

## Book Review

### Securing India's North-East

PK Khup Hangzo

*External Dimensions of Security of the North East Region*  
Temjenmeren Ao (Ed). New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt Ltd., 2021. Pp154.  
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North East India shares a border with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal. Consistent with this fact, the security of the region has an important external dimension to it. The region has long grappled with inflows of illegal migration, refugees, illicit drugs, small arms, wildlife trafficking, contraband smuggling, etc., from countries that it shares borders with. Furthermore, the prospect of a major border conflict between India and China over Arunachal Pradesh is ever-present. These factors affect the region's security immensely. The volume titled *External Dimensions of Security of the North East Region* aims to inform and enhance academic and policy debates on this key aspect of North East India's security challenges. It consists of papers presented at the National Conference on "External Dimensions of Security of the North East Region" that was jointly organized by the New Delhi-based Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and the Shillong-based Asian Conclave from October 10-11, 2019. Edited by Temjenmeren Ao, a Research Fellow on Southeast Asia at ICWA, New Delhi, it was published in June 2021. The volume is divided into three sections namely Part I: China, Part II: Bangladesh and Myanmar, and Part III: The Policy Outreach: Emerging perceptions and the Politics of Identity in the Public Narrative. In all, there are 14 chapters in the volume.

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## China--Principal Security Concern

The five chapters in Part I make clear that China remains a major security concern to North East India. Major General S.B. Asthana (retired) argues in his chapter titled "Chinese Impact on Security Dynamics of the North East Region of India" that Chinese territorial claims in Arunachal Pradesh, the lack of identifiable demarcation of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), etc., are major sources of insecurity to North East India and that China could potentially cut off the region from India in the case of conflict, and fuel insurgency and use water as a strategic weapon to gain strategic leverage over India. Dr. Panu Pazo, Assistant Professor at the Namchi Government College in Sikkim, focuses on China's "dominance" of North East India's water resources in his chapter "China's Hydropower Infrastructure Development along the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet: Implications for Lower Riparian Regions of Northeast India". He argues that the country's exercise of its dominant hydrological position, through the unilateral construction of dams on the Yarlung Tsangpo, for example, could have serious ecological, environmental, and geopolitical implications for North East India.

Meanwhile, Sanjeev Kumar, Senior Research Fellow at ICWA, outlines the history of China's support for insurgent groups in North East India in his chapter "Tracking China's Indulgence in Insurgency in India's North East: An Analysis". He observes that the Naga insurgents were the first to establish contacts with the Chinese in 1963 and they are followed by the Mizos, the Manipuris, and the Assamese in the 1960s and 1970s. Although China's support for ethnic insurgent groups has waned considerably, it has not ceased completely and there is a real possibility that the country could re-establish contacts with them and use them as leverage in future conflicts with India. As regards to the border dispute, Major General A.K. Bardalai opines in his chapter "Ecology and Boundary: Mapping Overlapping Terrain" that India and China must search for a "middle ground" to resolve their contested borders. That, he argues, requires an acceptance by both countries of the status quo, i.e., the acceptance that neither side may be willing to give up some of their positions along the India-China border they currently occupy despite it being disputed by the other. In other words, there should be an element of give-and-take in their overall territorial approach in order to arrive at a final solution to the border dispute.

## **Bangladesh and Myanmar**

Part II of the volume looks at Bangladesh and Myanmar and it consists of two chapters. The first, “Cross-Border Dimensions of Internal Security in North East India”, by Lieutenant General K. Himalay Singh (Retired), points to the existence of “insurgent havens and support system” in countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar till recently as detrimental to North East India’s security. Cross-border illegal migration, drugs and narcotic smuggling, and Muslim fundamentalism further complicated the region’s security situation. Meanwhile, Dr. Biplab Debnath, Assistant Professor at the Tripura Central University, makes the case for developing inland waterways in his chapter “Maritime Connectivity and North East India: Issues and Challenges”. He contends that inland waterways could enable North East India to access seaports in Bangladesh and Myanmar and facilitate trade and maritime connectivity between the region and neighbouring countries.

Part III of the volume is titled “The Policy Outreach: Emerging Perceptions and the Politics of Identity in the Public Narrative”. The seven chapters in it address issues of identity, governance, and development in North East India. Samudra Gupta Kashyap, a journalist, argues in his chapter “Why No end to Politics of Identity in North East India?” that the region has a long history of indigenous communities struggling to protect their identities and recent waves of migration, including from Bangladesh, continues to aggravate the situation. The lack of development and opportunities in the past further compounded their sense of insecurity, alienation, and neglect, and fuelled insecurity and discontentment among the indigenous communities. In “Negotiating Citizenship and Belongings in an Age of Multilateralism: The Way Forward,” Dr. Binayak Dutta, Assistant Professor at the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in Shillong, observes that the assertion of identity or nationalism in Assam through the National Register of Citizens (NRC) has polarized the people of the state. It has also created tensions, trauma, uncertainty, and anxiety among them. Mrinal Talukdar, a journalist, also waded into the issue in his chapter argues that NRC has created a new politics of identity in Assam, one that is extremely toxic and dangerous. He calls for the redefining of “indigenous people” in Assam.

## **Internal Roadblocks to Development**

Two chapters explore issues of identity and development in Nagaland. In “Inexorable Circles and Cycles of Identity Politics – Politics of Identity in the Public Narrative: A

Nagaland Perspective,” Monalisa Changkija, a journalist and a poet, opines that the numerous tribes that make up the “Nagas” never actually referred to themselves by that name. They prefer to be known by the respective names of their tribes, such as Ao, Angami, Sema, Lotha, etc. The Naga identity was thrust upon these tribes by the British colonizers and American missionaries but it has been well received by the people as it gave them a collective identity and promised to bring about political unity. However, the Naga body politic is characterised by “patriarchal, paternalistic and prejudicial” forms of identity politics with the cultures, traditions, and customary laws of the Naga tribes tilting towards male dominance and that has been a key source of simmering tensions among the wider Naga society. In “Governance in Nagaland,” former Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer Alemtemshi Jamir opines that many people in Nagaland considered the State government to be a temporary arrangement pending a final political settlement. That has made it difficult for the government to establish its full authority. The situation was made worse by the establishment of parallel governments by insurgent groups who levied taxes and even ran their own judiciary. In other words, Nagaland is characterised by the presence of many governments but little governance.

Taking a broader view of the region, Patricia Mukhum, editor of *The Shillong Times*, highlights the key roadblocks to economic development in Northeast India in her chapter titled “External Orientation of India: Possibilities and Roadblocks”. She calls for deconstructing the “hyper-ventilated security concerns” in the region. She argues that enough harm has been done to the region by keeping it undeveloped because of the fear that better roads would make it easier for the enemy to make inroads. She also raises her concern about governance matters. Insurgency, according to Mukhum, has created a climate of misgovernance with various groups taking matters into their own hands with no sense of accountability. For example, people or groups with vested interests often imposed bandhs at will and were not held to account. That disrupted normal lives and had a negative impact on development. Extortion by militant groups is another major impediment to development. She also highlights the sorry state of land customs stations along North East India’s international borders. Their poor conditions, she argues, have enabled more smuggling to take place than formal trade. Finally, Mukhum contended that central government ministries such as the North East Council (NEC) and the Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) have become “bloated bureaucracies” and they have not been able to properly carry out their key goal of fast-

tracking the operationalization of development projects in North East India.

The key purpose of the volume on *External Dimensions of Security of the North East Region* is to enhance understanding of the external dimensions of North East India's security and contribute to the academic and policy debates on the issue. It has delivered on that front. The volume outlines an array of security threats that originated from neighbouring countries, such as the threat of war with China due to the border dispute, illegal migration, arms trafficking, drug smuggling, insurgent havens, etc. Beyond this, the volume also discusses the challenges of governance in states like Nagaland and the prospects for increased maritime connectivity between North East India and the neighbouring countries through inland waterways, which would have a profound impact on the region's economic growth and security. Most importantly, the chapters in the volume reflect the views from North East India as they are largely written by authors from the region.

While some chapters, such as those pertaining to China, are very well researched, others pertaining to the role of governance (or the lack of it) and identity in shaping the security environment of North East India lack depth and rigorous analysis and they read more like an opinion piece and not a research article. While that does not diminish the merit of the arguments made in the chapters, it could potentially constrain and limit reader's understanding of the role of governance and identity in shaping both the internal and external security environment of North East India. Given that issues pertaining to governance and identity are closely intertwined with the region's security, a couple of chapters that are based on rigorous research and analyses would have elevated the volume enormously.

### **Winds of Change**

The volume surprisingly fails to discuss the extensive changes that are underway in the region in terms of infrastructure development, cross-border connectivity with Bangladesh and Myanmar, development of waterways, bridges, railways, airports and highways that are transformational both in terms of internal growth, commerce and wider security. Growing ties with Bangladesh and Myanmar have also helped in significantly neutralising safe havens for militant groups, and enhancing cross-border trade that benefit people living in the borderlands. Positive changes have also occurred in resolving some of the internal disputes, improving security, and relaxing the scope of AFSPA.

Major infrastructure projects are being implemented across the region to connect it to the rest of the country, improve regional connectivity, and significantly step up growth and commerce. The immensely significant Bogibeel combined rail and road bridge project over the Brahmaputra has been completed and will significantly improve travel between Dibrugarh and Dheemaji districts in Assam and from there to Arunachal. It is the second longest combined rail and road bridge in Asia. The Finance Minister Nirmala Sitaraman in her address to the Natural Allies in Development and Interdependence Conclave in Guahati in May this year stated that projects worth a staggering Rs. 1,34,200 crore (Rs. 1,342 billion) are underway to improve connectivity alone. They include 20 railway projects worth Rs. 74,000 crore covering 2,011 km, Rs. 58,000 crore to build 4000 km of roads, and Rs. 2,200 crore on 15 ongoing air connectivity projects in the region. Waterways are being developed on the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Barak rivers for travel and transportation in the region and connect it with Bangladesh under the national waterways scheme.

A number of developments have also taken place on the external connectivity and trade fronts. For example, the USD 484 million Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project is now in the final stages of construction and it could be completed by 2023. The project aims to connect by sea the Indian port of Kolkata to the Myanmar port of Sittwe in Rakhine State. Sittwe will then be connected by an inland waterway, the Kaladan River, to Paletwa in Chin State. Finally, Paletwa will be connected by road to Mizoram and other states in North East India. The project could open up an alternative maritime route for India's landlocked North East region and also strengthen its connectivity with maritime Southeast Asia. Work is also underway on the Asian highway project that will connect Guahati to Bangladesh, Myanmar and Thailand. Together, these projects would not only promote trade and interdependence but also help counter China's expanding influence in Myanmar.

Connectivity between Bangladesh and North East India has also progressed rapidly. A 1.9 kilometer bridge over the Feni River has already been inaugurated in 2021. Progress has also been made on the 15.6 km Agartala (Tripura)-Akhaura (Bangladesh) railway line and it is due for completion later this year. The railway line will eventually connect Tripura's capital city of Agartala to Kolkata. These connectivity projects will ease the movement of goods and passengers between Bangladesh and Tripura and provide new trade opportunities for North East India as a whole. India and Bangladesh

have also recently agreed to set up six more border haats or border markets of which four will be located in Meghalaya and two in Tripura. Border haats enable duty-free trade in locally-grown agricultural as well as manufactured goods. They play an important role in generating income and livelihood and help improve the living standards of the people in remote border areas.

By missing out on the economic, political and strategic significance of these developments over the past several years the editors/authors have, unfortunately, diminished the significance of a volume that on the whole competently discusses many key politico-security issues.