



## The Impact of Illegal Arms Trafficking on Northeast India's Security

*Bipin Kumar*<sup>a \*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, S.M.M. Town P.G. College Ballia U.P. India 277001

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.6.0225.1039>

### ABSTRACT

Northeast India faces a complex web of security challenges, rooted in historical grievances, ethnic tensions, and porous borders. A significant factor fueling this instability is the rampant illegal arms trafficking. These illicit weapons, sourced from neighboring countries and domestic black markets, empower insurgent groups and criminal networks, exacerbating existing conflicts and hindering development efforts. The easy availability of sophisticated firearms undermines the authority of the state, fosters a climate of fear, and perpetuates a cycle of violence that destabilizes the entire region. Addressing this issue requires a multi-pronged approach, encompassing strengthened border security, enhanced intelligence gathering, and targeted socio-economic development initiatives to address the root causes of unrest.

Keywords: Illegal Arms Trafficking , NE India , Insurgency , Ethnic Conflict , Law and Order , Counterterrorism , Golden Triangle , Narcotics trafficking.

### 1. Sources and Routes of Illegal Arms

The security landscape of Northeast India is significantly complicated by its extensive and porous borders with Myanmar, Bangladesh, and China.<sup>i</sup> Because of its closeness to the Golden Triangle, drug trafficking has been a problem in India's Northeastern Region (NER) since the 1970s. The socioeconomic structure of this area is impacted by the significant drug trafficking into India made possible by the unguarded, porous Indo-Myanmar border. After Afghanistan, Myanmar is the world's biggest producer of heroin and opium. It is a major player in the regional drug trade network because of its advantageous location within the Golden Triangle, which allows for the easy movement of illegal substances due to its porous borders and overland connections. In addition to engaging in other illegal activities including money laundering, human trafficking, and gun smuggling, these operations are frequently run by military factions, ethnic militias, insurgent groups, and organized crime groups.<sup>ii</sup> The region's challenging terrain, marked by dense forests and riverine systems, further compounds the difficulty of effective border control.<sup>iii</sup> Smuggling networks, both local and transnational, exploit these vulnerabilities, establishing key trafficking routes that serve as conduits for illegal arms.<sup>iv</sup> The sources of these weapons are diverse, adding to the complexity of the issue. Black markets, operating both within and outside the region, provide a readily available supply. Additionally, insurgent groups themselves often possess stockpiles of arms, acquired through past conflicts or external support. Leftover military stockpiles, remnants of previous regional conflicts, also contribute to the proliferation of weapons. This confluence of factors creates a volatile environment, where the easy availability of arms fuels insurgent activities, exacerbates ethnic conflicts, and undermines the rule of law.<sup>v</sup> Consequently, addressing the security challenges in Northeast India necessitates a comprehensive strategy that includes strengthening border security, disrupting smuggling networks, and curbing the flow of illegal weapons from their various sources.

### 2. Impact on Security and Stability

The problem of the widespread proliferation of firearms and weaponry has been present in Northeast India since the start of the insurgency in the 1950s. Beginning in the 1950s, the Pakistani Army provided the Naga rebels with weaponry such self-loading rifles, light machine guns, and mortars in order to arm and train the insurgents in the Northeast to fight the Indian State. It has been observed that the majority of this smuggling into the area comes from China's Yunnan province via Bangladesh and Myanmar. According to intelligence, there may even be historical ties between China and the insurgents in the Northeast, and weapons obtained from China are smuggled into the Northeastern states via Bangladesh, Thailand, and the Sino-Myanmar frontiers.<sup>vi</sup> India's borders with Bangladesh and Myanmar are more than 4000 km and 1600 km long, respectively. Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura are among the northeastern states that are located along these borders. These borders are vulnerable to security breaches for a number of reasons, such as insufficient fence, frequent movement, the rugged topography of the border regions, etc. Insurgent organizations in Myanmar including the Karen National Union (KNU), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and United Wa State Army (UWSA) help with this smuggling, and Pakistan's ISI helps ferry illegal weapons across the Bay of Bengal. The vast majority of the arms shipments come from China, and firearms, assault rifles, and grenades are easily accessible at locations throughout Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya.<sup>vii</sup> According to marks discovered on weapons turned in by insurgent groups in 2019, the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in

particular continues to be the main source of illegal weaponry for insurgent groups in the Northeast. "Earlier, the shipments originated in Thailand which received the arms from China and Cambodia," writes Rajeev Bhattacharya in his research paper. These were transported to Chittagong and Cox Bazar, and then to Northeast India. The preferred entrance ports for supplies to NSCN-IM, ULFA, Bodo, and Manipuri rebels were Sonamura in Tripura, Jayantia and Garo Hills in Meghalaya, and Dhubri in Assam. This changed with Operation Golden Bird (1995), a joint India-Myanmar military operation against the gun smugglers.<sup>viii</sup> Strong steps must be implemented at the national, regional, and international levels in order to reduce this threat. India must take a multifaceted approach at the national level. Given the permeability of the boundaries between India and Bangladesh and Myanmar, border control in these regions needs to be reinforced. In places where physical presence or fencing is impractical, this can be accomplished by using technology in the form of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Additionally, non-invasive examination methods including metal detectors, explosive vapour detectors, full-body scanners, and handheld substance detectors can be used to find illegal radioactive material, drugs, concealed weapons, etc.<sup>ix</sup>

---

### 3. Economic and Social Consequences

The proliferation of illegal arms trafficking in Northeast India has severe economic and social ramifications, fostering a climate of instability that hinders development. Economically, it disrupts trade, discourages investment, and diverts resources from crucial sectors like education and healthcare, as funds are instead allocated to security measures. Socially, it fuels violence, exacerbates ethnic tensions, and leads to widespread displacement, creating a culture of fear and insecurity that erodes community cohesion and undermines the rule of law. The ready availability of weapons facilitates criminal activity, including drug trafficking and extortion, which further destabilize the region and perpetuate a cycle of violence. This also severely hampers the tourism industry, which could be a large economic driver in the region.<sup>x</sup>

---

### 4. Countermeasures and Solutions

Illicit arms trafficking in Northeast India is a threat of great magnitude for regional stability, security, and growth. Combating it calls for a multi-faceted effort on the part of government agencies, law enforcement, foreign co-operation, and community action. Strengthening border security is perhaps one of the best countermeasures. With its border so porous in relation to such states as Myanmar, Bangladesh, and China, enhanced surveillance and technology in the forms of drones, satellite surveillance, and biometric surveillance can deter arms smuggling. The induction of additional border security troops and enhanced inter-agency coordination between such troops as the Border Security Force (BSF), Assam Rifles, and local police can go a long way in cutting off trafficking channels.<sup>xi</sup> Strengthening mechanisms of enforcing laws and intelligence-sharing is imperative in disrupting arms networks of smugglers. Illegal arms traders, middlemen, and insurgents have to be confronted by authorities using new tracking systems and undercover operations. Improved coordination among centre and state agencies, along with timely intelligence-sharing, can assist in intercepting arms deals in advance. Strict legal action, such as enhanced punishment for smugglers and stricter enforcing of the Arms Act, will act as a deterrent.

Cross-border arms trafficking is best addressed by international co-operation. India needs to increase bilateral relations and intelligence co-operation with its bordering states in an attempt to ward off illegal weapons. Extradition treaties, joint action, and intelligence co-operation between India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and China can dismantle supply chains and identify major traffickers.<sup>xii</sup> International co-operation in partnerships such as those of UNODC and INTERPOL can reinforce enforcement efforts. Awareness campaigns and community outreach can reduce support for arms dealers among locals. Educating locals about the negative impact of illegal weapons and alternative sources of income can deter locals from engaging in arms smuggling. The government must have rehab programs for erstwhile insurgents, which can give education, employment, and monetary compensation for reintegration in society.

A long-term solution for arms trafficking is socio-economic development. The solution of poverty, joblessness, and a lack of infrastructure in Northeast India can reduce people's dependency on illegal activities. Education, vocational training, and programs of economic growth can create alternative income sources, which can reduce demand for arms smuggling. A combination of stringent security measures, co-operation between different countries, community engagement, and economic progress is necessary in an effort to put an end to illegal arms trading in Northeast India. Government and civil society must collectively make a sincere effort for there to be enduring peace and stability in the region.

---

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, illegal arms trafficking poses a severe threat to the security and stability of Northeast India. The easy availability of illicit weapons fuels insurgency, ethnic conflicts, and organized crime, undermining governance and law enforcement. It not only escalates violence but also disrupts economic growth, displaces communities, and weakens trust in state institutions. The persistent flow of illegal arms across porous international borders highlights the need for stronger border control, intelligence-sharing, and international cooperation. Addressing this challenge requires a multi-dimensional approach, including stricter law enforcement, community engagement, and socio-economic development to provide alternative livelihoods. While security measures are essential, long-term peace can only be achieved by addressing the root causes of conflict, such as political grievances, economic disparities, and lack of opportunities. A concerted effort by the government, security forces, and civil society is crucial to curbing arms trafficking and ensuring lasting stability in the region.

---

**References**

- <sup>i</sup> <https://www.usiofindia.org/publication-journal/border-management-in-northeast-paradigms-of-technology-driven-tactical-interface.html>
- <sup>ii</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/research/from-poppy-fields-to-black-markets-understanding-the-drug-trade-across-india-and-myanmar>
- <sup>iii</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2017/02/24/the-geographic-challenges-of-counterterrorism-in-northeast-india/#:~:text=Dense%20forests%2C%20rugged%20terrain%20and,to%20make%20counterterrorism%20more%20difficult.>
- <sup>iv</sup> <://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/insurgencies-in-india-north-eastern-region/https>
- <sup>v</sup> <https://inkstickmedia.com/how-the-flow-of-small-arms-helps-fuel-violence-in-indias-manipur/>
- <sup>vi</sup> <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=70786>
- <sup>vii</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/9310657/Small\\_Arms\\_Proliferation\\_in\\_Indias\\_Northeast\\_The\\_Chinese\\_Connection](https://www.academia.edu/9310657/Small_Arms_Proliferation_in_Indias_Northeast_The_Chinese_Connection)
- <sup>viii</sup> Ibid
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://www.pwc.in/publications/2016/smart-border-management-an-indian-perspective.html>
- <sup>x</sup> <https://inkstickmedia.com/how-the-flow-of-small-arms-helps-fuel-violence-in-indias-manipur/>
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://www.ijfmr.com/research-paper.php?id=31779>
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26460070?seq=1>