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Modernizing the Security Doctrine to Resolve Conflict in India's Northeast

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ABSTRACT

A new security doctrine is needed to resolve the long-running conflicts in Northeast India, which must be analyzed afresh both from traditional and non-traditional approaches because the socio-political culture and regional geopolitics are infused with the challenges of insurgency and economic under-development. The region, therefore, requires the most special treatment to end mistrust and improve connectivity between the people and the government. This article recommends that a paradigm shift away from national or international security to human security would have far-reaching implications for actors and institutions. Such an approach would focus on threat insecurity,

development insecurity, insecurity of women and children, unemployment, poverty, ethnic mistrust/conflict, and insurgency. The article also recommends the adoption of a gender-sensitive perspective for conflict resolution to replace the gender-blind approach taken by policymakers and researchers. Such an approach is needed because men and women are differently involved in armed conflicts, but policies and research have reflected a blindness to this. The approach advocates the adoption of a practical strategy for the Northeastern states to be made equal stake holders at every stage of the decision-making process for comprehensive regional development.

The post-independence history of the Northeastern states of India has remained elusive and is a work in progress. The chief cause for this elusiveness is that peace and development have been proved difficult to achieve in some states owing to a complex mix of domestic factors. There is an entire range of sub-regional and regional issues that have a bearing on the attainment of peace. First, the security aspect of peace is of vital importance because, in an event of armed conflict in the Northeast, the collapse of human security is a major concern. Secondly, the traditional linkage between insurgent groups, acts of terror, and extortion make governance difficult and could lead to a “lawless” society as the government may cease to be effective. Thirdly, it will be perilous to ignore the security of the nation without considering the security at the borderlands. Without effective protection of the border regions, a nation’s security parameters are void and extremely vulnerable. Geographically, eight states comprise Northeast India: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The region is connected to the Indian mainland by the strategic Siliguri Corridor, also known as the



Chicken's Neck, and surrounded by the neighboring countries of Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China. While China is an emerging global power with regional influence, Myanmar is a hotspot of political and ethnic violence and a haven for Northeastern insurgents in this landlocked region which has no coastline or maritime economic zone.

Fourthly, the issue of the training camps of the Northeastern insurgents, embedded within ethnic populations of the country, is still an important talking point for Indian policymakers. There has been no headway on persuading them to shut their camps because of the lack of an objective-oriented policy. With the recent February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the increased leverage of the military calling all the shots in the government in Yangon will be a challenging task for India. The military coup and its consequences would impact the relationship of the neighboring countries, especially India's northeast. Indian policymakers face a litmus test of choosing either a wait-and-watch strategy or a proactive initiative to deal with the changing political scenario in Myanmar.

Fifthly, policymakers have struggled to comprehend the socio-cultural diversity of the region which presents a dynamic kaleidoscope picture of caste, creed, and culture of a people who share a common trait of ethnicity and identity. As a result, the effort to develop a cohesive strategy has been hamstrung. The prime need for the region is a strategy or a bunch of plans accepted and welcomed by all actors and stakeholders.

Finally, it is sobering to recognize that the history of the region is littered with case studies of all kinds of conflicts, ranging from mass civil disobedience movements and long-standing grievances against the government, to armed struggle seeking secession or complete independence, as well as communal riots, and the Naga-Kuki ethnic

cleansing, resulting in genocide.¹ The multiple conflicts have rendered the task of policymakers to frame an overall objective-oriented policy even harder to deliver. These versions of ethnic conflict need a critical study to identify the cause and effect relationship, which may act as a shield to any future conflicts.

In academic narratives, conflict is categorized in a variety of ways according to the cause, and often there is a confluence of several causes for a given conflict, even if one of them can be identified as more prominent. Conflicts are generated by myriad causes encompassing ideological issues such as moral and religious differences; political questions; assertion of identity and ethnicity; distributional issues such as control of and access to natural resources; and unsatisfied human needs and human rights violations. These causes can be classified in different ways: in terms of the proximity of a cause to the actual violence and mobilization of conflict-causing elements such as men or ideology; in terms of insecurity, inequality, misuse of power, and perceptions; and in terms of powerful actors versus powerless ones. It is productive to apply the theoretical discourses of the paradigm of conflicts and their resolution mechanisms to the Northeast. The instability of the region can be divided off into two distinct factors: ethnic clashes fueled by mistrust and irredentist action among various indigenous groups within the region, and the various half-dormant and semi-active armed political movements against the government. The reasons for conflicts in the Northeast are multidimensional and need an objective-oriented multipronged strategy running the gamut of political, social and developmental actions. Policymakers must understand the crux of a

¹ Uddipana Goswami, *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014).



crisis specific to the demographic paradigm of each trouble-prone state. It would be unwise to stuff the suffering of the entire region into one single bottle instead of dissecting the nature of each ailment separately.

The Relevance of Human Security

The factor of human security is properly applicable to the conflicting patterns of Northeastern geopolitics. The application of a human security approach derives much of its relevance from a dual policy framework based on the mutually reinforcing pillars of protection and empowerment. Early warning mechanisms may be developed by examining how a particular constellation of threats to individuals and communities can translate into broader insecurities, and thus help mitigate the impact of current threats and, where possible, prevent the occurrence of future ones.

The paradigm shift from national or international security to the security of people would have far-reaching implications for actors and institutions at the domestic level. As the state bears primary responsibility for the provision of human security for its citizens, it is important to index the status of human security and gauge the capacity of the state's norms and institutions to deal with the threat of insecurities. The northeast is a warren of deep-seated insecurities such as physical threat insecurity, development insecurity, insecurity of women and children, insecurity over unemployment and poverty, insecurity caused by ethnic mistrust/conflict, and insurgency. The states have undergone spells of crises, one after another, but their nature and dimensionalities have yet to be properly understood and addressed.

The headline issues involved in the ongoing struggles in the region mainly relate to the sovereignty of the homeland and ideology of

internal colonization. Many active insurgent groups believe that their land and resources are forcefully occupied without the will of the indigenous people and, thus, they have a moral right to rebel against authority. Both these issues have generated a severe conflict, not only between insurgents and the government but also between other sections of people, such as the powerful versus the underprivileged classes. Although the capability of insurgent groups in creating a separate homeland is doubtful, their uncompromising struggle for their goal continues.²

At present, it is hard to see the conditions of the Northeast transforming beyond armed struggle and political instability. The space for economic and infrastructural development needs to be pushed further and faster. The most important and prime issues that need to be addressed are employment, education, road connectivity, infrastructure development, and human security and development, but they are strewn in the dynamic of conflict. Security and development are multidimensional aspects that strengthen each other. The facet of armed and violent conflict is a major obstacle to the achievement of human progress and development in the region. Not only does violent conflict lead to death and misery, but also political instability that undermines institutions, and economic and social development. The conflict in the Northeast is social, economic, historical, political, and much more: it thrives in the quagmire of a lack of trust and confidence. The diagnosis of the problem has often been incomplete, and half-baked prescriptions have predictably been equally inadequate. The

² Prasenjit Biswas and Chandan Suklabaidya, *Ethnic Life-Worlds in North-East India: An Analysis* (New Delhi: Sage, 2008).



resulting cycle of violence has continued to create scenarios of intractable conflict.³

The data from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) in 2019 did show some improvement but the region was still far from being peaceful. The security situation in the Northeast has improved substantially since 2013, and the year 2018 witnessed the lowest number of insurgency incidents and civilian deaths since 1997.^{4 5} Total deaths declined to 37 in 2018 from 49 in 2017. Of the 37 killings, 23 were civilians and 14 were members of security forces. The MHA report also shows that counter-insurgency operations led to the killing of 34 insurgents, the arrest of 804 persons, as well as recovery of 478 weapons in 2018 across the region.⁶ Compared to 2013, insurgency incidents in 2018 in the region dropped significantly by 66 percent, civilian casualties declined 79 percent, security forces' casualties fell by 23 per cent, and kidnapping or abduction cases were lower by 62 percent.⁷ Casualties and armed violence showed some reduction in the last five years but an environment of lasting peace and stability is yet to be established. It would be a wise step for policymakers to assess the risks of future political conflict, despite the short-term decline in the casualty rate. Appropriate policies of reform and accommodation

³ H.C. Sarangi, *Emergent Northeast: A Way Forward* (New Delhi: Isha Books, 2008).

⁴ "Major Initiatives/Achievements in the Year 2019-2020," Ministry of Home Affairs Report, Government of India, page 1, https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MajorAchievement_09022021.pdf.

⁵ "Manipur accounted for 50% of NE violence in 2018: MHA report," *Northeast Today*, November 4, 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

should be adopted as many of the symptoms for prolonged future conflict persist.⁸

The Missing Gender Perspective

The question of finding an acceptable and feasible solution to the violence and armed struggles in various parts of the Northeast is a formidable test for policymakers, who must include a gender perspective to conflict resolution. Across the region, men and women are differently involved in armed conflict, but policies and research have reflected a gender-blind approach. Many critics point out that conflict resolution, in its development, conceptualization and methods, has been gender-blind. In fact, the social construction of the different roles of men and women implies a relationship of power, which has a pervasive effect on the spheres of behaviour of institutions and their practices. As conflict is a part of constructed social practice, a conflict resolution mechanism cannot be gender-blind if it must be effective and result-oriented.⁹ Instead of negating the role of women, the need of the hour is to adopt a gender-sensitive approach in conflict resolution and in correcting the gender-blindness.¹⁰ It is essential to understand the role and totality of women's responsibilities and the gains that accrue from greater participation and decision making by women in conflict resolution, as there is evidence that women can make a visible difference in political clashes.

⁸ Ted Robert Gurr, *People versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2002).

⁹ Oliver Ramsbotham, Hugh Miall, and Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 306.



The women's organizations in the region are vocal in civil society's attempts to engage in conflict resolution and peace building. Women's groups such as Meira Paibi in Manipur, Naga Mothers' Association in Nagaland, and Mahila Shanti Senain Assam, to name a few, have been ceaselessly involved in conflict resolution in different ways through various roles. They have been important contributors as peacemakers, by crossing lines of conflict, working with the other side in the conflict on new peaceful solutions, networking with women and other civil society actors, and encouraging women at the grassroots level to get actively involved. Their contributions are greatly valued in resolving the issues to a certain degree, and it is high time to acknowledge women's empowerment in conflict and peace building as women themselves have demanded a role in the process. The gender sensitization of the field of conflict research will open up a discourse and practice in contemporary conflict resolution, where women and children are included as radical change agents and empowered peacemakers.¹¹ There is a definite need to incorporate gender into conflict resolution policymaking and practice.

Women of the Northeast have a long history of active engagement in peace building and mediation, and have mobilized effectively for community survival and easing of violence.¹² Civil society organizations play an important role in filling the mediating gap or acting as a bridge between the government and the insurgent groups in an environment where most conflict casualties are civilian, the violence devastates communities, and the authorities are unable to provide basic services. One significant case is the role of the Naga Mothers'

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kolas Ashild, *Women, Peace and Security in Northeast India* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2017).

Association in the Naga peace talks, where they acted as a facilitator between different stakeholders in order to peacefully settle the dispute. Another instance is the various Meira Paibi organizations in Manipur that turn themselves into both mediators and deterrents against many illicit activities during the peak of an insurgency crisis, symbolizing a shield of hope and stability. Meira Paibi have, moreover, acted as vigilantes against social problems of alcoholism and drug use. These organizations are active in managing conflicts in areas where violence can brew in any corner of society. They have played a constructive role in strengthening vulnerable people in the face of armed struggle and have helped make the violence-to-peace transition in the region.

Graduating from a Simplified Approach

The familiar “pump in money and use force if the Northeast people rebel” approach of the political powers will bring the least success to contain violence in the region.¹³ Without understanding the nitty-gritties of conflict, an effort to initiate resolution measures will be the least fruitful. The conflict dynamics in the region range from insurgency for secession to insurgency for full autonomy, from armed violence to ethnic clashes, and from problems caused by the relentless inflow of migrants to the fight over the control of resources. Besides, the inter-tribal and inter-factional rivalry has led insurgent groups to frequently clash among themselves, leading to serious law and order problems, plunging some of the states into a vicious cycle of insurgency, armed violence and retarded economic growth. Armed conflict has given impetus to small arms proliferation, drug and human

¹³ Sanghamitra Choudhury, *Women and Conflict in India* (New York: Routledge, 2016).



trafficking, and organized crime along the India–Myanmar border.¹⁴ The approach to resolving these issues must change over time to fit various objectives geared to achieving successful outcomes rather than sticking with the old formula of using the gun, which will bring minimum results.

The terms ‘conflict’ and ‘political violence,’ often used interchangeably in the Northeast, encompass both state violence and non-state aggression. Many security analysts perceive state violence and non-state violence of individuals or belligerent groups as the main problem and not the overall insurgency. A combination of political crisis and social disintegration has led to a burgeoning of non-state actors that are equally responsible for the fragile situation in many parts of the Northeast. On the one hand, state violence is seen as violence inflicted in the name of development, but conflict can also be understood as a consciously constructed effort to employ violence to reconfigure the social landscape and relations of power.¹⁵ On the other hand, political violence not only tears societies apart, but it also reconstructs them, whether temporarily or in the longer term.¹⁶ Decoding the parallel association between conflict and political violence is a predicament that needs to be illustrated with a suitable approach and perspective, after the geopolitics of the region is factored in.

The region’s geopolitics has a powerful influence in shaping the ebb and flow of the insurgency. The porous land border with Myanmar provides easy passage for insurgents to crossover and establish training

¹⁴ Sanjoy Hazarika and V.R. Raghavan, *Conflicts in the Northeast: Internal and External Effects* (New Delhi: Vij Books, 2011).

¹⁵ K.S. Subramanian, *State, Policy and Conflicts in Northeast India* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁶ Ashild, *Women, Peace and Security in Northeast India*.

camps on foreign soil, allowing several groups to establish operational havens such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), and various smaller factions. The pursuit of the objective to attain complete sovereignty or self-rule led to the creation of the United Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFWSEA) in April 2015 (formed in the Taga area of Myanmar) to serve as an umbrella group consisting of five insurgent groups—the United Liberation Front of Assam (Independent), the NSCN (Khaplang), the KLO, and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB–Songbijit faction). Many of the groups are unwilling to come to the table for peace talks, other than the NSCN (K) proposal to join the Indo–Naga peace talks in December 2020. On account of shared ethnic traits between the people across the border, the Northeastern insurgents have found sanctuary and favorable conditions to keep their operations alive and well. As a result, Indian policymakers have found it difficult to bring peace and curb the armed movement in the Northeast.

The Myanmar factor weighs heavily on the effort to control insurgency, which is supported by China. Chinese interference in the internal affairs of Myanmar aimed to ensure that the ethnic armed groups from northern Myanmar, especially the United Wa State Army and the Kachin Independence Army, had a voice in setting a future direction of the peace process within the country. China has an undeniable role in Myanmar's peace process, which is driven by Beijing's bottom-line interest to maintain peace along the China–Myanmar border. The preservation of security and stability along its Myanmar border is an important aspect of Chinese policy. Many Northeastern insurgent groups operate from the camps situated at



Myanmar's border area in the Sagaing region. The insurgents are able to traffic in drugs and small arms with ease as they have similar racial traits with the ethnic Chin-Kuki and Heimi Naga populations inside Myanmar, which has turned out to be an added advantage for the insurgents to get assimilated and operate freely.

The much-awaited final Naga peace talks between the government of India and the NSCN (Isak Muivah) will possibly bestow a new facet to the geopolitics of the Northeast, where both the parties must commit to the agreement, heart and soul. There is every prospect of other Northeastern insurgent groups also coming out for political dialog if the talks turn out to be fruitful and the concerned parties accept them. With the NSCN (Khaplang) faction showing an interest in joining the peace talks and restoring the cease-fire agreement, such efforts may help in inking a final and lasting solution.

There is, however, an atmosphere of uncertainty and apprehension looming over Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and in Manipur in particular. One party, the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs), is very optimistic about the Naga peace talks, however, the neighboring states are quite nervous that the agreement may be harmful to their territorial and political interests. The arrival of territorial solutions in the region has given rise to demands for further territorial divisions in Manipur, Arunachal, and Assam. So far, as seen from the apprehension of many concerned state governments and civil society organizations, the Naga peace agreement is proving to be fuzzier than expected and planned. Before a full-fledged agreement sees the light of day, a cloud of fear and distrust is already alarming many. The Framework Agreement recognized the unique history of the Nagas and committed to settle the Naga political issues, however a few disagreements on symbolic issues such as the demand for a Naga flag and a separate

Constitution have hampered the peace talks. What could be a small step in mutual understanding is the provision of a series of significant confidence-building measures among different stakeholders and the government of India, which is an acid test for the parties involved in the Naga peace talks. Nonetheless, one of the most preferable approaches for bringing peace to the Northeast is for the government and civil society organizations to engage in a constant peace talks with insurgent groups.

Pursuing the path of peace, the NDFB (Saoraigwra) returned to India from Myanmar for political dialog with the government of India in January 2020. The initiative of the banned Saoraigwra faction to start peace talks with the government is very significant as the NDFB-S is considered the only remaining Bodo insurgent group active in Assam.¹⁷ Following their talks in January 2020, the NDFB-S signed a tripartite Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with the government of India and the Assam government to give up violence, to come overground, and to join the peace process. The Bodo political talks can be seen as an offshoot of the Indo Naga Peace process, and a model worth emulating. Such peace efforts are the need of the hour in the Northeast, and could generate a similar string of events in the near future.

Many Facets of Conflict

The armed struggle in the region is intriguing and has proved difficult to stanch because of the prevalence of multiple facets of historical origin and varying political and ideological movements, which have left a void of mistrust. Northeast India is culturally

¹⁷ "NDFB-S chief Saoraigwra in Delhi; Centre to ink common peace pact," *East Mojo*, January 13, 2020.



heterogeneous, and conflict exists at different levels. First, there are armed conflicts between certain insurgent groups that belong to different states and the government over the issue of sovereignty and political control. Some of the active groups are the UNLF, the UNLF (Kanglei Yawol Kanba Lupor KYKL, Manipur), the KLO (Assam), the National Liberation Front of Twipra (NLFT), and others.

Secondly, there are boundary conflicts between the individual states themselves over the demarcation of interstate borders. A few of the ongoing inter-state border disputes are between Tungjoy Village (Manipur) and Khezhakheno (Nagaland); between Assam and Nagaland over the Daldali Reserve Forest in Karbi Anglong (Assam); between Lailapur village in Assam's Cachar district and Vairengte in Mizoram's Kolasib district; and between Karimganj (Assam) and Mamit (Mizoram) districts, among others.

Thirdly, there are identity conflicts/crises arising out of a difference in outlook between various indigenous tribal groups for their self-proclaimed identity of who is more indigenous and authentic in claiming the title of the 'sons of the soil.' The concept undergirds the view that a state specifically belongs to the main linguistic group inhabiting it, or that the state constitutes the exclusive 'homeland' of its main language speakers who are, therefore, the 'sons of the soil' or the 'local residents.'¹⁸ A few such cases are the Bru and Chakma identity crises in Mizoram, whom the natives reject as refugees or internal migrants, or the Naga-Kuki sporadic quarrel over hill land control and exploitation.

Fourthly, there are violent conflicts between tribals and non-tribals: for instance, the mistrust between Tripuri tribals and the

¹⁸ "Sons of Soil Concept," *IAS Score*, January 4, 2020, <https://iascore.in/topical-analysis/sons-of-soil-concept>.

Bengali speaking community in Tripura. And finally, there are demographic conflicts/crises between those who consider themselves 'indigenous natives' and those who are perceived as 'refugees, outsiders, or foreigners.'¹⁹ This last category is of prime importance and is a source of insecurity in the Northeast which is overwhelmed by an influx of Bangladeshi refugees, causing the indigenous people to bear the burden of illegal immigration, which has caused population imbalance and exerted immense pressure on scarce resources and land use. The conflict is attributed to demographic change which is one of the prominent factors threatening the indigenous population in many parts of the Northeast. The states of Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura are presently facing the brunt of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and steady demographic change. In simple terms, illegal immigration has remained at the heart of many of the conflicts in the Northeast. Ever increasing immigration has caused rapid growth of the non-indigenous population, fuelling uncertainty over the livelihood of the indigenous people and threatening their human security.

Sports as Instruments of Ending Insurgency

A conspicuous feature of contemporary Northeast India is revealed in the trajectory of a different culture, visible in an improved performance in sport, and better connectivity owing to the Act East Policy at the intra-regional level. Sports have become an important component of fostering peace by taking youth far from conflict and chaos.²⁰ It is a powerful medium through which the talent of the Northeastern youth can be properly nurtured to bring laurels for the

¹⁹ Kunal Mukherjee, *Conflict in India and China's Contested Borderlands: A Comparative Study* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

²⁰ Kausik Bandyopadhyay, *Sport, Culture, Nation: Perspectives from Indian Football and South Asian Cricket* (New Delhi: Sage, 2015).



country. A quality sports policy will be a game-changer in the region as it would help keep the youth away from the insurgency and illegal activity. With a Sports University coming up in Manipur, skill and talent could be transformed into the making of professional players instead of gun-wielding individuals. An effective sports policy could generate suitable employment opportunities for the youth in services such as the railways, military, police and other government departments, thus making them financially self-reliant. Sports, in brief, would help policymakers to devise constructive strategies for economic advancement through human development, as well as improve skills and personality which could meaningfully inculcate discipline and the idea of home and belonging.²¹ In order to understand the overall context of the region, policymakers should have an appreciation of the political, economic, behavioral and attitudinal patterns of domestic governance in the region, and how such an environment creates the conditions for armed struggle/insurgency, insecurities and underdevelopment, as well as the possibilities for conflict transformation. Bringing peace to the region should be the main priority of all sectors of government machinery.

In the Northeast, sport plays an important role in rehabilitation and reintegration programs. Sporting activities designed for the reintegration of individuals help in promoting peaceful social values within an environment where aggression can be transcended and reconciliation and respect between opponents can be fostered. Football is especially popular in the region where many youngsters have excelled irrespective of gender. The game has done wonders in providing the younger generation with a viable professional alternative

²¹ Ibid.

to being involved in disruptive politics. Many notable football players from the Northeast are Talimeran Ao, Somatai Shaiza, Kiran Khongsai, Gunabir Singh, Renedy Singh, Bembem Devi, and others who have represented India in many international matches and still bring laurels to the country. Football is a game-changer for many young players in the region, particularly in Manipur which has produced world-class players in a conflict-prone environment.

The process of weaning Northeastern youth away from insurgency coincided with the development of the National Football League and the Special Area Games scheme which began in 1986.²² Not a single club from the Northeast could have made an impact in Indian football at the time. But, within four years, the Indian national team found a steady supply of footballers coming from the Northeast who became the dominant force, ending the supremacy of players from states such as Bengal, Goa and Punjab. Indian talent scouts traveled through the Northeastern states looking for young players. The footballers, however, came mainly from two states, Manipur and Mizoram, and the other Northeastern states could not match up to them. A list of the present Indian Super League footballers shows that out of the 270 registered players, 100 were from the Northeast, and most of them, from Manipur and Mizoram.

In the End, it's Always the Economy

The region could be turned into a haven of peace and plugged into the mode of globalization by activating economic development, by building indigenous institutions, and improving communication and physical infrastructure. With the increasing influence of the Act East Policy of the government of India, there has been renewed interest in

²² Joydeep Basu, "Indian Football: The North East is the top breeding ground for talent but will it stay that way?", *Scroll.in*, March 2, 2021.



seeking international investment and funding in various development projects, which may be a boon. The more secure the region becomes, the more likely it is to attract global investment.

On his visit to the Northeastern states in December 2020, the Union Home Minister, Amit Shah, inaugurated chains of multipurpose projects in Assam and Manipur, which showed a way forward for development in those formerly insurgency-affected states. A notable initiative was the laying of a foundation stone for a second medical college and a hospital in Guwahati for an estimated amount of Rs 755 crore (about US\$113 million), the Thoubal multipurpose project in Manipur worth Rs 1,998.99 crore, and the Bisnupur-Tupul-Thoubal-Kasom Khullen road worth Rs 475.68 crore. Such projects will create a flood of development in the state as security and development are closely associated.

The insurgency-ridden image of the border areas of the Northeastern states needs to be erased as the region serves as a land bridge to adjoining Southeast Asia and propels the Act East Policy. Owing to a narrow traditional security policy, the Northeast borderland has remained more vulnerable to external threats, with weaker economic development than the mainland.²³ The region has enormous potential to become a hub of cross-border trade and tourism, especially with Southeast Asia, a link that would decisively spur economic development, trade, and people-to-people connectivity, eventually boosting the regional economy and helping to end conflict. Towards this goal, the government has introduced a constructive approach by positioning the Northeast as a growth engine for peace and development.

²³ S.K. Agnihotri and B. Datta Ray, *Perspective of Security and Development in North East India* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2002).

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