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Emerging Security Dilemmas in India's Eastern Neighbourhood: From Ethnic Conflicts to Great Power Rivalries

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Abstract

India's eastern neighbourhood, encompassing countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, and China's periphery, presents a complex geopolitical theatre. Over the past decades, this region has evolved from being a site of ethnic conflicts and secessionist struggles to becoming a hotspot for great power rivalries. The convergence of domestic insurgencies, borderland unrest, cross-border ethnic solidarities, and external strategic pressures, especially from China and the United States, has created a multi-layered security dilemma for India. This paper examines the transformation of security concerns in India's eastern neighbourhood by analysing the interplay of regional ethnic movements, border tensions, and strategic interventions by global powers. It draws on contemporary developments, including the Myanmar civil war and Chin-Arakan resistance, China's expanding presence in Bangladesh, and India's recalibration of its Look East/Act East Policy. It argues that India's eastern periphery is no longer a peripheral concern but a crucial frontier of national security, diplomacy, and regional integration.

Through an interdisciplinary approach that blends security studies, international relations theory, and regional geopolitics, this study highlights the shortcomings of traditional security frameworks in dealing with transnational insurgency networks and cross-border ethnic affiliations. It also examines how India has oscillated between opportunistic engagement and strategic passivity in its policy responses. A strategic overhaul is necessary in light of the changing dynamics in India's eastern neighbourhood. It should take into account local aspirations, strengthen regional economic links, and avoid binary alignments in international rivalries. This paper focuses on the imperative for India to recognise the shifting fault lines in its eastern neighbourhood and to forge a nuanced policy that balances domestic cohesion with regional diplomacy and global strategy.

Keywords: Act East Policy, Myanmar Civil War, Cross-border Ethnic Insurgency, China-India Strategic Rivalry, Northeast India Border Security

Introduction

India's eastern frontier is a geopolitical tapestry woven with ethnic diversity, contested borders, and strategic anxieties. While historically marginalised in national policy designs, the eastern neighbourhood, bordering Myanmar, Bangladesh, and China, has emerged as a security frontier where regional power rivalries overlap with local insurgencies. The colonial legacy of demarcations, the persisting challenges of ethnic integration, and the increasing militarisation of the Indo-Pacific have brought

multiple complexities to India's security calculus (Bhattacharya, 2015) ^[1]. This paper analyses the emerging security dilemmas in India's eastern neighbourhood, arguing that the convergence of ethnic conflicts and great power competition has redefined India's security calculus.

Contextualising the historical and geopolitical dynamics of the area is essential to comprehending the changing security challenges in India's eastern boundary. Ethnic desires for political legitimacy and autonomy have historically been the main causes of the several insurgencies that have afflicted

northeastern India. These regions were neglected throughout the colonial era, which resulted in long-standing sociopolitical fault lines. India's post-independence integration initiatives encountered opposition, particularly from ethnic groups that saw the Indian state as an outside entity, such as the Nagas, Mizos, and Kukis (Roy, 2005)^[17]. These ethnic groups, which are dispersed across international borders, particularly with Bangladesh and Myanmar, have preserved familial and cultural links that frequently go against rigid ideas of national security and sovereignty. India's borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar are roughly 4,096 kilometres and 1,643 kilometres, respectively. These border regions, especially Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, have been historically porous and disputed, often serving as havens for insurgent groups and routes for illegal trade.

Following independence and Partition, both Myanmar and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) experienced fragile nation-building processes. Both nations had ethnic identities that opposed the central government, and both nations experienced decades of political turmoil and conflict. Myanmar, especially, has been nearly continuously at war since 1948, with ethnic armed groups (EAOs) dominating vast tracts of territory. Bangladesh, though a bit more stable, has experienced problems with political fragmentation, refugee crises, and growing ethnic and religious tensions. India's foreign policy toward both nations has traditionally been guided by the twin imperatives of non-intervention and regional stability. However, recent developments challenge this cautious approach, calling for a shift in strategy that accounts for non-state actors, hybrid warfare, and transnational networks of violence and influence. Ethnic identity plays a central role in shaping both conflict and cooperation across India's eastern border. The recent escalation in ethnic tensions in Manipur, particularly between the Meiteis and the Kukis, reflects the enduring ethnic fault lines in the region. According to Pautunthang (2024)^[13], the hills-valley divide in Manipur represents not just geographical separation but a deep-rooted sociopolitical conflict over land, identity, and representation. In Manipur, valley-based insurgent groups (VBIGs) have allegedly aligned with the Myanmar junta to destabilise Indian territory (Das, 2025)^[6]. Meanwhile, Kuki-Chin groups have been implicated in communal violence and arms smuggling, further fueling internal unrest (Mazumdar, 2024)^[22].

Moreover, the civil war in Myanmar has pushed thousands of refugees, especially from the Chin and Arakan regions, into the Indian northeast. Mizoram alone hosts more than 35,000 Chin refugees (Das, 2025)^[6]. While these flows have largely been humanitarian, they also include elements associated with insurgent and militant groups. In response, the Mizoram government and civil society have often defied the central government's deportation policies, offering shelter and solidarity to their ethnic kin (Choudhury, 2025)^[3]. These actions, while humanitarian, also blur the lines between internal security and foreign policy. The Chin unification process, facilitated by India's Mizoram Chief Minister with the help of the central government, marks a rare instance of Indian engagement with non-state actors. The Chinland Council and the Interim Chin National Consultative Council merged into the Chin National Council (CNC), forming a consolidated resistance group (Das, 2025)

^[6]. This development not only stabilises India's Mizoram frontier but also opens channels for infrastructure development and cross-border cooperation.

Since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the country has descended into a civil war that has reshaped regional geopolitics. The anti-junta resistance, composed of the People's Defence Forces (PDF) and ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), has mounted a formidable challenge to the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military). The collapse of central authority has empowered ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) such as the Chin National Army (CNA) and the Arakan Army (AA), which now exert de facto control over large parts of Chin and Rakhine States (Mazumdar, 2024)^[22]. The strategic implications for India are significant, particularly because these regions overlap with India's northeastern borderlands. The Arakan Army's dominance in Rakhine, a key region for the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project, also has ramifications for India's connectivity and energy security. The United League of Arakan (ULA), the AA's political wing, now administers several key towns and border areas (Mazumdar, 2024)^[22]. The porous border also facilitates transnational networks involving the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya, and the Kuki-Chin National Front (KCNF), which intelligence reports link to Pakistan's ISI (Das, 2025)^[6]. These radical groups aim to exploit the security vacuum and expand their operations into northeastern India and southeastern Bangladesh. Drug smuggling, illegal migration, and weapons trafficking form a trifecta of security challenges. The strategic terrain and dense forests of the India-Myanmar border make surveillance and enforcement difficult. Indian security agencies have also highlighted the risk of radicalisation and recruitment by insurgent outfits among disaffected youth in the region. India's policy, however, has remained cautious, avoiding overt support for either side to preserve its security interests and infrastructure projects like the Kaladan Multimodal Transport Project (Pant & Shivamurthy, 2024)^[11].

This balancing act is increasingly unsustainable. As Choudhury argues, India's silence on Myanmar's civil war undermines its democratic credentials and weakens its influence among the ethnic groups that dominate the India-Myanmar border regions. Conversely, China has leveraged the chaos to strengthen its strategic footprint in the region by supplying the junta with resources and courting rebel groups to secure its economic corridors. India must seize the strategic window created by the weakening of the junta in western Myanmar. Chin and Arakan rebels have gained territorial control, offering India a rare opportunity to align with forces that share its federal democratic ethos and have historic ties with communities in India's Northeast (Mazumdar, 2025)^[9]. A more proactive engagement with Myanmar's non-state actors could help India reshape the strategic terrain of its eastern frontier.

While Myanmar garners significant attention, Bangladesh plays an equally critical role in India's eastern neighbourhood security. Historically cooperative, the India-Bangladesh relationship is being tested by growing Chinese influence. Beijing has increased its economic footprint in Bangladesh through large-scale infrastructure investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (Singh, 2024)^[19]. Amid

Bangladesh's internal political instability, China has portrayed itself as a reliable development partner, raising alarms in New Delhi. India's concerns are not unfounded, as Singh (2024) ^[19] notes, China's substantial investments, totalling over \$2 billion in infrastructure projects such as the modernisation of Mongla Port and the establishment of industrial economic zones-reflect its ambition to deepen influence in the Bay of Bengal and create strategic corridors that could encircle India. This expanding footprint risks undermining India's traditional influence and poses long-term security challenges, particularly in the maritime domain. Bangladesh's geopolitical dynamics have undergone a radical change following the ouster of incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024, a development that has radically altered the contours of India's eastern borderland. The caretaker administration led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus has demonstrated a strong leaning towards Beijing with a wish to further economic as well as strategic ties with China, as is reflected in Yunus's high-profile visit to China in March 2025, during which several agreements related to economic and technical cooperation were signed. Yunus's pronouncement of Bangladesh as the "guardian of the ocean" of the region and his placement of the country as a possible extension of the Chinese economy are indicative of a conscious change from the historically India-centric foreign policy. This re-orientation is occurring concurrently with domestic political instability, including the lifting of bans on Islamist parties as well as the release of leaders suspected of having connections with anti-India insurgent organisations, thus exacerbating tensions in bilateral relations with India and generating security concerns. The position of Hasina in exile in India, as well as Dhaka's extradition requests, have also contributed to diplomatic complexities, creating a mistrustful environment and anti-India mindset in Bangladesh. In a recent development, the interim caretaker government in Bangladesh has reportedly sought Chinese assistance to construct an airbase at Lalmonirhat, which is a WWII airfield. It is very close to the international border with India. The potential Chinese and Pakistani involvement has raised alarms in New Delhi for the security of its strategic chicken-neck corridor.

The effects of Myanmar's civil war are deeply felt in Bangladesh, particularly in the southeastern districts bordering Rakhine and Chin States. The emergence of the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), with cross-border ties to Myanmar and India, has led to violent attacks on Bangladeshi forces and police stations in the Bandarban region (Rejwan, 2024) ^[15]. The Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar have also become militarised. Armed groups such as ARSA and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) operate within the camps and are linked to trafficking networks and insurgent activity in Myanmar (Rejwan, 2024) ^[15]. These developments create the potential for further instability along the India-Bangladesh-Myanmar trijunction. Additionally, unresolved issues such as cross-border migration, water sharing, and rising Islamist extremism in parts of Bangladesh have occasionally strained bilateral ties. India's Northeast, which borders Bangladesh through several sensitive zones, remains vulnerable to these transnational disturbances (Pant & Bommakanti, 2019) ^[10]. Therefore, given the current regional insecurity, India may need to

reassess its strategic posture, including exploring options to reduce the vulnerability of the Siliguri Corridor, its narrow and critical 'chicken neck', through potential expansion or additional strategic depth.

The transformation of India's eastern neighbourhood is inseparable from the broader context of strategic competition among global powers. China, with its deep economic investments and border proximity, has been the most influential external actor. Following the 2021 coup in Myanmar, China increased its engagement with both sides of the conflict-initially balancing support between EAOs and the junta, but later aligning more closely with the military regime to stabilise the corridor for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Ross & Sun, 2024) ^[16]. The Kyaukphyu port, oil and gas pipelines, and associated infrastructure form the core of China's geopolitical interest in Rakhine. Control over this zone allows Beijing to bypass the vulnerable Strait of Malacca and secure a direct link between the Indian Ocean and Yunnan Province. China's support for a deeply flawed electoral process in Myanmar in 2025 and its growing diplomatic overtures to Naypyidaw highlight a long-term vision of regional influence (Ross & Sun, 2024) ^[16].

Meanwhile, the United States, as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy, is attempting to reinsert itself into South and Southeast Asian politics by focusing on democracy promotion, humanitarian aid, and countering Chinese influence. However, Washington's engagement remains limited. Critics argue that the U.S. treats Myanmar as a "boutique issue," thus enabling China to consolidate its role as regional kingmaker (Ross & Sun, 2024) ^[16]. In Bangladesh, the U.S.-China rivalry is manifesting in more subtle ways. American diplomatic pressure regarding democratic backsliding and human rights abuses has coincided with China's increased investments and strategic assurances. The outcome of this geopolitical contest will significantly affect India's ability to shape its neighbourhood.

However, India has been cautious in aligning too closely with Washington on Myanmar and Bangladesh, fearing entanglement in a proxy conflict and jeopardising its border security (Pant & Shivamurthy, 2024) ^[11]. The result is a strategic dilemma. While India benefits from U.S. support in balancing China, it is simultaneously wary of entangling itself in a great power rivalry. In this sense, India's eastern neighbourhood reflects Herz's (1950) ^[7] security dilemma on a regional scale, where efforts to ensure one's security (by aligning with powers like the U.S.) may increase insecurity (by provoking China).

India launched its "Look East Policy" in the early 1990s to deepen engagement with Southeast Asia. The policy was later upgraded to the "Act East Policy" in 2014, signalling a more proactive approach. Despite the rhetorical shift, ground realities suggest limited success in transforming Northeast India into a strategic bridge between South and Southeast Asia (Patgiri & Hazarika, 2016) ^[12]. Connectivity remains patchy, insurgencies persist, and mistrust between local populations and central institutions continues. India has traditionally pursued a cautious and pragmatic foreign policy, especially when dealing with volatile border regions. Its past reluctance to formally engage with non-state actors has given way to more flexible postures, as seen in its

indirect coordination with the Chin National Council (CNC) and the United League of Arakan (ULA) (Choudhury, 2025)^[3]. Despite growing awareness of regional shifts, India continues to face dilemmas: Should it deepen its involvement in Myanmar's internal affairs or preserve its longstanding principle of non-interference? Should it actively counter Chinese investments, or tactically coexist while strengthening its own infrastructure and trade connectivity? India's strategy must evolve in line with ground realities. The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit and Transport Project, central to India's Act East Policy, has stalled due to instability in Chin and Rakhine. But with EAOs gaining control over these regions, India has a rare opportunity to renegotiate directly with the de facto authorities (Mazumdar, 2025)^[9]. Moreover, India's coordination with Mizoram's state government, as seen in the Chin unification efforts, represents a successful sub-national foreign policy model. Empowering northeastern states to engage constructively with neighbouring ethnic kin groups could foster stability while preserving national strategic interests.

Moreover, security concerns often override developmental priorities. As Roy (2005)^[17] observes, Northeastern India is viewed more as a national security problem than as a developmental frontier. This securitised approach limits the scope for innovative policy solutions and hinders regional integration. India's diplomatic efforts also suffer from inconsistency. This strategic ambivalence dilutes the effectiveness of India's neighbourhood policy and gives external powers, particularly China, a comparative advantage in regional influence.

Given the evolving nature of security dilemmas in India's eastern neighbourhood, a multi-pronged approach is essential. India must recognise the transnational nature of ethnic identities and engage more constructively with ethnic communities across borders. Instead of viewing ethnic solidarity as a threat, New Delhi should treat it as a diplomatic asset. Engaging with Chin and Kuki leaders in Myanmar, for instance, could offer avenues for stabilising the border and countering Chinese influence. States like Mizoram, Nagaland, and Manipur are not just administrative units but geopolitical actors due to their ethnic and cultural linkages with neighbouring countries. Empowering state governments to engage in cross-border dialogues under a federally coordinated framework can lead to more nuanced and effective diplomacy (Mazumdar, 2025)^[9].

India must move beyond passive neutrality in Myanmar's civil conflict. Without necessarily endorsing any faction, India can engage with anti-junta forces that align with its democratic values and border stability goals. A selective engagement strategy, as suggested by Pant and Shivamurthy, that India must deepen its engagement with both state and non-state actors across Myanmar and Bangladesh, could help India hedge its bets while increasing its regional influence. Formal and informal channels of communication with EAOs like CNC and ULA are critical for stability and project continuity.

With the shifting political landscape in Bangladesh, deepening Chinese involvement, and emerging security threats along India's eastern frontier, India must critically reassess its strategic posture. While cooperative engagement with Bangladesh is always preferable because India has a

strong historical connection with Bangladesh due to the 1971 Liberation War, it is also a key to India's Act East policy, revitalising that legacy through education, civil society engagement, and joint cultural initiatives can provide a soft-power counterweight to Chinese influence (Singh, 2024)^[19] but India cannot depend on this option if its legitimate security concerns continue to be overlooked. To this end, New Delhi must be prepared to adopt alternative policies-including the development of border infrastructure and eliminating vulnerabilities in strategic zones such as the Siliguri Corridor to protect its national interests in the face of increasing regional competition.

To truly act east, India must prioritise infrastructure that benefits local communities. The Kaladan and Trilateral Highway projects should include robust community outreach, environmental safeguards, and employment guarantees to build trust. Regional trade corridors must also ensure local participation to generate economic incentives for peace and stability (Bhattacharya, 2015)^[1]. India should lead multilateral initiatives under the BIMSTEC. Joint initiatives with ASEAN, the U.S., Japan, and Australia can provide economic alternatives to Chinese financing. Enhanced border surveillance, fencing in sensitive zones, and integrated command centres should be prioritised. Simultaneously, grassroots-level outreach to local communities can reduce alienation and prevent radicalisation.

India's eastern neighbourhood has transformed from being a peripheral security concern to a dynamic geopolitical frontier. Ethnic conflicts, once largely confined to national borders, now intersect with global power rivalries, especially in the wake of Myanmar's civil war, Manipur's ethnic conflict and China's regional assertiveness. These challenges require a quick, multi-vector response in the tradition of realism, regional solidarity, and long-term vision. Instead of treating the Northeast as a buffer region or insurgency issue, it must be brought into national and regional policy-making as a strategic asset. In doing so, India must balance its approach to global powers without sacrificing strategic autonomy. A calibrated response guided by local realities yet linked to global strategy can assist India in navigating the new security challenges of the eastern periphery.

New Delhi is at a strategic juncture: retreat into guarded engagement, or emerge as a proactive regional player. By creating cross-border synergies, institutionalising subnational diplomacy, and negotiating the intricacies of global rivalries with strategic sophistication, India can secure its frontiers and its position as a regional stabiliser in the Indo-Pacific.

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