

India's Turbulent Northeast

India's northeastern corner and the neighboring countries embody some of the major demographic and environmental time bombs in the subcontinent. Instability in this region, which both India and China regard as strategically important, could provoke a disruptive Indian response or a serious deterioration in India-China relations, with a significant impact on the broader politics of the region. The last month brought two reminders of how volatile this area is: the murder of the King of Nepal and most of his family, and the violent protests in Manipur following India's extension of its ceasefire with the primary Naga insurgent group. This paper provides a thumbnail sketch of the players and the places involved in India's "northeast problems."



An unsettled periphery: India's northeastern corner faces insurgencies or separatist movements from over 50 groups. Although each conflict has its own roots and history, the issues they raise include language and ethnicity, tribal rivalry, migration, control over local resources, access to water, and a widespread feeling of exploitation and alienation from the Indian state. From the Indian government's perspective, these movements represent not just domestic discontent, but the danger of destabilization by Chinese or Pakistani intelligence activities. People from India's smaller northeastern neighbors, Nepal and Bangladesh, have swelled the destabilizing migrations at the root of some of these insurgencies, and

dissident groups have used these countries, as well as Bhutan and Myanmar, for sanctuary.

The seven states (also known as the Seven Sisters) that comprise India's northeast – Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh – cover a total area of 255,037 square kilometers and are linked to the rest of India by a narrow arm (the 21 kilometer-wide Siliguri corridor). The region borders on China, Burma, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Except for Assam, this is a region of high mountains and dramatic rivers. It is home to over 200 tribal groups and subgroups, many of whose historic rivalries continue today. Christianity is the majority religion in Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland, and there are substantial Christian minorities in the rest of the region.

The energy-rich northeast has substantial oil, natural gas, and coal, much of it unexploited because of political violence. Its rivers move enormous amounts of water, and could generate far more electricity than they now do, but harnessing them raises environmental issues as well as political and international ones. The area also has abundant forest resources. It is nonetheless one of India's most economically backward areas. As usual, the insurgencies have spawned extortion and violence, as well as high unemployment in a rapidly growing population. Prime Minister Vajpayee recently announced a \$2-billion development package for the area, but in the short term, insurgency and trade in small arms and narcotics will still be attractive options for young people.

A stormy history: The Ahoms, from whom the term Assam derives, were a people of Shan origin and came from Burma in the early thirteenth century, but adopted Hinduism and the culture of the land they conquered. The Kingdom of Ahom, which included all of the present Northeast, remained independent of any Indian power, and withstood a dozen Mughal raids. An attack by another Burmese tribe in 1817 left it weakened, and the British were able to annex the kingdom in 1826. The northeast has historically felt that modern India had no claim to its territories, and many of the tribes asserted their independence early on.

At various times since India's independence, the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh were carved out of the territorial boundaries of the old Ahom kingdom to strengthen the

administrative structure of the Indian state and to appease tribal demands for independence. During the 1947 partition of the subcontinent, parts of Assam, including the district of Sylhet, went to present-day Bangladesh. These partitions did not pay sufficient attention to tribal groupings, with the result that considerable tribal populations were divided between states. Assam remains the largest and most important state in the region.

The principal insurgencies: Nagaland boasts the region's oldest insurgency, which served as a model for several of the others. The Naga tribes are divided by state and national boundaries. The principal Naga militant group today, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), demands a united homeland, Nagalim, and claims a territory six times the size of present-day Nagaland, including most of Manipur, as well as parts of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Burma. Angami Phizo, the founder of the Naga insurgency opened the Burma front to the insurgency in the 1950s. Phizo's group established links with Chinese leadership at the same time, and later with Pakistan. Tribal divisions within the Naga insurgency surfaced in the 1960s and continue to plague the movement today.

On June 14, India's central government agreed to extend its cease-fire with the NSCN (I-M), extending the cease-fire agreement to predominantly Naga areas outside Nagaland as well. The extension was greeted with widespread protests and rioting in the adjoining state of Manipur, which has been put under President's rule. The states see this action by the central government as the first step towards redefining state boundaries. Prime Minister Vajpayee and Home Minister L.K. Advani somewhat belatedly announced that the central government would never consider changing state boundaries, and the current cease-fire agreement is now under review.

Assam: Assamese nationalism was first articulated in 1979 as a protest against immigration from West Bengal and Bangladesh. The Indian government's efforts to settle the problem, notably the Assam Accord of 1985, were unsuccessful. The most prominent insurgent group in recent years has been the United Liberation Front for Asom (ULFA), which demands secession, citing the economic exploitation of Assam. It represents Assamese-speaking Hindu descendants of the Ahoms, but has also made overtures to other groups. While the ULFA has lost some of its power, it continues to be a major source of violence and instability.

The Bodos: The Bodos are the largest plains tribe of Assam, and their movement is a quest for indigenous rights and tribal empowerment in a majority non-tribal state. They mobilized in 1987 to demand the creation of a separate state of "Bodoland," based on the historical precedent of forming new states out of Assam. The Bodos have a pattern of ethnic cleansing that is missing from the ULFA, and India's response to their insurgency has been predominantly military.

Mizoram: The Mizo insurgency lasted for over 30 bitter years of fighting from bases in Burma and maintaining links with Pakistan. The Mizo leader, Laldenga, signed an accord with the central government in 1986, effectively ending the insurgency through dialogue and emerging as the chief minister in the newly pacified state. In the latest development package to the northeast, Mizoram has been given a \$38-million "peace bonus."

The Indian approach: Indian scholars cite Mizoram as the model for a successful anti-insurgency policy, and attribute its good results to the Indian government's willingness to allow an insurgent leader to emerge as an officially recognized leader within the political system. The Indian government appears to be trying the same approach in Nagaland, and has been willing to accept the NSCN (I-M) as its exclusive negotiating partner there. Interestingly, some Kashmiri groups cite this as a precedent they would like to follow. The Nagas' territorial ambitions have complicated the picture, however, as has the fact that the NSCN (I-M) does not represent all the Naga tribes, such as the Khaplang. Over time, the development of other entrenched interests makes it difficult to put together a "Mizo solution." New Delhi's intensive counter-insurgency operations and the militarization of daily life in the region have compounded the problem. The local population is trapped between a coercive government and intolerant militants, and the democratic process is in shambles. Governors appointed by Delhi in the northeast play a dominant role in local political life, and this feeds local leaders' alienation from Delhi.

Agreements to resolve political unrest in tribal areas often restrict land ownership to local citizens and limit movement of people into the area. However, population growth in the nearby Indian, Nepali, and Bangladeshi plains continues to push people off the land, generating a continuing source of conflict and difficulty in maintaining this type of restriction.

"The foreign hand": The Indian government has always been quick to see Pakistani and Chinese intelligence activities, with the goal of encircling and destabilizing India, at the root of insurgencies in the northeast. Many insurgent groups, including the ULFA and the Nagas have traveled to training camps in China and in Pakistan, and this fact has exacerbated New Delhi's suspicions. The Indian government believes that the northeast is a hotbed of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) activity, and that the ISI also uses Nepalese soil for activities directed against India.

The northeastern neighbors: India has followed a "big brother" policy with its smaller neighbors, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. India, this theory held, would be the magnanimous giver of unilateral concessions in this strategically sensitive area, while they reciprocated with political loyalty, primarily vis-à-vis China, but also in international forums. India's relationship with Myanmar was non-existent since the 1960s, but has undergone a dramatic

change in the past few months. India is acutely sensitive to any indication of Pakistani or Chinese intelligence activity in these countries. In an attempt to keep China out of its “sphere of influence,” India poured development and infrastructure aid into Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim. Illegal migration is a recurring problem, as is insurgent groups’ use of their territory.

Myanmar: After a quarter century of little political contact, India has reestablished a relationship with Myanmar in the past few months, motivated primarily by security considerations. Myanmar borders four of India’s northeastern states (Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh), and the border between the two countries is a gateway for insurgents trying to destabilize the two states. A nexus between Naga and ULFA militants operating in India, and Chin and Karen rebels operating in Myanmar has proved to be a challenge that the two states can only curb through bilateral counter-insurgency measures. An Indian fear of a growing Chinese naval presence in Myanmar, with implications for the security of the Bay of Bengal, was a further catalyst for building ties with the military junta, in spite of considerable domestic opposition. India also sees Myanmar as its gateway to Southeast Asia, which has become a major priority in India’s “looking East” foreign policy. During his February trip to Myanmar, Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh inaugurated a highway connecting Manipur and Myanmar, a road that is expected to strengthen economic and security links between the two states.

Sikkim: Sikkim was annexed by India in 1975. India justified its action by citing misrule by the Chogyal (King) of Sikkim. However the underlying cause of India’s move was an influx of Nepali migrants that changed the demographics of the country and posed an insurmountable challenge to the monarchy. Ultimately, fear of compromising their sovereignty underlies the resentment smaller neighbors feel towards India.

Bhutan: Bhutan’s basic relationship with India is set by the India-Bhutan Treaty of 1949, which commits Bhutan to taking India’s advice on defense and foreign affairs. Within these limits, India has respected Bhutan’s sovereignty and not meddled in its internal affairs. In return, Bhutan has steered clear of China, and has limited its foreign relations to avoid raising suspicions in New Delhi. In the past few years, however, ULFA militants have set up bases in Bhutan’s densely forested foothills and are straining the limited powers of the Bhutanese army and police to restrain and evict them from their territory. The Indian government has reportedly been considering a full-fledged military operation to flush out the militants from Bhutan. This would upset the agreed balance of Indo-Bhutan relations and compromise Bhutan’s sovereignty and strong national pride, and could in turn affect the institution of the monarchy.

Bhutan and Nepal are also in a deadlock over the Bhutan’s decision to repatriate 100,000 allegedly illegal Nepali

immigrants from Bhutan. The immigrants themselves claim Bhutanese citizenship and accuse Bhutan of deporting them for ethnic reasons. Bhutan in turn believes that its sovereignty depends on maintaining a single Drukpa national identity, and fears the impact of the Nepali minority on its system of government.

Bangladesh: Relations between India and Bangladesh have been fairly good on the surface, but Bangladesh is suspicious of India’s overweening presence in the region. Cordial Bangladeshi political and defense ties with China and Myanmar have also aroused Indian suspicion. Illegal Bangladeshi immigration into India is a leading cause of Assam’s insurgency, and more recently ULFA militants have taken refuge in Bangladesh. Competition over shared water resources has been a recurring problem; India and Bangladesh resolved a dispute over the Farakka Barrage on the Ganges in 1996.

With India’s cooperation, Bangladesh signed an agreement settling its tribal insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in 1997. Implementation has been somewhat uncertain, however, and the basic population pressures at the root of the insurgency remain strong. This dispute is intertwined with several of those in northeastern India. The Chakmas, the principal indigenous tribe of the CHT, are Buddhists of Tibeto-Burmese origin. The Bangladeshi government for years encouraged Muslim migration to the relatively sparsely populated CHT, as the Indian government had done in Assam. The Chakmas mobilized in 1972 and attacked Bangladeshi installations under their armed wing, the Shanti Bahini. Army operations against the Shanti Bahini and displacement of people after the construction of a major dam led some 250,000 Chakmas to settle in nearby areas of India, including Tripura, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh.

Nepal: India continues to be by far Nepal’s most important economic, military, and political partner, and is deeply suspicious of any Chinese and Pakistani activity. Nepal has traditionally tried to maintain a relationship with China as well. In 1989, India temporarily closed its border with Nepal to protest against talk of a Nepalese military purchase from China, with devastating effects on the landlocked kingdom. In 1990, popular protests forced the king to accept constitutional limits on his power. This ushered in a decade of confrontational democratic politics, with 10 governments in as many years, and economic stagnation. A violent Maoist insurgency took root in the countryside.

The murder of King Birendra and nine other members of the royal family allegedly at the hands of then Crown Prince Dipendra, and the accession of a new king, Gyanendra, widely suspected of complicity in this crime, now call into question the standing of a monarchy earlier seen as a unifying symbol. The Maoists meanwhile pose a grave threat to the already unstable Nepalese state. They have been actively fanning anti-Gyanendra flames and blaming a “foreign hand” – either

Indian or American – for the palace massacre. The prospects for continued uncertainty are high, and India will be extremely suspicious of anything that could threaten its position as the primary outside power in Nepal.

Mandavi Mehta

India has intermittently tried to redress the imbalance in its bilateral relations with all three countries by finding areas of common interest and mutual cooperation. The only forum for multilateral cooperation in the region, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), is at best a weak organization, whose mandate explicitly excludes any role in bilateral disputes and which has been further debilitated because of the conflict between India and Pakistan. Partly as a result, India has focused more on bilateral or other sub-regional mechanisms for cooperation. India has a hefty trade surplus with each of these neighbors. Energy trade could shift this balance and benefit everyone. Bhutan already exports hydropower to India and will be expanding this trade. A similar agreement with Nepal has been under discussion for decades, but faces both political and environmental obstacles. The export of natural gas from Bangladesh could also be beneficial to both states, but is presently political dynamite within Bangladesh.

The *South Asia Monitor* is published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific public policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the authors.

© 2001 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies

Creating a more stable future: India's preoccupation with the law and order aspects of its troubles in the northeastern states has tended to deepen those states' alienation from Delhi. The key to a more stable future lies in a better mix of Indian policies. The key ingredients in a more stable future are economic development, focusing especially on the region's energy resources; greater tolerance for local control; willingness to work with local leaders; and strengthening democracy and civil society.

Similarly, India's stress on maintaining and expanding its current primacy in its smaller northeastern neighbors has amplified their sensitivity about dealing with an overbearing India. Some adjustments in Delhi's operating style could ease this problem, though current developments may make such a move difficult for the Indian government.

But China is at the root of India's security concerns about the northeast. The two countries have strikingly similar concerns about one another's roles in their Himalayan border region. In China's case, the issue is Tibet, two of whose most prominent leaders, the Dalai Lama and the Karmappa, have taken asylum in India. The two countries have reactivated their border talks and are trying to put their relations on a firmer footing. But their underlying competition is likely to strengthen over time. The established Chinese relationship with Pakistan is already a major concern for India, as is the newer Chinese link to the military government in Myanmar. Any indication of active Chinese involvement in India's insurgencies or a serious move to undermine India's primacy in Nepal and Bhutan – or an Indian move toward a more aggressive posture on Tibet – could send the uneasy relationship between the two rising regional powers into a sharp decline.