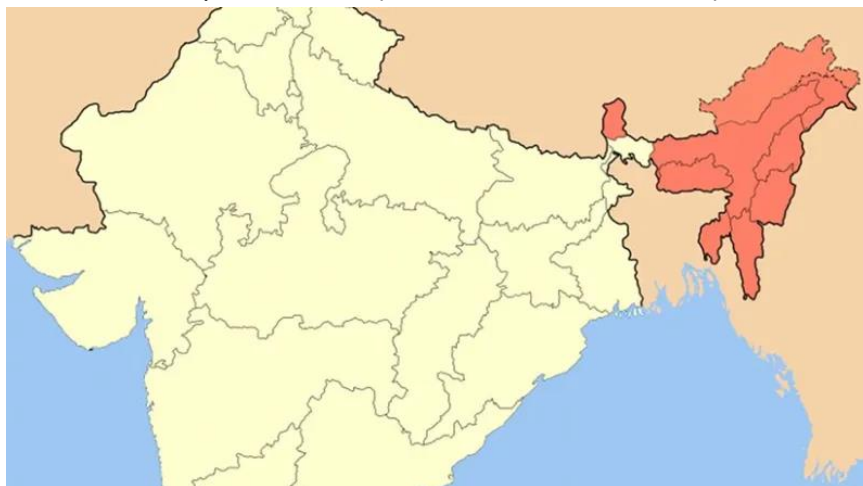

Ethnic Insurgencies and the Crime-Insurgency Nexus in India's North Eastern Region

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1947, India has struggled with a variety of internal security challenges. Much of the Indian institutional and scholarly discourse surrounding the country's national security has focused on discussing militancy in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), where the Indian government has fought a Pakistan-backed insurgency since the late 1980s. In addition to this, some coverage has focused on the ramifications of the Naxalite-Maoist insurgency that takes place in the 'Red Corridor' stretching through parts of eastern India (Ahuja & Ganguly, 2007). Especially the prevalence of the J&K conflict and India's continuously strained relations with Pakistan have incentivized an emphasis on India's western front as a key space in which national security is shaped and defined.

This strategic emphasis on J&K and, to a lesser extent, the Red Corridor, has resulted in India's North Eastern Region (NER) being less of a focal point. The NER forms India's continental border with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Nepal and is constituted by a total of eight states. These include the so-called 'seven sisters' (Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh) as well as the state of Sikkim, which is considered part of the NER despite not being physically connected to the rest of the region (Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, n.d.a). As of the last national census (2011), the states in the NER are home to approximately 45 million people, accounting for just 3.78% of India's total population (Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, n.d.). The NER is connected to the rest of India via the Siliguri Corridor, also known as India's "Chicken Neck," a strip of land that is 60 kilometres long and only 23 kilometres wide (Fazl-E-Haider, 2020). As such, the NER is situated at the physical periphery of India (see Map 1 below).

Map 1: The NER (NER states marked in red)



Source: Bhattacharjee (2019).

As is the case in J&K and the Red Corridor, the outbreak of ethnic insurgencies in the NER since the 1950s has transformed the region into a space in which the political control and authority of the Indian Centre is contested. The geographically peripheral status of the NER is reflected in its ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and general demographic make-up: the region is home to more than 500 different peoples (Forte, 2008) and registers the highest concentration of India's Adivasi communities. Members of the Adivasi communities, which are also referred to as 'scheduled tribes' by the Indian Ministry of Tribal Affairs (n.d.), are legally recognized by the Indian government as the indigenous inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. Although Hinduism remains dominant in the NER, the geographical proximity to Southeast Asia means that many inhabitants of the NER look more akin to Burmese or Thai people than people from the Indian mainland (Mahadevan, 2020). This sense of ethnic and cultural otherness has historically contributed to the rise of a series of insurgent organizations (IOs) whose political demands range from more political autonomy to full independence for their ethnic group. Since the outbreak of insurgencies started in the 1950s, the NER has come to develop into the most militarized and volatile sub-region in South Asia (Kakati, 2021). While some of the insurgencies have died down in their severity, security challenges remain present. In 2016, for example, insurgents killed 14 people after opening fire on a market in Assam (Hussain, 2016). Alongside the conflict in J&K and the Naxalite insurgency, then, the NER is another space in which armed non-state actors play a key role.

Shaped by decades of insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN), the NER today faces a wide range of structural issues. The activities of IOs have been met with militarized COIN operations that have sustained the region's political and economic marginalization within the Indian Union. The prevalence of insurgency and a militarized COIN response has also shaped the development of correlated issues such as an economic dependency on smuggling and illicit trade, widespread undocumented migration, large-scale drug and arms trafficking, the alleged presence of Pakistani intelligence services and the general prevailing of anti-mainland sentiment (Saha & Bhomwick, 2021). The contestation of political boundaries consequently remains an omnipresent phenomenon in the NER.

This paper contextualizes the historical trajectory and functioning of insurgencies in the NER today and specifically examines how North Eastern IOs have become involved in criminal activities, most notably drug trafficking, as a means of financing their operations. The NER has emerged as a key space for the so-called 'crime-insurgency nexus', describing the growing interconnection between IOs and criminal groups as well as the intersection between insurgent and organized criminal activities.

The paper commences from a conceptual starting point by distinguishing between insurgency and terrorism before discussing the evolution of the crime-insurgency nexus. Afterwards, the paper turns to examining the political context in which regional insurgencies are situated. A particular emphasis will be placed on the NER's integration into British India as a peripheral buffer space and the governance approach of post-colonial India towards the NER after 1947. Here, the paper also argues that the mostly militarized COIN approach of the Indian government has proven counterproductive as it has failed to address the social issues

incentivizing rebellion while further alienating the local population. The paper then discusses how the crime-insurgency nexus plays out in the NER, particularly regarding the trafficking of narcotics between India and the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia.

Insurgency, terrorism, and the crime-insurgency nexus in international relations

▪ *Conceptualizing insurgency*

Some conceptual ambiguity surrounds the notion of insurgency and how the activities of IOs differ from the activities of other politically motivated militant groups. This ambiguity is particularly pertinent when it comes to distinguishing between IOs and Terrorist Organizations (TOs) - after all, both IOs and TOs pursue specific political aims through militant means. The distinction between insurgency and terrorism is further complicated by the fact that the designation of an organization as a TO is not a politically neutral classification. As Ünal (2016) rightly points out, “[t]errorism is considered to be a pejorative term. Guerrilla warfare and insurgency, by contrast, carry a greater degree of legitimacy due to their association with liberation, freedom fighters, etc.” (p. 26). As such, the description of a group as a TO (or an IO) is not a politically neutral act. Moreover, the classification is not a necessarily accurate reflection of the group’s aim or strategic approach. Rather, classifying a group as a TO is indicative of the political positioning and objectives of the party making the classification.

This extent of conceptual ambiguity makes it necessary to distinguish between insurgency and terrorism. A useful distinction to employ for the purposes of this paper is the difference in how the group relates to the larger community it operates in. De Wijk (2020) suggests that “*insurgents rely on support of the populations whilst terrorists are individuals or isolated groups or cells without broad public support*” (p. 114). This delineation views terrorism as a largely cell-based enterprise whereas insurgency relies to a greater extent on social and political legitimacy in the areas it operates in. Of course, defining what constitutes ‘broad public support’ is somewhat arbitrary as support is practically impossible to reliably quantify, especially in fluid conflict environments. Yet, the idea of an IO having to enjoy a greater extent of public support serves as a useful way of conceptualizing how IOs may differ from TOs.

It is worth noting that the Indian government actively distinguishes between insurgent and terrorist groups in what can be interpreted as a distinction between presumably ‘external’ and ‘internal’ security threats. Regarding militancy in J&K, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) describes India as having to deal with issues connected to “*terrorism/militancy*” (2021). The classification of militant organizations in J&K as terrorists subsequently frees up political space to fight militancy in the region as militancy is seen as not/less politically legitimate. Indeed, this (institutional) understanding of groups active in J&K as TOs helped to justify the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 as a counter-terrorism measure (Sodhi, 2021). When it comes to classifying Naxalite groups such as the Communist Party of India (Maoist), however, the MHA (2021a) mostly refers to an “*extremist insurgency*”. Similarly, North Eastern groups are classified as ‘IIGs’ (Indian Insurgent Groups) (MHA, 2021b). This is even though their militancy is directly opposed to the role of the Indian government, with groups

such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) demanding full independence from India.

This divergence in classification on behalf of the MHA (and, thus, the Indian government) is not specific to India and implies no argument as to whether groups in J&K, the Red Corridor and the NER should be classified as IOs or TOs. The difference in classification is at play at the highest echelons of international politics and is inherent to political dynamics more generally. The Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, for instance, has recently urged the international community to recognize the interim Taliban government in Afghanistan as the country's legitimate government (Al Jazeera, 2021) – this is despite many of the interim government's members being on the sanctions list of the United Nations Security Council (2021). Here, the classification of whether the Taliban and its members constitute a TO/terrorists clearly diverges. In the case of India, illustrating that the MHA refers to different groups in different terms is not to say that the groups active in J&K are not TOs or should not be classed as such, but that the classification of a group as a TO matters in terms of how that group is dealt with politically. Clearly, militancy in J&K is underpinned by a militancy-as-terrorism logic. This classification is presumably connected to the extent of Pakistani involvement in that strategic theatre, meaning that the conflict obtains an at least partially external dimension. In contrast, militancy in the Red Corridor and the NER, structured by a militancy-as-insurgency logic, is assigned comparatively more political legitimacy. This logic appears connected to a foreign element being less pronounced (or less visible) in these conflicts. Differing categorizations subsequently open different spaces for different political responses.

- *The crime-insurgency nexus*

As any other militant non-state actor, IOs rely on the dependable inflow of funds to sustain their military and organizational capacities. Funds are essential for the short-term and long-term capacity of the group as they are needed to supply fighters, incentivize new fighters to join, secure safe houses, pay for forged documents and military training and provide bribes to authorities if required. Most importantly, funds are key to acquire and maintain arms, equipment, and personnel for the IO. In short, the reliable and consistent inflow of funds is utterly essential for an IO to maintain the long-term military capacity to pursue its political goals.

The sources of funding IOs have access to are heavily dependent on the political context they operate in, with the bipolar conflict of the Cold War serving a prime example. During the Cold War, both the United States and the USSR propped up IOs that they deemed to be supportive of their respective strategic aims. The geopolitical context of the Cold War consequently created the larger political context through which much political and ultimately financial support was conceptualized and channelled. As IOs became embroiled in the larger geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War, their financial sustainability became heavily tied to their respective supporting party (or parties), which made them dependent on the willingness of their sponsor to continue their support for the IO. From the perspective of the IO, this formed an extent of dependency that could have adverse effects. The Nicaraguan Contras,

who were backed by the US against the Soviet-backed Sandinista government in the 1980s through the provision of arms, logistics, funds, intelligence, and diplomatic support, are a case in point (Hager Jr., 1998). The extent of dependency on American support heightened the Contra's exposure to shifts in US policy and the group ultimately largely collapsed when support for the Contras became too controversial in the US (Robles, 2016). During the Cold War, then, the bipolar environment and the geopolitical framework of the Cold War meant that IOs often remained financially tied to their State-sponsor.

The collapse of the USSR transformed this financing structure by not just ending bipolar power competition but by also reigning in a new era of neoliberal trade reforms that proved conducive to the financial activities of transnational organized crime (TOC). Firstly, the USSR's dissolution decreased the availability of State support: the USSR could no longer support IOs while the US lost its main geopolitical opponent, the existence of which had justified the support for IO. Secondly, the seeming defeat of communism in the face of neoliberal capitalism brought about a new neoliberal consensus embodied in Francis Fukuyama's (1992) *"end of history"* thesis. What was widely perceived as the victory of capitalist democracy quickly led to the intensification of pro-market reforms, embodied in neoliberal trade agreements such as the 1994 North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that was signed between Canada, Mexico, and the US. As global trade intensified through the growing integration of supply chains and the eradication of trade barriers, so did illicit trade. Drug trafficking to the United States from Mexico, for instance, rose dramatically following the implementation of NAFTA as free-market reforms facilitated more intense cross-border economic exchange (McKibben & Escibano, 2015). A growth in transnational organized crime, especially in the trafficking of illicit goods such as arms and narcotics, subsequently emerged as a side effect of neoliberal globalization in the aftermath of the Cold War. In the 21st century this process has been accelerated further through advances in communication and transportation technologies, allowing for the increasingly global trade in drugs, arms, natural resources, people, and wildlife (Shelley, 2020). The end of the Cold War subsequently resulted in the creation of an economic environment that was conducive for the illicit activities of transnational criminal organizations.

IOs have capitalized on this shift in the global political economy as State support has depleted following the end of the Cold War and the global crackdown on State-backed terrorism financing after 9/11. The 2001 attacks and the declaration of the 'Global War on Terror' were accompanied by far-sweeping measures to fight terrorism financing, consequently raising the financial and diplomatic stakes for governments to support militancy elsewhere. The subsequent depletion of State support thus incentivized a reorientation of IOs towards criminal activities as a means of financing. An IO can engage in criminal activities in various ways. It may, for example, enter an alliance with a criminal organization (CO) in which the IO performs specific tasks for the CO, such as trafficking specific illicit goods. These alliances may exist within a country or between groups based in different countries. The alliance with a CO and the subsequently generated revenues allows the IO to become more financially independent in its revenue streams, enhancing the IO's capacity to sustain its fight for longer periods of time. The drying up of State support over the past thirty years, alongside an

increasingly globalized economy, has subsequently made cooperation between IOs and COs more attractive and feasible than it was previously.

The more frequent and increasingly deep links between COs and IOs have resulted in conceptual distinctions between both becoming blurred over time. This growing interconnectedness between COs and TOs has been described as the crime-terror nexus as the operations of COs and TOs increasingly overlap. As with the crime-terror nexus, the growing significance of the crime-insurgency nexus reshapes the character of the organizations involved in this nexus. COs and IOs differ fundamentally in many ways, including their motivational drive. While COs are inherently motivated by material/financial gain, IOs and TOs pursue a specific political objective, mostly involving a change in the political status quo (Grabovsky & Stohl, 2010). That said, COs are not necessarily apolitical as regulatory environments (such as the capacity of the State they operate in) have a direct impact on their revenue margins. Moreover, COs and IOs share overlaps in their practical operations: both use violence and coercion as tools to pursue their objectives, both are mostly opposed to the State(s) they operate in and both are (almost always) operating in opposition to law enforcement agencies. While their specific motivations differ by definition, then, the underlying operational logic(s) of COs and IOs leave significant room for cooperation.

The factors incentivizing various forms of cooperation or engagement between COs and IOs are embodied in Cornell's (2007) crime-rebellion continuum. On a structural level, COs and IOs can benefit from the political-economic conditions produced by the activities of the other group: COs can economically capitalize on the increased lawlessness produced by political instability while IOs can partake in the COs' illegal activities to ensure enhanced financial self-sustainability, in turn allowing for the pursuit of political goals. Cooperation between COs and IOs can therefore allow both sides to pursue their respective economic and political objectives (Makarenko, 2004). Cornell (2007) visualizes this in the crime-rebellion continuum (see Figure 2 below): as operational orientations and practical aims overlap, cooperation between COs and IOs is incentivized.

Figure 2: The crime-rebellion continuum

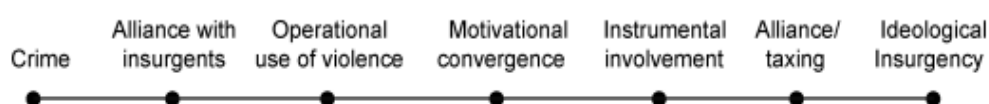


Figure 1. The crime-rebellion continuum.

Source: Cornell (2007).

As the ties between the CO and the IO deepen, their practical operations are likely to become more and more alike over time. Cornell (2007) and Makarenko (2004) describe this process as operational and motivational convergence. This process of convergence makes it harder to

distinguish whether an IO or a CO is still driven by political/economic aims or whether economic/political objectives have replaced the initial goals.

The left-wing Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) embodies this process of convergence and the blurring of conceptual distinctions. The FARC has operated a guerrilla war against the Colombian State since 1964 and emerged as a main transnational drug transporter after the US and Colombia cracked down on Colombian cartels in the early 1990s (Peceny & Durnan, 2006). Over time, FARC has consequently emerged as a key component of the global drug trade (Otis, 2014) and has become practically indistinguishable from a CO. In this context, IOs may also choose to substitute their primarily political goals for economic ones, using political rhetoric as a façade to justify their activities (Grabovsky & Stohl, 2010). Convergence can thus occur when an IO (such as FARC) simply adopts the strategies commonly used by a CO, for example to reduce their reliance on a CO they were cooperating with previously. Criminal groups and insurgent movements subsequently obtain the capability of function as a CO and IO at the same time (Makarenko, 2004). This process of convergence and the creation of strategic partnerships epitomizes the crime-insurgency nexus.

The growing prevalence of this crime-insurgency nexus has important policy implications. The shift from State-backing to TOC as a financing tool means that governments have lost their capacity to influence the IO's behavior by exerting diplomatic pressure on the State supporting the IO. The fact that IOs have become directly or indirectly involved in TOC, for instance by exploiting the eradication of trade barriers and pre-existing supply chains, also means that the criminal activity as such is difficult to challenge as illicit economies have become deeply embedded in licit economies (Shelley, 2020). Lastly, the destabilizing political impact of criminal and terrorist activity sustains what is called the "*black hole*" thesis, referring to a situation in which weak or 'failed' States present a safe haven for the CO/IO (Makarenko, 2004, p. 138). Strategically weakened spaces include failed States such as Somalia but also countries in which the central government's authority beyond its immediate centre of power is heavily confined and/or contested. Such spaces include, amongst others, Afghanistan and Myanmar (ibid), which can then serve as bases for groups to operate in other countries. In the case of the NER, criminal activity in Myanmar has key implications for the trajectory and longevity of insurgency.

The origins of insurgency in the NER

The outbreak of insurgencies in the NER is rooted in complex historical processes and demands for cultural and ethnic rights with recognition. As with many contemporary conflicts in South Asia, the roots of these conflicts can be found in the subcontinent's colonial past. Indeed, the historical context of regional insurgencies can be broadly divided into two phases. Phase one refers to the time between 1826 (when most parts of the NER became part of British India) and 1947 (when British India was partitioned into India and East and West Pakistan). As will be shown, the way in which the colonial administration approached the NER politically laid the groundwork for the issues that the NER faces today. The second phase (1947-now) refers to the NER's political status in post-colonial India. As post-colonial India has

continued significant components of the colonial governance approach, contemporary issues are the outcome of the region's marginalization under colonial and post-colonial rule.

- ***The NER in colonial India: 1826-1947***

The various polities located in what is today known as the NER began falling under British control from 1826 onwards as Britain expanded its control eastwards from Bengal towards Burma. From 1817 onwards, the Burmese Empire of the Konbaung Dynasty had expanded westwards into Assam, the territory of which comprised most of the NER states of today. The growth of Burmese influence over the NER put the Konbaungs at odds with the strategic interests of the British, who were focused on protecting the British stronghold in Bengal against potential incursions from the Burmese Empire and the Qing Dynasty (Inoue, 2005). British-Burmese tensions escalated in the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826), which saw the British establish control over Assam and Tripura in the Treaty of Yandabo, with Manipur becoming a British protectorate (Kakati, 2021). Britain further expanded its rule over the Indian-Burmese borderlands in the 1864-1865 Duar War with Bhutan, resulting in Bhutan ceding additional territories (Penjore, 2004). By the end of the 19th century, colonial conquests had allowed Britain to gain control over effectively all of the NER.

Under British rule, the NER was relegated to a peripheral role within British India as the colonial administration largely viewed it as a strategic buffer space to the Burmese Empire and the Qing Dynasty. The conceptualization of the NER as an India-internal buffer space resulted in the British limiting infrastructure investment in the region, which largely disconnected the region from the remainder of British India in economic and political terms. What could be termed the peripheralization of the region was further compounded by legislation. In 1873, the administration introduced the 1873 Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, which required visitors with commercial interests in the NER to acquire a permit prior to conducting trading operations in the region (Ghosh & Chaudhury, 2021). This act had the practical effect of insulating the NER from outside influences and economic development more generally. Moreover, it engendered and formalized the practical political and economic division between the NER and the rest of the British Raj.

The peripheralization of the NER in the Raj was underpinned and legitimized by British perceptions of the NER as a fundamentally backwards and uncivilized space. The British viewed the inhabitants of the NER as primitive tribal communities (Karlsson, 2001), a rhetoric that helped to justify the lack of investment in regional infrastructure and connectivity (McDuie-Ra, 2008). As aptly put by Baruah (2020), the Raj government viewed the NER as a *"land without people – or land with barely any people"*. This sense of North Eastern backwardness (and British superiority) was also expressed in the colonial administration showing little interest in recognizing the region's complex ethnic and cultural dynamics - rather, the NER's population was seen as a *"homogenous, undifferentiated mass"* (ibid). As a result, the British divided the NER into 14 tribal administrative units, the lines of which were drawn in a largely *"arbitrary manner"* (Forte, 2008). Under colonial rule, the NER was not integrated into popular imaginations of what it meant to be a colonial subject or what it

meant to be ‘Indian’. Indeed, the colonial administration made little effort to transform the NER into an integrated part of the colonial system: as Ghosh and Chaudhury (2021) pinpoint, the *“British rulers had also demarcated much of it [the NER] as ‘backward tracts’, ‘excluded areas’, and ‘partially excluded areas’, where tribal people were left to manage their own affairs in varying degrees”*. In combination with a security-focused narrative, this notion of backwardness became deeply integrated into the political structures of colonial India, relegating the NER to the political, social, and economic periphery of the Raj.

- ***The NER in post-colonial India: 1947-now***

The peripheralization of the NER was a key component of the political and cultural structures of colonial India and remained largely in place following the partition of the Raj in 1947. After partition, Delhi initially maintained the administrative boundaries created by the British, dividing the NER into Assam, Manipur, and Tripura, with Sikkim maintaining its status as a princely state. Assam was by far the geographically largest and most populous state and the Assamese elite had forged close ties with the administration of Jawaharlal Nehru during the partition negotiations. The Assamese elite had been anxious not to become part of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), which would have made the Assamese population a religious and ethnic minority in a Muslim and Bengali-majority country (Kakati, 2021). These close ties between the Assamese elite and the Nehru government resulted in the Centre following a post-partition approach where regional governance capacities were *“subcontracted”* to the Assamese leadership (Bhaumik, 2007, p. 18). This ‘subcontracting’ had the practical effect of subsuming many of the region’s ethnic groups under Assamese rule. The Naga ethnic group in particular took offense to this: as early as 1945, the Naga National Council (NNC) had begun to demand Naga independence. One day prior to the partition of the Raj in August 1947, the NNC had even declared the independence of Nagaland after negotiations with Nehru over Nagaland’s future status had fallen through (Kolås, 2017). The post-partition political arrangements in the NER and the Centre’s empowerment of the Assamese at the expense of other ethnic groups subsequently created a breeding ground for ethnic animosities.

In the following years, the ruling of a variety of ethnic groups by the Assamese leadership and their backer, the Indian government, heightened ethnic tensions and anti-India sentiment that erupted into insurgencies from the 1950s onwards. For people in the NER, Indian independence had changed remarkably little – if anything, India had failed to make meaningful changes to improve the NER’s position. Indeed, the Nehru government had largely continued the governance approach that had been chosen by the British. As Kakati (2021) highlights, the *“integration of the NER into the rest of the country was ‘abrupt’, with no prior history. The states were integrated and demarcated into ad hoc units for administrative convenience”*. The continued peripheralization of the region was epitomized by the subcontracting of governance capacities to the Assamese elite. This began to violently backfire in 1956 as a NNC-led insurgency in Nagaland renewed the demands for an independent Naga State. The Indian-Assamese model had failed.

India's response to the Naga insurgency was underpinned by a hard-hand logic that culminated in the long-term militarization of the region. Justified with the claim that security forces required additional protection against Naga insurgents (Ngaihte, 2015), the Indian government introduced the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) in 1958. AFSPA provided Indian forces with legal immunity for any rights violations that occur in areas of the NER in which AFSPA is applied (Kakati, 2021). AFSPA has been highly controversial within India: In the words of a former member of the Indian Supreme Court,

"[T]hough the Act gives sweeping powers to the security forces even to the extent of killing a suspect with protection against prosecution, [...] the Act does not provide any protection to the citizens against possible misuse of these extraordinary powers" (quoted in Ngaihte, 2015, p. 373).

AFSPA had an ultimately counterproductive effect on Indian COIN efforts in the NER. The seemingly indiscriminate use of violence by security forces (and the lack of legal accountability for rights violations) further stifled anti-Assamese and anti-Indian sentiment, resulting in the eruption of insurgencies in Manipur, Mizoram, and Tripura from the late 1960s onwards (Bhaumik, 2007). While AFSPA was applied in more and more parts of the NER, the Indian government also moved to partition Assam into Nagaland (gained statehood in 1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh (1975) and Mizoram (1987) to address local demands for more political autonomy. Assam was now much smaller and significantly less influential. Despite statehood, insurgencies remained prevalent and escalated as time went on, indicating the non-pacifying effect AFSPA had on COIN operations. Moreover, the partition of Assam heightened anti-Indian sentiment in Assam. This ultimately drove the outbreak of anti-Indian insurgency in Assam in the 1980s, the so-called 'Assam agitation'. The perhaps most prominent actor in the insurgency was the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). The sense of insufficient political autonomy and the negative experience with AFSPA evolved to be the main driver of insurgencies in the NER.

India's strategic COIN approach in the NER has also been shaped by its external threat perceptions, especially regarding China and (East) Pakistan. The annexation of Tibet by the Chinese Communist Party in 1950 removed the buffer space that an independent Tibet would have formed between India and a potentially revisionist China (Hoffmann, 2006). In the NER, this especially was a concern for India as China did not (and does not) recognize the McMahon line, which divides Tibet from Arunachal Pradesh. Beijing considers Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet and consequently part of China (Bachhawat, 2019). Tensions over Arunachal Pradesh came to a blow during the 1962 Indian-Sino War during which China occupied large parts of the state. The Chinese incursion significantly raised the threat perception that India's national security was not just internally challenged (through IOs) but also externally challenged (through military operations by foreign countries). The NER was increasingly viewed as a strategically volatile space that India's opponents could use to destabilize the country from within, potentially by collaborating with IOs. India's defeat in the 1962 conflict consequently meant that consolidation of strategic control became a *"national security project"* (McDuie-Ra, 2008, p. 186). The perceived existence of internal and external threats

(as well as the collusion of both) reinforced the pre-existing security-focused perspective and legitimized the existence of AFSPA.

Delhi's concerns regarding the interplay between foreign actors and IOs did not fully miss the mark. Pakistan began actively backing IOs following the outbreak of insurgency in Nagaland in 1956 (Das, 2012) and intensified its support for Naga, Manipuri and Mizo rebels after India's defeat in 1962 while China began supporting Naga insurgent groups, one of which later evolved into the NSCN (Ahuja, 2019). In turn, India began using the NER to train and arm anti-Pakistani insurgents operating in East Pakistan during the Bangladeshi war of independence (Murshid, 2011). Dynamics within the NER were also shaped by external developments: as growing tensions in East Pakistan in the 1950s and 1960s culminated in the out-migration of ethnic Bengalis to the NER, anti-Bengali violence in Assam rose throughout the 1960s (Karmakar, 2018). As aptly put by Bhaumik (2007), the NER ultimately developed to be a space of "*insurgent crossfire*" (p. 26) from various sides from the 1950s onwards due to the interaction between distinct local issues (such as demands for more political autonomy) and larger geopolitical dynamics that resulted in States supporting various insurgency groups in the borderlands of Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar.

Insurgencies in the NER can be seen as the result of a complex interplay between local, national, and regional security dynamics that give rise to a heterogeneous and fluid insurgency landscape. Insurgencies are locally motivated by complex ethnic and political factors, many of which change depending on external circumstances. Some insurgencies have received active support from foreign governments. These concerns prevail until today: after talks between the Indian government and the NSCN stuttered in 2019, it was once again alleged that China was using the NSCN to fight a proxy war against India (Deka, 2019). In other cases, the relative weakness of the Bhutanese and Burmese government has meant that the territories of both countries have been used by Indian IOs (Kumar, 2015). While there is often some foreign element to the insurgency, these foreign elements interact with more distinct local concerns. There also is a national level as IOs oppose (parts of) the rule of the Indian government. The prevalence of this sentiment through the experiences connected to AFSPA justifies the popular support for IOs while India-affiliated authorities and security forces lack social capital and legitimacy. In a vicious cycle, the anti-India violence by IOs simultaneously helps to justify the continuous militarization of the region through legislation such as AFSPA. While effectively all IOs share this Indian sentiment, the existence of a distinct local-ethnic dimension also shapes the way in which IOs (can) relate to the Indian government. In Assam, for instance, insurgencies were directed against both the Indian Centre as well as their regional allies, the Assamese government. Conflicts are subsequently situated in diverse local, national, and regional political contexts.

This distinct local element is key as it allows the Indian Centre to exploit conflicts between IOs and ultimately integrate and co-opt them into existing political structures. Co-option and integration are a more pertinent option for some IOs than for others: an IO demanding more political autonomy, for instance, is much easier to co-opt than an IO genuinely seeking secession from India. The granting of more political autonomy can consequently help to alleviate these demands. Indeed, the partition of Assam can be viewed as an attempt to co-

opt dissident voices into existing political structures. Over time, co-optation has hence emerged as a political alternative for IOs, also as IOs have partially collaborated with Indian authorities to settle their scores with other IOs. The diverging ideological characteristics subsequently inform how the Indian government can interact with different types of IOs.

Figure 3: Characteristics of IOs in the NER

| Characteristic | Example |
|---|--|
| Insurgency based on deep rooted historical demand for ethnonational independence has developed into a struggle of secession from India, | NSCN |
| Insurgency is separatist in rhetoric but practically demands greater political autonomy within India's given political structures. This makes these insurgent groups easiest to co-opt. Most currently active groups fall into this category. | Tribal insurgency in Tripura |
| The IO has sharp separatist overtones but is ultimately co-opted into the Indian system through negotiations and concessions from the Indian side. | Mizo insurgency |
| The IO seeks to change the Indian system from within and has connections to Indian mainland organizations (such as Maoist organizations). | Manipur People's Liberation Army (PLA) before 1990 and communist insurgents in Tripura (1948-1950) |
| The IO is propped up by larger IOs and effectively functions as a satellite organization. | United Peoples Volunteers of Arunachal (UPVA), propped up by Naga and Assamese groups |

Source: Bhaumik (2007).

Successful co-optation can result in the disarmament and integration of IOs into the political mainstream. A successful co-optation is embodied by the Mizo National Front (MNF), which now runs as a regular political party in Mizoram (Puia, 2018). The trajectory of IOs has subsequently shown to be fluid over time.

India's COIN policy in the NER ultimately consists of a two-pronged strategy, with the first (and more recent) component being the co-optation of IOs into the political mainstream. This

approach has become increasingly dominant since the 1990s as the Centre launched concerted efforts to reach ceasefire and disarmament agreements (Kolås, 2017). The co-option strategy is particularly valuable when authorities deal with an IO that has been weakened by previous COIN operations: the Indian government then negotiates from a position of strength and manages to accommodate dissident voices in the mainstream of regional politics. The trajectory of the MNF epitomizes this.

The second and still influential COIN approach is underpinned by a militarization-driven logic and rooted in the legislative framework of AFSPA. The co-option strategy has come to complement rather than replace the military-focused approach. Militarization remains a key part of the repertoire: after ceasefire talks with ULFA failed during the 1990s, Indian security forces launched large-scale military operations, Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino, to eradicate ULFA's influence in Assam (Bhaumik, 2007). India has also increasingly involved the Bangladeshi, Burmese, and Bhutanese armed forces in combating IOs that use foreign territory to escape Indian security forces, for example in 'Operation All Clear', in which Indian and Bhutanese forces collaborated to clear out ULFA forces in southern Bhutan (Banerjee & Laishram, 2004). IOs in the NER have also increasingly had to deal with military operations from other national governments: in 2019, the Burmese armed forces conducted several offensives that especially undermined the stronghold of the NSCN in the Indian-Burmese borderlands (Shivamurthy, 2021). A military-focused conflict response consequently remains a key part of COIN tactics in the wider NER.

In fairness, it must be said that the Modi administration has shown willingness to revoke AFSPA in areas that it considers to be increasingly stable. The implementation of AFSPA is tied to the government declaring an area as "*disturbed*," implying that the security in selected areas is tarnished "*by reason of differences or disputes between members of different religious, racial, language or regional groups or castes or communities*" (Das, 2012). Under Modi, the Indian government has revoked AFSPA in areas that it deemed more stable, removing AFSPA in Tripura in 2015, in Meghalaya in 2018 (ibid), and parts of Arunachal Pradesh in 2018 and 2019 (Economic Times, 2019). In 2021, however, the MHA (2021c) once again declared parts of Arunachal Pradesh as disturbed, re-invoking AFSPA for the duration of six months. AFSPA consequently remains a key policy tool for the central government's governance approach towards the NER. That said, the Modi government has sought to normalize social life in the NER to some extent.

The continued militarization of large parts of the region helps to explain the peripheralization the NER experiences today. As under British rule, a security-focused narrative has resulted in economic investment and infrastructure development remaining limited in the region (Ghosh & Chaudhury, 2021). Although states in the NER show significant variation in terms of their development (Nandy, 2015), the NER lags behind the mainland in absolute and relative terms when it comes to poverty rates (McDuie-Ra, 2008). The NER was not made an integral part of the economic liberalization program India launched in the 1990s and thus has not yielded any of the benefits produced by the country's economic development (Karlsson, 2001). This structural peripheralization is expressed in the availability in basic social services such as healthcare and education provision, neither of which is as accessible as it is elsewhere in India

(Kakati, 2021). The NER can be seen as the least developed part of a country that still faces severe development issues. This lack of development in both relative and total terms factors into the sustenance of insurgencies as poverty *“compounds vulnerability to insurgency at the individual and community level by lowering the opportunity cost of mobilising for violence”* (Marks, 2016). The militarized response of the Indian government has thus sustained the structural marginalization of the region.

In sum, ethnic insurgencies in the NER are rooted in the historical marginalization of the region under both British and Indian rule. India’s AFSPA-driven response has contributed to the region’s internal insecurity. Indeed, pacification has been more successful when regional demands have been acknowledged and were responded to positively, for instance through the granting of more political autonomy. The prevalence of AFSPA has thus helped to sustain insurgencies in the NER. The emergence of the crime-insurgency nexus in the NER must be seen in this context of political marginalization and subsequent political economic underdevelopment.

The crime-insurgency nexus in the NER

Insurgencies in the NER serve as a welcome case study of how the crime-insurgency nexus plays out in practice as regional IOs have become increasingly involved in criminal activities, most notably the trafficking of drugs coming from and to the Golden Triangle. This chapter first provides a general overview of the criminal activities IOs have engaged in over time before discussing how and why the trade in illegal drugs has become an increasingly pivotal factor in sustaining insurgencies in the NER.

▪ **Non-drug activities**

One component of the crime-insurgency nexus in the NER is IOs fulfilling government-like functions in areas they control or in which they enjoy significant political influence. In many parts of the NER, insurgencies (and corresponding insurgent groups) have long become a dominant component of everyday political life. The public opposition to the Indian government, still observable in parts of the NER, provides IOs with social and political capital, which in turn helps to facilitate their integration into the region’s political economy. The combination of social capital as well as an element of coercion has allowed IOs to start engaging in government-like behavior, for instance in the form of collecting taxes (Balakrishnan, 2018; Chandran, 2003). This creates significant challenges for the Indian government as legal tax revenues remain limited and economic informality has become deeply entrenched into the functioning of the local economy. This informality provides a framework for illicit activities, including criminal activities.

Informal and illicit economic behavior is most heavily pronounced when it comes to illicit cross-border trade and cross-border trafficking. To be sure, IOs have engaged in various non-trafficking activities: during the Assam agitation, for instance, the ULFA began systematically engaging in bank robberies and extortions to extract funds from the local population

(Bhaumik, 2007). However, many trafficking routes were established in the aftermath of the Indian-Sino War as both China and Pakistan increasingly made use of illicit trade networks to supply regional IOs with arms and funds (Mahadevan, 2020). These routes remain in use today as IOs traffic a variety of goods, including arms, gold, teak, wildlife, and exotic flora (Chadha, n.d.; Mahadevan, 2020). For the trafficking of gold, especially the town of Dimapur in Nagaland is of key importance (Mahadevan, 2020). Trafficking of various goods has consequently emerged as a key component of the regional insurgency economy.

The prevalence of different trafficking networks is enabled to a significant extent by the region's geography. States in the NER share only 2% of their continental border with mainland India, with the remaining 98% being shared with other countries (Das, 2012). As such, the size of regional borders makes them practically impossible to monitor and control (see Table 4).

Table 4: Length of the land borders between North Eastern states and neighboring countries

| Border | Approximate length of border in km |
|----------------|---|
| NER-Myanmar | 1643 |
| NER-China | 1000 |
| NER-Bhutan | 650 |
| NER-Bangladesh | 1880 |
| Total | 5173 |

Source: Das (2012).

Despite the historically heavy presence of military and paramilitary forces, the length of national borders in the region, coupled with the lush vegetation, means that Indian security forces are simply too thinly stretched to effectively oversee and control cross-border traffic. Considering the lack of economic opportunities and conventional economic structures, the porous state of the borders thus helps to actively facilitate informal cross-border economic activity smuggling (Saha & Bhomwick, 2021). Economic and geographical factors consequently make the NER conducive for illicit and criminal activities.

Existing smuggling and trafficking routes make extensive use of pre-existing infrastructure networks linking the NER to mainland India. The Manipuri town of Moreh, for instance, is located close to the Indian border with Myanmar (see Map 4). By virtue of being a big town

for regional standards, Moreh enjoys a greater degree of infrastructure connectivity with other regional transport hubs such as Imphal in Manipur. Road networks connect Imphal to Dimapur, from where goods can be transported to Guwahati in Assam via railway networks. Guwahati, the largest city in the NER, then facilitates the connection to the Indian mainland. Cities and towns with comparatively good infrastructure connectivity have consequently emerged as major hubs for the trafficking networks spanning through the NER.

Map 4: Smuggling and trafficking routes between India and Myanmar



Source: Mahadevan (2020).

The importance of places like Moreh for the informal economy of the region has meant that economic livelihoods in the region have become inextricably tied to trafficking and other forms of illicit activities. In Manipur alone, more than fifty thousand people are believed to

earn their daily wages through smuggling (Mahadevan, 2020). The generally porous state of the border and the lack of formal economic structures has thus reinforced a dependency on illicit and criminal activities as a way of making ends meet for local communities.

Indeed, India's approach towards facilitating cross-border trade reflects both strategic concerns and the desire to pursue strategic opportunities. Amongst other things, the NER suffers from economic underdevelopment due to a lack of infrastructure - based on this, infrastructure needs to be improved to alleviate underdevelopment and, ultimately, criminal activity. However, as the case of NAFTA highlights, increased connectivity (i.e., through infrastructure development) can also be conducive to criminal activities. India has made this experience in the past: in the early 1990s, New Delhi launched its Look East Policy, which sought to expand India's export market towards Southeast Asia (Kesavan, 2020). The Look East Policy was followed by a trade agreement with Myanmar in 1994 – instead of significantly stimulating formal trade, however, the surge in cross-border trade led to a skyrocketing in illicit trade (Mahadevan, 2020). This confirms the pattern observed in the case of NAFTA: trade liberalization liberalizes all kinds of trade, not just formal and legal trade.

The subsequent ambiguity of how to approach the development of the NER is still visible in Indian policymaking today. Under the administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the NER has been framed as a key part of Modi's Act East Policy, which seeks to revitalize the Look East Policy of the 1990s and transform the NER into a land bridge with Southeast Asia (Palit, 2016). For the deepening of trade connectivity with Southeast Asia, the investment in and integration of the NER is of key significance: as India's Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar argued in February 2021, *the Centre believes that "Act East must begin by Delhi giving the necessary attention and the necessary resources to our own States in the East and North-East"*. Infrastructure investment, particularly through Japanese foreign direct investment in the NER, has come to epitomize this ambition (Borah, 2019). Despite this positive signalling and investment, however, the recent border clashes with China have also meant that the Modi administration inherited the strategic anxiety of China using India-developed connectivity networks to launch an attack on the Indian heartland if it came to a war (Mahadevan, 2020). This fear reflects the anxieties of previous British and Indian administrators and indicates how a larger political commitment to developing the NER is at least partially overridden by broader geostrategic considerations.

The structural issues the NER faces are complex and do not have an easy fix. The IOs can capitalize on structural underdevelopment on some extent as it legitimizes their narrative in regard to the negative role of the Indian government. Economic underdevelopment results in illicit trading patterns that are further enabled by the region's geography. Yet, increasing trade in the region, for example by investing in infrastructure or market-friendly reforms, also does not seem to comprehensively solve the issue. As a result, the criminal activities of IOs remain part of the NER's political economy. This is nowhere more visible than in the trafficking of illegal drugs.

- **Illegal drug trafficking in the NER**

The most important part of the crime-insurgency nexus in the NER is the trade in illegal drugs between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. This is, to a large extent, the consequence of the NER’s geographical proximity to Myanmar. The eastern part of Myanmar is home to the ‘Golden Triangle’, which stretches over the borderlands of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand (see Map 5). The Golden Triangle is one of the world’s biggest opium cultivation and heroin production hotspots, with its vast (150,000-square-mile) and mountainous terrain making it notoriously hard to govern (Chin, 2009).

Map 5: The Golden Triangle



Source: Salleh (2020).

Drug production in Myanmar has come to play an increasingly central part in the global drug trade. While the outflow of heroin from Myanmar has multiplied over the past decades, large-

scale drug production in Myanmar is a somewhat recent trend. In the 1930s, opium production became increasingly popular in Myanmar as opium production plummeted in China (Kramer et al., 2009). Opium production in Myanmar increased after former soldiers of the Chinese nationalist forces, the Kuomintang (KMT), who had fled China in the late stages of the Chinese civil war in the 1940s, intensified the cultivation of poppy plants in the Burmese highlands (Sinha, 2014). Although the KMT forces were driven out in the early 1960s, the Burmese military coup in 1962 heightened the influence of IOs all over Myanmar. As insurgencies went on, many of these IOs resorted to the cultivation and trading in drugs to finance themselves (Kramer et al., 2009). In the following decades, the continued production of and trade in drugs emerged as a quintessential part of the Burmese insurgency economy. After the communist regime in Myanmar fell in 1989, heroin production grew even further (Sinha, 2014), with the number of heroin processing facilities in Myanmar doubling after India and Myanmar signed the 1994 agreement (Mahadevan 2020). Today, the Golden Triangle is key for the drug trade between Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Yunnan province in China, which is located along the border between China and Myanmar (Zhang & Chin, 2016). The growing importance of the Golden Triangle and particularly Myanmar in the transnational drug trade has made drug production in Myanmar a key part of the country's political economy while allowing regionally active IOs to increasingly make use of enhanced trading opportunities.

The expansion of illicit drug production in Myanmar has had key implications for insurgencies in the NER as it has made the trafficking in drugs a key income source for regional IOs. Since the 1990s, the revenues produced by drug trafficking has come to gradually replace other sources of revenue (Kolås, 2017; Sinha, 2014). One of the main products passing through the NER has been Yaba (The Print, 2021). Yaba, meaning 'crazy medicine' in Thai, consists of a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine and has severe dependency effects for users (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2008). Commonly sold in the form of a pill and primarily produced in Myanmar, Yaba has long been popular in Southeast Asia. In recent years, however, South Asian markets have emerged as main export markets for Yaba, with Bangladesh in particular registering a high demand for the drug (Pressly, 2019). Since Yaba first appeared in Bangladesh in 2002 (ibid), Bangladeshi authorities have clamped down on the continental smuggling routes between Bangladesh and Myanmar. While these measures have been largely successful in curtailing the Bangladeshi-Burmese cross-border drug traffic, they have had the practical effect that trafficking networks have relocated north to the Indian border, with especially Mizoram and Tripura serving as primary crossing points (The Print, 2021). As drug production in Myanmar and demand for Myanmar-produced drugs has grown, then, the NER has become located at the crossroads of the South-Southeast Asian drug trade.

Drug trafficking through the NER is a very much reciprocal process as Southeast Asian producers rely on Indian-produced precursor chemicals to produce synthetic drugs. The European Commission (n.d.) defines drug precursors as *"chemicals that are primarily used for the legitimate (legal) production of a wide range of products, like medicine, perfumes, plastics, cosmetics etc. However, they can also be misused for the illicit (illegal) production of drugs such as methamphetamines, heroin or cocaine"*. For illegal drug producers, India is a particularly attractive supply market for precursor chemicals as its pharmaceutical industry is

highly developed for regional standards (Mahadevan, 2020). Moreover, the fact that India has so far only regulated 17 out of 24 precursor chemicals that are required to produce drugs such as fentanyl means that Indian-produced precursors are still comparatively easy to purchase and traffic (Tecimer, 2018). The inflow of drugs into India, in combination with the outflow of precursor chemicals to Myanmar/Southeast Asia consequently makes trafficking in drug-related goods a highly attractive activity for regional IOs.

Besides further entrenching a dependency on criminal activities in local communities, a growing intensity in the regional drug trade has also had partially devastating health effects on local communities in the NER. While Indian farmers mainly sell cannabis to Burmese traders, the Indian market receives highly addictive and destructive drugs such as Yaba and heroin. Compounded by experiences of economic and social marginalization, this has heightened the danger of drug abuse. Indeed, drug use and abuse rates are significantly higher in the NER compared to the rest of the country (Ghosh, 2019). The kind of drugs entering the North Eastern markets also has a direct influence on consumption patterns. The smoking of opium, for instance, has increasingly been substituted with the injection of processed heroin and pharmaceuticals (Transnational Institute, 2011). The growing prevalence of injecting drug use, in turn, has resulted in a surging transmission of HIV and Hepatitis C (ibid). In places like Manipur and Mizoram, the rates of AIDS and HIV in the adult population is consequently at least four times higher than in the rest of the Indian population (Albertin, 2009). The growing exposure of the NER to the transnational drug trade and the subsequent availability of drugs therefore has direct and severe implications for the already fragile social fabric of the region.

It is now apparent that the NER's economic issues, which sustain a reliance on criminal activity in the region, are rooted in its political marginalization. With the Indian government's policy towards the region predominantly shaped by security concerns, the subsequent economic underdevelopment has maintained a demand for rebellion and insurgency. The historical presence of insurgency, in turn, vindicates a militarized response that heightens the local demand for further insurgent action while maintaining the structural underdevelopment of the region. The extent of structural underdevelopment reinforces a dependency on informal economic activity and organized crime as a source of revenue for both individuals and communities in the NER. The sense of political alienation and the subsequent support for IOs is upheld by the well-documented corruption of government agencies throughout the region (Times of India, 2011). Today, the NER remains caught in a cycle of insufficient development sustaining insurgencies and criminal activities while the subsequent activities of COs and IOs undermine opportunities for further regional development.

Conclusion

The NER constitutes a prime example of how the crime-insurgency nexus plays out in the Indian subcontinent. Over time, politically motivated militants have increasingly made use of criminal activities to ensure financial independence in the face of Indian COIN operations. This form of financial self-sustainability and the pronounced role of the illicit and informal

economy in the NER has made it much harder to fully eliminate the IOs while sustaining the structural issues that fuel public support for them. As a result, criminal activities such as drug trafficking have become an essential part of the North East's political economy.

While drug trafficking and connected revenues have come to increasingly shape the character and trajectory of regional IOs, IOs cannot be said to have become motivated by financial gain alone. IOs continue to exist because the deep-rooted political issues that motivated their emergence in the first place have not ceased to exist. Marginalized under British colonial and Indian post-colonial rule, the people of the NER remain excluded from the economic progress that much of India has registered in the past decades. The NER has continued its political existence as a space that is treated as ethnically, culturally, politically, and economically peripheral. This peripheralization results in rebellion which then serves to vindicate sustained peripheralization. AFSPA embodies this dynamic.

Instability in the NER will remain present if the population of the NER remains relegated to the social and economic peripheries of India. With the NER becoming more and more important for India's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia, the economic development and sociocultural inclusion of the NER into India's political imagination must emerge as a domestic policy priority for coming national administrations.

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