

Myanmar's Instability and Its Impact on Internal Security in Northeast India: A Geopolitical and Securitization Analysis

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Abstract:

This paper examines how the political crisis in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup has affected internal security in Northeast India, especially in the border states of Manipur and Mizoram. The conflict in Myanmar has led to increased cross-border migration, insurgent movement, and transnational crime, challenging India's border security and governance capacity. Using the frameworks of Realist Geopolitics and Securitization Theory, the paper analyzes India's strategic and policy responses. The Realist perspective highlights how Myanmar's instability creates a power vacuum, facilitating insurgent regrouping and illegal networks along the India-Myanmar border. Northeast India, viewed as a strategic buffer zone, is directly impacted by these disruptions. Securitization Theory helps explain how India frames the refugee influx and ethnic unrest as security threats. This has led to exceptional policy measures such as border militarization and the application of special laws. However, these measures often overlook local ethnic dynamics and humanitarian needs, leading to social alienation and tension within border communities. The paper draws on policy reports, refugee data, and ethnographic insights to show that current security-centric approaches may exacerbate long-term instability. It argues for a balanced strategy that integrates border security with community engagement, inclusive governance, and regional cooperation involving Myanmar's civil society and ethnic groups.

Keywords: Myanmar crisis, Northeast India, internal security, Realist Geopolitics, Securitization Theory, cross-border migration, insurgency, Manipur, Mizoram, refugee policy

Introduction

The Northeastern region of India, which includes states like Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland, holds a vital place in India's national landscape—both geographically and culturally. Known for its ethnic diversity and strategic location, this region shares a long and often unmonitored border of over 1,600 kilometers with Myanmar. Because of this closeness, any major political or social disturbance in Myanmar tends to directly affect Northeast India. In recent years, the situation has grown more complex, especially after the military takeover in Myanmar in 2021, which sparked violent protests, the breakdown of civil governance, and a large-scale humanitarian crisis.

As a result of the ongoing conflict in Myanmar, a wave of people has crossed into Indian Territory, seeking safety. At the same time, armed rebel groups have used the border's loose security to move across both countries. This has caused a rise in cross-border crime, smuggling, and insecurity. The local administration and Indian government have had to adapt quickly to the growing pressure on resources, law enforcement,

and diplomatic strategies. In states like Manipur and Mizoram, communities with close ethnic ties to groups in Myanmar have been particularly affected, leading to tensions between humanitarian needs and national security concerns.

To understand these issues better, this study uses two academic approaches. The first is Realist Geopolitics, which looks at how states focus on protecting their power and territory in an uncertain global environment. From this view, India sees the Northeast as a crucial area to defend, especially when neighboring countries become unstable. The second is Securitization Theory, which helps us understand how governments frame certain issues—such as refugee arrivals or ethnic unrest—as serious threats. Once labeled this way, these problems are treated with emergency policies like military action or strict border controls, sometimes at the cost of civil liberties or community relations.

This paper examines how these two perspectives help explain India's response to Myanmar's crisis, focusing on the Northeastern states that have seen the most direct impact. It explores the security, social, and political effects of the Myanmar conflict on India's internal situation, particularly looking at refugee flows, insurgency threats, and how state policies have adapted in response. By doing so, the study offers a deeper understanding of how border instability can reshape domestic politics and security in a highly sensitive region.

Theoretical Framework: Making Sense of Complex Security

(a) Realist Geopolitics: The Power Struggle in the Borderlands

Realist Geopolitics, a foundational theory in international relations, explains how countries act primarily to protect their national interest and sovereignty. According to this view, states operate in an anarchic international system where power and security matter most. For India, the Northeastern region—especially states like Manipur and Mizoram—is not just a geographically remote zone but a critical frontier that protects the nation from external instability. Myanmar's political unrest since the 2021 military coup has significantly affected this security environment. The Observer Research Foundation (2022, p. 4) highlights how the chaos in Myanmar has created an enabling environment for Indian insurgent groups and illegal cross-border activities, which pose new threats to India's territorial integrity. Strategic analysts like Ashley J. Tellis emphasize that the Northeast serves both practical and symbolic roles in India's defense infrastructure. Tellis, as cited in Ganguly and Pardesi (2022, p. 109), underlines the importance of this region as a first line of defense against geopolitical disruption emanating from neighboring states like Myanmar.

(b) Securitization Theory: How Issues Become Threats

While realism focuses on power and survival, Securitization Theory offers a sociopolitical lens to understand how certain issues come to be treated as national security threats. This theory argues that when a state labels a problem—such as migration, ethnic unrest, or refugee influx—as a threat to national existence, it legitimizes taking exceptional measures to address it. In Northeast India, such framing has been common, especially after the Myanmar crisis. According to Paula Banerjee (2019), the Indian state has often portrayed refugee inflows and ethnic tensions as dangerous to national unity. This securitized approach enables the government to introduce extraordinary controls like deploying military forces, strengthening border fencing, and enforcing laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), even when these responses generate local resentment (Banerjee, 2019, p. 145).

The combined effect of Realist and Securitization perspectives is visible in India's tightened border management, increased militarization, and enhanced surveillance along the India-Myanmar border. As

Myanmar's internal conflict spills over into neighboring Indian states, cross-border kinship groups such as the Mizos and Kukis become entangled in political and security dilemmas. Although Realism would view these ethnic ties with suspicion for potential insurgent alliances, Securitization explains why the Indian state might classify humanitarian migration as a destabilizing act. These responses, however, come with trade-offs. By emphasizing state security above community concerns, the government risks alienating border populations and creating distrust between ethnic groups and security forces.

Both theoretical lenses help illuminate why India's Northeast is treated as a security-sensitive zone. Realism explains the state's strategic anxiety, while Securitization Theory reveals how political narratives frame migration and ethnic diversity as threats. However, the application of these frameworks should not ignore the human dimensions of the crisis. Refugees fleeing Myanmar's junta are not mere security liabilities—they are often victims of violence and repression. Over-securitizing the region without adequate humanitarian support can worsen local grievances and make the region more volatile in the long term. Therefore, future policy must balance territorial defense with community resilience and regional diplomacy.

Myanmar's Instability: What Changed and How It Spilled Over

(a) Escalating Civil War in Myanmar

Myanmar's political situation took a serious turn in February 2021 when the military overthrew the elected government and seized power. This event disrupted the country's already fragile democracy and brought back old ethnic tensions that had never fully disappeared. Armed resistance groups like the Arakan Army, Kachin Independence Army, and Chin National Army became active again, fighting against the military regime. As the situation turned more violent, many areas—especially the borderlands—fell out of government control and became conflict zones.

The collapse of central authority led to what can be called a civil war, where different groups fight both the military and among themselves for control. According to the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), this power vacuum allowed not only rebel groups but also criminal gangs to operate more freely, especially in areas near international borders (Lall, USIP, 2022, p. 8). These developments are not confined within Myanmar. The instability has crossed borders, especially into Northeast India, where the security situation is already delicate. Armed groups, drug smugglers, and other illegal networks are using this disorder to expand their influence in Indian Border States like Manipur and Mizoram. This has serious consequences for India's internal security.

(b) Refugee Influx: Pressures and Tensions in Border States

The outbreak of violence in Myanmar, particularly in Chin State, has forced many people to flee their homes in search of safety. A large number of refugees have entered Indian states like Mizoram and Manipur, where they share ethnic and cultural backgrounds with local tribes. These refugees are mostly from the Chin-Kuki-Zomi communities, who feel a strong connection with the Mizo and Kuki groups in India. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR India, 2023, p. 2), more than 68,600 refugees arrived in India following the military coup.

While Mizoram has responded with sympathy, offering basic support and shelter, the sudden population increase has stretched local infrastructure and public services. Health care, food supplies, housing, and even policing have all come under pressure. In addition, the arrival of refugees has led to unease among some local people who worry about limited resources and job competition. Banerjee (2019) notes that such situations often worsen ethnic rivalries and tensions, especially in areas where communities already

feel politically and economically vulnerable (p. 147). New Delhi has largely viewed the refugee situation through a security lens rather than a humanitarian one, choosing to control the borders and monitor migrants rather than focusing on relief or integration efforts. This securitized approach reflects India's national security priorities but does not always align with the sentiments and needs of the local populations.

(c) Cross-Border Insurgency and Criminal Networks

Myanmar's internal disorder has also contributed to a growing problem of insurgency and illegal networks that stretch across its borders into India. Several armed insurgent groups from Northeast India, like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), have taken advantage of the unstable situation in Myanmar. They have re-established hidden camps and training centers inside Myanmar, where the lack of effective government control allows them to operate freely.

These groups are not only involved in political resistance but also in illegal activities like smuggling arms, selling narcotics, and even human trafficking. The rugged terrain and poor border security make it easy for people and goods to move undetected between the two countries. Reports from the Observer Research Foundation (2022, p. 13) and Tiwari (2022, p. 959) reveal that the Indo-Myanmar border is now a hotspot for such illicit operations. Indian security forces find it difficult to manage this porous border, where official surveillance is often limited. This has raised serious concerns about national security, with fears that cross-border terrorism and organized crime may grow stronger if left unchecked. The situation demands both better surveillance and deeper cooperation with Myanmar's future government structures, whenever they stabilize.

(d) The Ethnic Dimension: Kinship and Complexity

The crisis is made even more complicated by the fact that the people living on both sides of the India-Myanmar border often belong to the same ethnic groups. Families are split across the international border, and communities on both sides speak the same language, follow similar customs, and share deep ancestral ties. This ethnic kinship makes it difficult for the Indian government to treat the issue strictly as a security problem. Local communities in Northeast India, especially in Mizoram and Manipur, often sympathize with or support refugees and even insurgents because of these close ethnic connections.

Sanjib Baruah (2021) explains that this situation creates a divide between how the central government in New Delhi views the issue and how local people experience it. What the central government considers a threat to national security is seen by many locals as a matter of family, kinship, and moral duty (Baruah, Himal Southasian, 2021). This leads to confusion and conflict in policymaking. State governments like Mizoram often take a more welcoming approach, providing shelter and aid, while the central government pushes for control, restrictions, and surveillance. This lack of coordination undermines the effectiveness of policy responses and adds to local frustrations. Addressing this complex crisis will require policies that balance national security with local realities and humanitarian considerations.

Indian Policy Response: Securitization in Action

(a) Military and Administrative Measures

India's reaction to the growing instability in Myanmar, especially after the 2021 military coup, has been strongly shaped by security concerns. In the northeastern states of Manipur and Mizoram, the central government has responded by reinforcing its control through military and administrative actions. These include deploying more paramilitary forces, strengthening border surveillance with drones and sensors, and expanding the use of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in conflict-sensitive areas.

AFSPA gives extraordinary powers to the armed forces, such as conducting searches without warrants and using force on mere suspicion. These measures reflect what scholars call securitization, where a government treats certain social or political issues—like migration or ethnic unrest—not just as problems but as serious threats to national survival.

According to Banerjee (2019, p. 151), AFSPA has often been criticized for enabling excessive force and causing harm to civilians. In many places, the law has led to a breakdown in trust between local communities and the state. This shows how a strategy meant to ensure safety can sometimes deepen the very insecurity it tries to resolve. The securitized lens often leads to harsh actions that fail to consider the sensitivities of ethnic minorities living along the border, particularly when they have cultural and familial ties to people across the frontier.

(b) Policy Gaps and Local Alienation

While these military-led responses might seem effective in the short term, they overlook key political and cultural realities. The people of Manipur and Mizoram have their own histories, struggles, and relationships with neighboring Myanmar. When the Indian government responds only with a security mindset, it often neglects these local contexts. As a result, many residents feel excluded from decision-making and treated as potential threats rather than citizens with legitimate grievances.

This alienation becomes worse when peaceful communities are subjected to curfews, arbitrary checks, or are denied access to public services. Banerjee (2019, p. 153) points out that when governments overuse securitization measures, it can create deep resentment among affected groups. Similarly, Baruah (2022, p. 88) argues that the Indian state often misunderstands or ignores the region's ethnic demands, such as autonomy, cultural recognition, or historical justice. Without addressing these root causes, security measures alone cannot produce lasting peace or integration.

The failure to balance national interests with local needs risks further deepening the divide between the central state and border communities. These gaps can also be exploited by insurgent groups, who present themselves as protectors of marginalized identities. Therefore, policies focused only on control may unintentionally increase instability rather than reduce it.

(c) Toward Balanced and Inclusive Policy

To move beyond reactive strategies, many experts advocate a more inclusive and community-driven approach. Such a policy would still prioritize national security but also aim to understand and accommodate local concerns. Instead of seeing border communities as security risks, the government could treat them as partners in peacebuilding. This means investing in education, infrastructure, cultural dialogue, and inclusive governance.

Singh and Rajagopalan (2023) suggest that India's broader geopolitical aims—such as securing its eastern borders and containing Chinese influence—can be better achieved if local populations are involved in decision-making. Development programs should not just be imposed from above; they should be shaped with the participation of those who live in these sensitive zones. These scholars emphasize that no amount of military presence can substitute for the legitimacy gained from public trust.

Moreover, humanitarian concerns must be integrated into national policy. With refugees fleeing violence in Myanmar, states like Mizoram have shown compassion and cultural solidarity. Instead of opposing such responses, the central government should coordinate relief efforts and support host communities. This would not only reduce pressure on borderland societies but also improve India's moral and diplomatic standing in the region.

In conclusion, while security threats are real, they must be addressed with sensitivity and foresight. A successful policy must combine border protection with respect for human rights, local autonomy, and regional cooperation.

Implications and Recommendations

The ongoing political crisis in Myanmar has significant implications for India's Northeast, especially in terms of security, governance, and ethnic relations. The instability has highlighted the need for a more effective and coordinated border management system. Current efforts—primarily led by security forces—are often reactive and stretched thin across difficult terrain. There is an urgent need for cooperation with Myanmar's remaining civil institutions, as well as with regional actors such as ASEAN, to ensure better surveillance and monitoring of insurgent activities and refugee movements (Lall, 2022, p. 13). Without regional coordination, India's unilateral efforts may fall short in preventing cross-border threats.

Another key implication is the exclusion of local communities from policy design and execution. Border populations in Manipur and Mizoram are not only directly affected by the refugee influx but are also critical to peacekeeping and intelligence gathering. However, many feel sidelined by top-down policies that prioritize military control over grassroots participation. Involving local actors in managing refugee camps, offering relief, and shaping counterinsurgency strategies would help build trust and cooperation. As noted by Baruah (2022, p. 88), long-term peace in the Northeast depends not just on military preparedness, but on political inclusion and responsiveness to ethnic concerns.

A third implication is the need to balance security with humanitarian responsibility. Refugees fleeing violence in Myanmar are often seen purely as security risks, which can lead to harsh treatment and legal neglect. India's non-signatory status to the 1951 Refugee Convention further complicates the situation. Nevertheless, the country must uphold basic humanitarian norms, especially in the case of vulnerable women and children. As emphasized by Lall (2022, p. 13), respecting human dignity while remaining alert to security threats is essential to India's global democratic image and domestic stability.

Lastly, the crisis presents an opportunity for India to develop a blended approach that integrates hard security with diplomacy, development, and rights-based governance. This includes investing in infrastructure in border regions, promoting cross-border trade under safe conditions, and facilitating dialogue with non-state actors when feasible. Singh and Rajagopalan (2023) stress that security alone cannot ensure long-term peace. What is needed is a strategy that recognizes the political complexities of the region and offers both protection and partnership to its diverse communities.

Conclusion

The ongoing turmoil in Myanmar since the 2021 military coup has created serious consequences for India's Northeastern states. Areas like Manipur and Mizoram have felt the pressure of increased refugee inflows, rising insecurity, and deepening ethnic tensions. These effects are closely tied to the region's geography and cultural linkages with Myanmar. India's response, shaped largely by national security priorities, has focused on controlling borders, deploying military forces, and limiting cross-border movements. While these actions may help in the short term, they risk overlooking the complex social and humanitarian realities of the region.

Theoretical perspectives such as Realist Geopolitics and Securitization Theory help explain this security-first approach. From a realist view, the Northeast acts as a strategic buffer zone, making its protection a key priority for the Indian state. Securitization Theory adds another layer by showing how the government

frames issues like refugee migration and ethnic unrest as urgent threats, which justifies the use of extraordinary measures. However, these responses can create a divide between national goals and local expectations, especially when people with close ethnic ties across borders are treated as security risks rather than communities in distress.

The refugee influx and rising criminal activity along the India-Myanmar border have revealed not only the challenges of border control but also the need for deeper engagement with local communities. In states like Mizoram, where people share cultural and familial ties with refugees, local responses have often been more empathetic and community-focused than those coming from the central government. When these local approaches are ignored or overridden by top-down decisions, it creates feelings of alienation and mistrust, which can lead to further unrest.

Moving forward, the crisis offers India an opportunity to rethink its policies in the region. A more balanced strategy is needed—one that combines security vigilance with local involvement and humanitarian care. Instead of viewing border communities as obstacles, they should be treated as partners in peace and development. A coordinated and inclusive approach can help not only stabilize the Northeast but also strengthen India's image as a responsible and responsive democracy. Addressing the crisis through cooperation, cultural understanding, and respect for rights will lead to more lasting peace than force alone ever could.

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