



Cross-border ethnic linkages and security challenges in Indo–Myanmar borderlands

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Abstract

The Indo–Myanmar borderlands represent one of South Asia’s most intricate geopolitical and socio-cultural frontiers, shaped by historical continuity, ethnic cohesion, and contemporary security dilemmas. Stretching across approximately 1,643 kilometers and cutting through India’s northeastern states—Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram—this porous border divides historically integrated ethnic communities, including the Nagas, Kukis, Chins, Mizos, and Meiteis. These ethnic linkages sustain deep-rooted cultural, social, and economic interactions, while simultaneously posing complex challenges for border governance and national security. Insurgency, arms and narcotics trafficking, refugee influx, and political instability in Myanmar—particularly following the 2021 military coup—have intensified cross-border vulnerabilities. This paper critically examines the interplay between cross-border ethnic connectivity and emerging security challenges in the Indo–Myanmar borderlands. Using a qualitative research methodology based on secondary sources, policy documents, and scholarly literature, the study explores historical evolution, ethnic geography, security dynamics, and geopolitical implications. The paper argues that effective border governance requires a balanced strategy integrating security imperatives, socio-economic development, cultural sensitivity, and regional cooperation. The study concludes by proposing a comprehensive policy framework aimed at sustainable peace, development, and stability in the border region.

Keywords: Indo–myanmar border, ethnic linkages, border security, insurgency, act east policy, northeast india, regional geopolitics

Introduction

Borders in South Asia are not merely physical demarcations of sovereignty; rather, they constitute complex socio-political spaces shaped by historical legacies, cultural continuities, and evolving geopolitical realities. The Indo–Myanmar border, extending approximately 1,643 kilometers across the northeastern Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram, exemplifies this complexity. This frontier traverses ethnically contiguous regions whose social, cultural, and political identities predate the emergence of modern nation-states. Colonial boundary-making under British rule fragmented these historically integrated ethnic territories, disrupting established patterns of mobility, governance, and exchange. Despite the imposition of rigid political boundaries, enduring networks of kinship, trade, and cultural interaction continue to define everyday life in the Indo–Myanmar borderlands. The region is predominantly inhabited by Naga, Kuki, Chin, Mizo, and Meitei communities, who share linguistic affinities, clan-based kinship systems, customary institutions, and religious traditions. These transboundary ethnic linkages sustain cultural continuity, reinforce social cohesion, and promote people-to-people connectivity. Simultaneously, however, they complicate state-centric border governance and security management. The porous nature of the frontier, compounded by rugged terrain, infrastructural deficits, and limited administrative reach, has historically facilitated insurgency, arms trafficking, narcotics trade, irregular migration, and other forms of transnational crime. Insurgent groups operating in Northeast India have frequently exploited ethnic sanctuaries

across Myanmar to evade security forces, thereby perpetuating cycles of instability. The security landscape has deteriorated further following Myanmar’s military coup of February 2021. The ensuing political turmoil, civil resistance, and armed conflict have intensified ethnic militarization, weakened border governance, and generated large-scale displacement. Refugee influxes into Mizoram and Manipur have produced humanitarian, demographic, and security challenges, while the proliferation of arms and illicit trafficking networks has heightened concerns over regional stability. India’s strategic reorientation under the Act East Policy has amplified the geopolitical significance of this frontier. Conceived as India’s principal land corridor to Southeast Asia, the region hosts critical connectivity initiatives, including the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway. Yet, persistent insecurity and infrastructural constraints continue to impede these ambitions. Against this backdrop, this study critically examines the nexus between cross-border ethnic linkages and security challenges, offering policy-relevant insights for building a balanced and sustainable border governance framework.

Historical Evolution of Cross-Border Ethnic Linkages and Security Dynamics in the Indo–Myanmar Borderlands

The historical evolution of the Indo–Myanmar borderlands is deeply embedded in long-standing patterns of migration, colonial boundary-making, ethnic identity formation, and postcolonial state-building. These processes have

profoundly shaped the region's political geography, socio-cultural fabric, and contemporary security dynamics. In the pre-colonial era, the frontier zones between present-day Northeast India and Myanmar constituted an integrated socio-cultural and economic space. Indigenous communities such as the Naga, Kuki, Chin, Mizo, and Meitei inhabited contiguous territories governed by customary laws, clan-based institutions, and decentralized political systems. Territorial boundaries were fluid, facilitating mobility for trade, intermarriage, ritual exchange, and social interaction. Traditional trade networks connecting the Brahmaputra and Chindwin river basins enabled economic interdependence and cultural assimilation, reinforcing shared ethnic identities that transcended territorial divisions. The advent of British colonial rule in the nineteenth century fundamentally altered this spatial order. Colonial boundary demarcation, particularly following the Anglo-Burmese treaties, imposed rigid administrative borders across ethnically homogeneous landscapes. This artificial partition fragmented cohesive ethnic communities, disrupting traditional governance structures and socio-cultural continuity. Policies such as the Inner Line Regulation (1873) further isolated hill societies, while missionary interventions introduced literacy, Christianity, and political consciousness, contributing to emerging ethnic mobilization. The post-independence period witnessed intensified border institutionalization as India and Burma consolidated territorial sovereignty. The 1967 Indo-Myanmar Boundary Agreement formalized the international border, restricting traditional cross-border mobility. These changes generated economic hardship, identity anxieties, and political alienation, contributing to the rise of ethnic insurgencies. Militant groups such as the NSCN, ULFA, and various Kuki and Meitei organizations exploited Myanmar's border regions as strategic sanctuaries. During the Cold War, geopolitical rivalries, arms trafficking, and narcotics trade intensified militarization, embedding the frontier within transnational conflict networks. Subsequently, India's Act East Policy sought to transform the border into a connectivity corridor, though persistent instability and infrastructural challenges constrained progress. Following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, renewed conflict, refugee influxes, and transnational militancy underscored the enduring relevance of historical ethnic linkages. Overall, the region's historical evolution reveals a layered interaction of mobility, colonial disruption, state consolidation, and geopolitical contestation, shaping contemporary security vulnerabilities and policy dilemmas.

Ethnic Geography and Cross-Border Social Connectivity

The Indo-Myanmar borderlands represent one of South Asia's most ethnically diverse and culturally intricate regions. Traversing rugged mountainous terrain and dense forested valleys, this frontier sustains a mosaic of tribal communities whose social, cultural, and economic lives transcend political boundaries. Understanding the region's ethnic composition and cross-border networks is therefore essential for appreciating both its integrative potential and persistent security challenges. The principal ethnic groups inhabiting this region include the Naga, Kuki, Chin, Mizo, and Meitei communities, distributed across India's northeastern states—particularly Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, and parts of Arunachal Pradesh—and Myanmar's Sagaing Region, Chin State, and northern Kachin areas. The Nagas, comprising sub-tribes such as Tangkhul, Ao, Sema,

Konyak, and Lotha, occupy contiguous territories on both sides of the border, interconnected through kinship ties, customary institutions, and religious affiliations. Similarly, the Kuki-Chin-Mizo ethnic continuum spans southern Manipur, Mizoram, and Chin State, characterized by linguistic homogeneity, clan-based organization, and shared cultural practices. Smaller groups, including the Zeliangrong, Paite, Thadou, Hmar, and Mara, further reinforce the region's ethnic heterogeneity. Kinship networks form the foundation of cross-border connectivity, enabling mobility for family reunions, ritual ceremonies, and community festivals. Village councils, tribal chiefs, and church organizations play a central role in sustaining social cohesion, conflict resolution, and humanitarian cooperation. These networks facilitate information exchange, economic collaboration, and crisis response, particularly during periods of political instability. Economic interdependence is reflected in informal trade networks centered on subsistence agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and border markets. The exchange of agricultural produce, livestock, textiles, and forest goods fosters mutual reliance, although regulatory constraints and infrastructural deficits often push commerce into informal channels. Shared cultural and religious traditions, reinforced by transnational church networks, strengthen collective identity and social solidarity. At the same time, ethnic identity underpins political mobilization, as seen in movements advocating transboundary autonomy and territorial integration. The expansion of digital connectivity has further transformed cross-border interactions, enabling virtual networks for political advocacy and humanitarian mobilization while introducing new security vulnerabilities. Collectively, these dense ethnic networks complicate conventional border governance, necessitating nuanced strategies that integrate security enforcement with community participation, cultural sensitivity, and sustainable development within India's Act East Policy framework.

Emerging Security Challenges in Indo-Myanmar Borderlands

The Indo-Myanmar borderlands constitute one of the most complex and volatile security environments in South and Southeast Asia, shaped by rugged terrain, dense forests, ethnic heterogeneity, porous boundaries, and weak institutional presence, which together generate a wide spectrum of security threats extending far beyond conventional military concerns. These include insurgency, transnational militancy, arms trafficking, narcotics production and trade, illegal migration, organized crime, cyber-enabled radicalization, and environmental insecurity, all of which are deeply intertwined with cross-border ethnic networks and regional geopolitical instability. Insurgency and transnational militancy remain the most persistent challenges, as ethnic armed groups such as the NSCN, ULFA, PLA, KYKL, and KNA have historically exploited the frontier's permeability to establish operational bases and logistical sanctuaries within Myanmar's Sagaing Region and Chin State, enabling recruitment, training, and cross-border mobility despite enhanced bilateral security cooperation. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons further aggravates instability, as the Indo-Myanmar corridor forms a critical segment of Southeast Asia's illicit arms trafficking routes, sustaining insurgent violence, organized crime, and inter-ethnic tensions.

Simultaneously, the region serves as a major transit zone within the Golden Triangle narcotics network, facilitating large-scale trafficking of methamphetamine and heroin, which fuels public health crises, social disintegration, and financial support for militant and criminal syndicates. Illegal migration and refugee inflows, particularly following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, have imposed acute humanitarian and administrative pressures on Indian Border States, while raising concerns regarding demographic stress, resource scarcity, and potential security infiltration. Human trafficking, targeting vulnerable women and children, compounds insecurity, thriving amid poverty, limited governance capacity, and inadequate law enforcement. These threats are further intensified by infrastructural deficits, ineffective border management, ethnic conflicts, cyber vulnerabilities, and environmental degradation driven by deforestation, illegal mining, and climate-induced disasters, collectively reinforcing cycles of displacement, livelihood insecurity, and social instability. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires an integrated strategy that harmonizes security enforcement with inclusive development, community participation, institutional strengthening, and sustained regional cooperation.

Impact of Myanmar Crisis on Indian Border Security

The military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021, which overthrew the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government, has profoundly reshaped the security environment of the Indo–Myanmar borderlands, intensifying existing vulnerabilities while generating new and complex challenges for India's northeastern frontier. The post-coup period has witnessed a sharp escalation in armed conflict involving the military junta, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and newly formed resistance groups such as the People's Defence Forces (PDFs), particularly in the Sagaing Region and Chin State, which lie in close proximity to the Indian border and generate significant spillover effects. The erosion of administrative authority and security capacity in Myanmar's frontier zones has substantially weakened border surveillance, enabling insurgent groups operating in Northeast India to revive dormant networks, procure weapons, and establish logistical sanctuaries, thereby heightening risks of cross-border infiltration, arms trafficking, and coordinated militant operations. Simultaneously, the political crisis has triggered large-scale civilian displacement, with thousands of refugees—predominantly from the Chin ethnic community—seeking shelter in Mizoram and Manipur, where deep ethnic and cultural ties have fostered humanitarian assistance outside formal regulatory mechanisms, placing acute strain on healthcare, housing, education, and public service infrastructure while exposing significant policy gaps due to the absence of a comprehensive refugee framework. Moreover, the breakdown of governance has facilitated the rapid expansion of illicit economies, including narcotics trafficking, arms smuggling, human trafficking, and informal trade, with intensified flows of methamphetamine and heroin aggravating public health crises and providing financial sustenance to militant and criminal networks, thereby reinforcing cycles of violence and instability. These developments have also severely disrupted strategic connectivity initiatives such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project and the India–Myanmar–Thailand

Trilateral Highway, undermining the broader objectives of India's Act East Policy and threatening to transform the frontier from a corridor of economic integration into a zone of chronic insecurity. In sum, Myanmar's political turmoil has fundamentally destabilized India's eastern border, underscoring the urgent need for integrated responses combining robust border security, humanitarian engagement, diplomatic flexibility, and sustained regional cooperation.

Act East Policy and Strategic Implications

The Indo–Myanmar border occupies a pivotal position in India's Act East Policy (AEP), which aims to strengthen economic, strategic, and cultural linkages with Southeast Asia. As India's only land bridge to the ASEAN region, this frontier functions not merely as a geographical corridor but as a strategic gateway shaping India's broader regional engagement. However, persistent political instability, ethnic conflicts, and security challenges significantly undermine the effective realization of this policy. A core objective of the Act East Policy is to enhance connectivity and economic integration through flagship infrastructure projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway, and the Rhi–Tiddim road corridor. These initiatives are designed to boost trade, reduce transportation costs, stimulate regional development, and integrate India's northeastern states into regional and global value chains. Nevertheless, insurgency, difficult terrain, bureaucratic delays, and Myanmar's post-2021 political turmoil have severely impeded progress, resulting in prolonged delays, cost escalations, and heightened security risks for project personnel and assets. From a strategic perspective, the Indo–Myanmar border is central to India's efforts to counterbalance China's expanding influence in Southeast Asia, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). China's extensive economic investments and strategic partnerships in Myanmar have intensified geopolitical competition, enhancing the strategic salience of India's engagement. Simultaneously, India confronts a diplomatic dilemma in balancing strategic imperatives with democratic values and humanitarian concerns arising from Myanmar's political crisis. Continued instability undermines people-to-people connectivity, trade expansion, and sub-regional cooperation initiatives such as BIMSTEC, constraining the transformative potential of the Act East Policy. Ensuring stability, accelerating connectivity, and strengthening regional cooperation remain indispensable for translating India's strategic vision into tangible outcomes.

Policy Challenges, Strategic Dilemmas, and an Integrated Response Framework

India's engagement with the Indo–Myanmar borderlands is shaped by a complex interplay of policy challenges and strategic dilemmas that demand nuanced, adaptive, and multidimensional responses. A fundamental tension exists between stringent security enforcement and the imperative of ethnic integration. While robust counter-insurgency operations, border surveillance, and law enforcement mechanisms are essential to contain militancy, arms trafficking, and narcotics flows, excessive militarization risks alienating indigenous communities whose socio-cultural networks transcend national boundaries. Heavy-

handed approaches can erode public trust, undermine intelligence cooperation, and inadvertently reinforce insurgent narratives of exclusion and marginalization. A parallel dilemma emerges between development priorities and security-centric governance. Although infrastructure expansion, connectivity enhancement, and socio-economic upliftment are crucial for stabilizing the region and integrating it into national growth trajectories, persistent insecurity necessitates substantial military deployments and surveillance expenditures, diverting scarce resources from developmental initiatives and perpetuating the perception of the borderlands as chronic conflict zones. Additionally, India confronts a profound humanitarian-security trade-off in managing refugee inflows following Myanmar's post-2021 political crisis. Ethical imperatives rooted in ethnic solidarity and humanitarian responsibility compel assistance, yet unregulated migration generates administrative, demographic, and security challenges, compounded by the absence of a comprehensive national refugee framework. At the diplomatic level, India must navigate a delicate balance between pragmatic engagement with Myanmar's military authorities to safeguard strategic interests—particularly in countering expanding Chinese influence—and adherence to democratic norms, human rights considerations, and regional stability commitments. Addressing these interlinked challenges necessitates an integrated strategic framework centered on strengthened Integrated Border Management (IBM), harmonizing security agencies, civil administration, and development institutions to ensure coordinated surveillance, infrastructure growth, and public service delivery. Institutionalizing community-based security mechanisms through tribal councils, civil society organizations, and faith-based institutions can enhance intelligence flows, trust-building, and peacebuilding outcomes. Simultaneously, sustained investments in livelihoods, healthcare, education, digital inclusion, and sustainable infrastructure are vital for addressing structural drivers of insecurity. Finally, deepened bilateral cooperation with Myanmar, complemented by multilateral engagement through BIMSTEC, ASEAN, and the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation framework, can foster collective responses to transnational threats, humanitarian crises, and development challenges, thereby promoting enduring peace, resilience, and cooperative security across the Indo–Myanmar frontier.

Conclusion

The Indo–Myanmar borderlands epitomize the intricate interplay between ethnicity, security, and geopolitics, shaped by the enduring legacies of colonial boundary-making, socio-cultural continuity, and evolving strategic contestations. Inhabited by transnational ethnic communities such as the Naga, Kuki, Chin, Mizo, and Meitei, this frontier sustains deep-rooted cross-border linkages that preserve cultural identity, kinship networks, and economic interdependence. While these connections reinforce social cohesion and facilitate people-to-people interaction, they simultaneously generate structural vulnerabilities that are exploited by insurgent groups, transnational criminal syndicates, and illicit trafficking networks.

The persistence of insurgency, arms proliferation, narcotics trafficking, illegal migration, and humanitarian crises highlights the limitations of conventional, security-centric border governance approaches. Excessive militarization, though necessary for immediate threat containment, often

exacerbates local alienation, erodes trust in state institutions, and disrupts traditional socio-economic systems, thereby perpetuating cycles of instability. India's Act East Policy has significantly elevated the strategic relevance of the Indo–Myanmar borderlands, positioning them as a critical gateway to Southeast Asia and a linchpin of regional connectivity initiatives. However, persistent political instability in Myanmar, infrastructural deficits, and entrenched security challenges continue to constrain the realization of these objectives. Moreover, intensifying geopolitical competition, particularly China's expanding strategic footprint in Myanmar, further complicates India's regional engagement, demanding careful diplomatic calibration and strategic foresight. In this context, sustainable governance of the Indo–Myanmar frontier requires a comprehensive and inclusive policy framework that integrates security imperatives with socio-economic development, cultural sensitivity, and regional cooperation. Strengthening integrated border management, institutionalizing community-based security mechanisms, and accelerating targeted development interventions can address the structural roots of insecurity while fostering local ownership of peacebuilding processes.

Ultimately, transforming the Indo–Myanmar borderlands from zones of contestation into corridors of cooperation necessitates a paradigm shift that harmonizes national security objectives with human security concerns, ethnic integration, and regional diplomacy, thereby contributing to long-term stability, regional integration, and strategic resilience in the Indo-Pacific order.

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