

Narcotics Trafficking in Northeast India: A Geopolitical, Security, and Developmental Challenge

I. Context and Relevance

- Northeast India (NER), envisioned as India's strategic gateway under the Act East Policy (AEP), is facing escalating threats from narcotics trafficking, particularly from the Myanmar border.
 - This phenomenon threatens to undermine developmental gains, destabilize socio-political harmony, and sabotage regional connectivity efforts vital to India's Indo-Pacific vision.
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II. Historical and Geopolitical Background

- Proximity to Golden Triangle: NER borders Myanmar, one vertex of the Golden Triangle (Myanmar–Thailand–Laos), a notorious hub for opium and synthetic drug production.
 - Myanmar's turmoil post-2021 coup has expanded illicit economies, with opium cultivation increasing from 99,000 to 166,000 acres by 2023.
 - The ban on opium in Afghanistan (2022) shifted global narcotics production westward, re-intensifying drug activities in Southeast Asia and the NER.
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III. Current Scenario: Statistics and Trends

- Drug seizures in Manipur: From \$10.17 million (2021–22) to \$193 million (2022–23).
 - Mizoram: Over 2,297 arrests and 30 vehicles seized in 2024 (Jan–Apr).
 - Rising HIV/AIDS rates, with Manipur (36.8%) and Mizoram (28.3%) accounting for highest AIDS-related deaths in India (2020).
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IV. Interlinkages: Drug Trade, Insurgency, and Security

A. Insurgency Financing

- Drug revenues fund insurgent outfits such as:
 - Chin Kuki Liberation Army (CKLA)
 - United Tribal Liberation Army (UTLA)
 - Kuki National Organisation (KNO)
- These groups engage in border trafficking, extortion, and arms smuggling.

B. Border Vulnerability

- Porous Indo-Myanmar border (1,643 km) is largely unfenced, making it a conduit for:
 - Narcotics
 - Illegal migration
 - Human trafficking
 - Arms and ammunition smuggling
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V. Act East Policy (AEP): Opportunities vs. Threats

- Opportunities: NER's transformation into a trade corridor linking Southeast Asia through projects like:
 - India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway
 - Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project
 - Threats:
 - Drug-related violence deters private investment and FDI.
 - Destabilization threatens infrastructure like border roads, telecoms, and power grids.
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VI. Multidimensional Implications

A. Security (GS Paper III)

- Internal security threat
- Weak law enforcement and intelligence failure
- Need for border fencing, surveillance tech, and joint border patrols with Myanmar

B. Health (GS Paper II)

- Drug addiction and HIV/AIDS affect human capital
- Strain on public health infrastructure

C. Social Cohesion (GS Paper I & II)

- Erosion of traditional structures
- Tribal youth vulnerable to addiction and trafficking networks
- Deepening ethnic fault lines

D. International Relations (GS Paper II)

- India's regional diplomacy with Myanmar, Thailand, and ASEAN needs recalibration
- Importance of platforms like BIMSTEC, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, and India-ASEAN Summits

VII. Legal and Institutional Framework

- NDPS Act, 1985
- Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB)
- Free Movement Regime (FMR) along Myanmar border – needs urgent reform
- SAARC Drug Offences Monitoring Desk and UN's South Asia Regional Office of UNODC

VIII. Policy Gaps and Challenges

- Weak inter-agency coordination between NCB, Assam Rifles, Border Security Force, and state police
- Delayed infrastructure rollout under AEP
- Minimal community-based rehabilitation and prevention programs

IX. Recommendations and Way Forward

A. Strategic Border Management

- Fencing priority sectors (high-risk zones)
- Integrating drone surveillance, AI-based pattern detection, and satellite mapping

B. Diplomatic Engagement

- Bilateral mechanism with Myanmar's military regime, despite legitimacy concerns
- Multilateral action via ASEAN and UNODC

C. Economic and Community Development

- Employment generation schemes for border tribes (MGNREGA+, skilling)
- Incentivizing alternative crops to displace poppy cultivation in border regions

D. Integrated Health Response

- Expansion of NACO-led HIV prevention and drug de-addiction centres
- Grassroots-level awareness and outreach in tribal languages

E. Insurgency Control

- Implement targeted CI (Counter-Insurgency) operations

- Promoting peace accords with militant groups under strong verification systems
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X. UPSC Linkages and Model Questions

Prelims

Q. The “Golden Triangle” refers to:

A. A region in Southeast Asia known for:

- (a) High biodiversity
- (b) Strategic mineral reserves
- (c) Drug production and trafficking
- (d) Renewable energy collaboration

Answer: (c)

Mains

GS Paper III:

Q. Discuss the interlinkages between cross-border drug trafficking and regional insurgency in Northeast India. How does it impact India’s Act East Policy objectives? Suggest suitable countermeasures.

[Answer Structure]:

- Introduction: Drug trade trends
- Body: Link with Myanmar crisis, insurgency groups, HIV/AIDS, and border vulnerability
- Impact on AEP: Investment, infrastructure, diplomatic credibility
- Measures: Security, diplomacy, rehabilitation, institutional reforms
- Conclusion: Need for integrated approach balancing development and security