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Crime–Terror Nexus Along India’s Eastern Border

By Mohammed Sinan Siyech

Synopsis

Bangladeshi authorities recently confiscated weapons bound for locations in India illustrating the vulnerabilities along the eastern border.

Commentary

ON 19 MARCH 2018, a consignment of arms being transported in a boat was intercepted by Bangladeshi authorities. The destination of these weapons was reportedly for locations in India’s North-East states, home to various secessionist movements, left wing insurgencies and proscribed terrorist groups.

Many of these secessionist movements have been fighting the government for decades undermining India’s control in the region. Similarly, the Naxalite insurgency (operating in parts of Central India) that started in the 1960’s, also continues to be a thorn in India’s quest for internal stability and security.

Insurgencies and Arms Smuggling

Both these broad insurgencies have persistently tapped into elements from outside the Indian borders to acquire arms and weapons. Many of them have also set up their bases in adjoining nations to coordinate operations against India.

This is enabled by India’s expansive borders with its neighbours Myanmar and Bangladesh who share a combined total of more than 5000 kilometres. Additionally, these borders are dotted with mountains, hills, forests and rivers making the task of patrolling and preventing infiltration, an exceptionally challenging one.

An over-stretched border patrol force coupled with inadequate salaries leading to corruption, serves to further undermine India’s border challenge. These issues are

also mirrored on the Bangladeshi and Myanmar side demonstrating the numerous problems faced in protecting the borders. Consequently, authorities regularly arrest various criminals and terrorists from Bangladesh and Myanmar for transporting weapons and fake currency into India.

Myanmar A New Hub?

Over the years and particularly in the 1990's and 2000's, there have been many criminal gangs that used Bangladesh as a conduit to sell weapons into India. The most visible of such cases was the 2004 arms haul in Chittagong – where more than 10 trucks loaded with weapons and explosives were prevented from smuggling weapons into India.

In 2014, the Bangladeshi judicial system meted out prison sentences to more than 40 people involved in the case; many of them were from government sectors, highlighting the problem of corruption in the arms trafficking process.

When Sheikh Hasina became Prime Minister of Bangladesh in 2009, steps were taken to crack down on terrorist groups and leaders operating in Bangladesh. Consequently, the Indo-Bangladesh border security improved considerably.

However, as experience in dealing with crime-terror nexuses have shown, a halting of one smuggling route used has rarely led to the complete eradication of such rackets. Rather, terrorist groups and smugglers seek out other routes to sustain their operations due to the profitability of these activities.

Thus, Myanmar has now become a new hub for India's terrorist groups with intelligence agencies noting that the town of Ruily (along the Myanmar-China border) is host to many leaders such as convicted terrorist Paresh Baruah from the United Liberation Front of Assam - Independent (ULFA-I). These personalities work with various groups within China to procure and distribute arms to Indian groups, demonstrating the regional extent of the problem.

Fake Currencies and Human Smuggling

A look into the arms smuggling routes also reveals that the groups using these conduits do not operate in vacuums but rather are the same that help finance terrorist groups. A case in point is the trafficking of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN) from adjoining countries helping terrorist groups conduct operations.

Moreover, illegal migration into India also takes place along the same routes. Apart from creating resentment among local communities and prodding violent vigilante attacks against these immigrants, the routes also serve as perfect cover for Jihadist actors to come to India.

For instance, the Bangladeshi groups, Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) have been increasing their footprint in the nation. JMB was discovered running an explosive factory in 2014. In January 2018, it announced a new branch called the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen India (JMI) which, despite having an unknown presence, showcased the group's comfort with operating in India.

In total, the Bangladeshi authorities have alleged that at least 2,000 militants have crossed into and currently reside in India using the very same smuggling routes.

Securing the Borders

Ultimately, India needs to come to terms with the prospect that it can only contain and not completely eliminate such activities. To do so, it has to complete its fence-building projects which has been in progress for years, hampered by the rough terrain and operational delays.

Additionally, it may have to rely more on technological means like deploying drones to inspect its borders and discover smuggling routes, a methodology that is slowly being adopted by border forces.

An important step that could help India deal with the menace of smuggling weapons and other contraband goods would be to elevate its political and diplomatic relations with its neighbours. As the case study of Bangladesh has shown, India's enhanced relations with Bangladesh served to break the backs of various smuggling rings along the Bangladeshi border.

India is now pursuing similar results by encouraging better relations with Myanmar and other countries of Southeast Asia as part of its 'Act East' policy. This policy also brings in the added benefit of development to the North-Eastern states of India, whose absence is in fact the largest factor driving insurgencies, apart from ethnic identity clashes.

Effectively, combating and preventing smuggling and terrorism along India's borders needs a multi-pronged and comprehensive approach which can be achieved not just with internal cohesion but also regional assistance. Given that many countries in Asia deal with similar crime-terror nexuses, authorities should work together with their neighbours and gain lessons from these experiences.

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