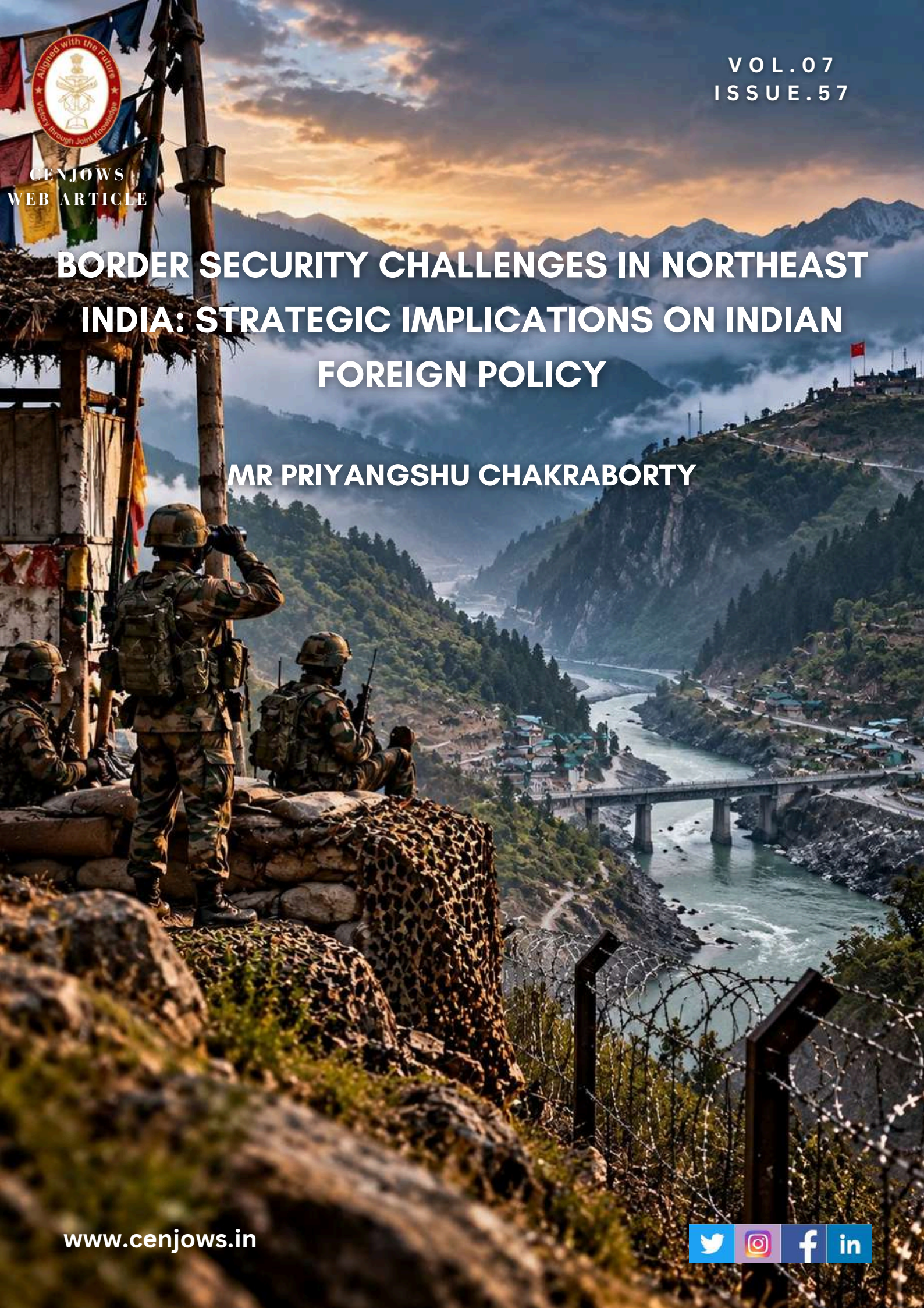




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Border Security Challenges in Northeast India: Strategic Implications on Indian Foreign Policy



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Introduction

The cursory history of Northeast India, reflecting the geopolitical commencement of India's foreign policy, plays a crucial role in shaping strategic security and stability in the region. It is observed as a sensitive geographical location that is determined to be safe from both internal and external threats, with cooperative engagement between India and its neighbouring countries. Now, the question arises: why is Northeast India important for Indian foreign policy? Does the answer lie in its geostrategic location?

Northeast India comprises eight states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim), holds diverse cultures and unique characteristics, and holds significant status for regional dynamics. India's complex web of identities coalesces as much as in the country's northeast, where the politics of identity and self-determination have led to internal and external security challenges. While

security discussions usually focus on India's western border, it is the northeast that is home to a tangle of issues which, if viewed collectively, represent a serious threat to long-term regional stability.¹ As borders are considered focal points of the territorial sovereignty of a state, it is necessary to build a robust presence of security mechanisms for legitimate elements of facilities and services of bridging integration. In this relation, the region of Northeast India is surrounded by Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar; this has made the management of borders in the region filled with the nature of complexity and more intense existence against unconventional threats. The presence of militant outfits in most of the Northeastern states and their ability to indulge in hit-and-run operations across borders has only added to the intricacies, both in interstate and intra-state relations, along with a growing incidence of substance abuse. This makes an experience for most of the states in Northeast India.²

Speaking of its origin, the motive of Naga National Council (NNC), which led to further formation of militant organisations in the region like National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), split into Isak-Muiva and Khaplang, the rise of Mizo National Front (MNF) and United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), accompanied with ethnic conflicts and territorial disputes, led to insurgency and launching of several operations against militancy in the Northeast by Indian armed forces.

The rise of illegal migration, cross-border terrorism, drug trafficking and the growth of China's rapid influence engaged with severe threats to instability in its border implications and standards of maintenance and also put hurdles on India's diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries and regional security. While the external powers and their activities have impacted upon the security of India's Northeast, there is hardly much understanding about how small but hostile neighbours have taken advantage of a country's vulnerability in its strategic soft underbelly.³

To secure its border in the lens of strengthening foreign policy, the state has adopted a multi-pronged plan to tackle the 'multiple front scenarios', which shifted India's determination towards an offensive defence strategy for better interaction and utilisation of its capabilities in the region, which in turn relates to the juxtaposition of India's vision of global power in frameworks of regional cooperation to counterbalance external

parameters. The state engages with Act East Policy, BIMSTEC and empathises towards connectivity and economic integration with neighbouring countries to reflect its border management to make remarkable transition for Northeast India into global trade and security networks. The key motive is to take people-centric approaches and make them partners in national security, maintaining good cooperation with the neighbours to achieve progress.⁴

This article comprehensively explores Northeast India's border security issues through the lens of India's foreign policy and highlights India's strategic initiatives while enhancing one's knowledge of the way forward of possible approaches for shaping India's foreign policy engagement with border security in Northeast India and strengthening regional cooperation and national security.

Geostrategic Importance of Northeast India

'Southeast Asia begins where Northeast India ends'. This statement justifies⁵ categorising India's Northeast borderland as a sub-state region in international relations. Northeast India, comprising with 99 per cent of the 6,387 km border of the region as an international border with four countries, makes up almost 40 per cent of India's land borders with its neighbours, has an extraordinarily important strategic dimension and is a vital part of the nation's defence architecture, as its Siliguri Corridor (Chicken Neck), just 23 km in width, connects with the rest of India. In the pragmatic vision of India's foreign policy approach, Northeast India has been considered as a 'hub of opportunities', turning the region into a focal point for regional connectivity. The region has gained attention for crucial transforming priorities. With Act East Policy, launched in 2015, stepping up in action, the institutional establishment of BIMSTEC, BBIN and the holistic ideals to follow sustainable rationale in the Indo-Pacific region are acknowledged by neighbouring countries via a wholesome ratio of interest. Notably, rebuilding⁶ of India's Neighbourhood Diplomacy, Northeast India emerges as a reconciling force to integrate national interest and regional aspirations within a single table of discussion.

Major Border Security Challenges in Northeast India and India's Strategic Responses

History of Border Security Violations:

Northeast India is beset by multiple territorial disputes, both international and inter-state. One of the primary concerns for India's geopolitical vision is to neutralise China's expanding footprint across the region. For instance, Beijing asserts that the state of India, i.e., Arunachal Pradesh, which it refers to as "South Tibet", has been an integral part of Chinese territory since ancient times and therefore falls within its sovereign jurisdiction.⁷ The latest move by China to rename places in Arunachal Pradesh aligns with its broader efforts to exert control over geographical regions it claims started a huge geopolitical tussle between the two countries, resulting in Tawang clashes (2022) in the region. In addition, the eastern border of the country, i.e., Bangladesh, is witnessing an evolving political environment defined by rising pro-Pakistan elements and Islamist extremism within the state, which has raised alarm for 'anti-India' prospects. The risk assessment is intensified for posing hostile activities to destabilise Northeast India. Similarly, in the Indo-Myanmar border, the Free Movement Regime (FMR) was appreciated to allow border residents to visit 16 kms of Indian territory without visa requirements by the two countries as a beam of mutual understanding between India and Myanmar.⁸ But, in 2024, the initiative was ceded by India by allowing only 10 km of free trespassing with seven odd days of validity, later creating diplomatic disagreement between the two neighbouring countries.⁹ India, on a serious note, took such major steps for eliminating the possible loopholes that often allow militants to escape beyond the border, securing them from the illegal network of smuggling, drugs and armed flow via open routes. The action has also been revamped with biometric technicalities to prevent infiltrations in the region.

Series of Ethnic Conflicts and Insurgent Movements:

Since colonial times, the Northeastern region of India (NER) has undergone a juncture of ethnic conflicts and insurgencies, later perceived with separatist demands and mass agitations, particularly from Assam, Mizoram and Nagaland. The principal of inter alia, i.e., 'three notions of E-Ethnicity, Economic Development and Elections are the

fundamental source of persistent unrest within the region.¹⁰ Insurgencies in the region emerge from the interaction of local, national and regional dynamics, which have interplayed to produce multifarious and fluid shifting scenario.¹¹ Ongoing ethnic conflict in Manipur (since 2023) is the finest example to relate to. Consequently, Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has experienced both positive and negative implications for stabilising the nexus of peace-building, interoperability and advancement of the region. These insurgencies have been rooted in sponsorship of external forces like China (for armed support and technology), Myanmar (shelter of their camps and potential equipment), and Pakistan (involvement of ISI in the region), creating prominent movements for socio-economic instability and hurdles to provide advancement in Northeast India.

Drugs and Arms Trafficking:

Drug consumption is a worldwide problem, which has affected almost all the nations, both developed and developing.¹² Similarly, Northeast India has emerged as a major geographical location for drug trafficking; the region provides a key corridor for illegal drug trade, such as heroin, methamphetamine, opium and synthetic drugs, into the region, even though the region has a historical prevalence of raw opium, Ganja and Bhang. To reflect its presence, India's northeastern states- the 'Seven Sisters' as they are traditionally referred to have historically been associated with the cross-border drug trade whose origins are linked to the 'Golden Triangle' with Myanmar at the centre of this international narcotics-fuelled economy¹³; The government has announced a 'zero tolerance policy' on drug trafficking as well as against the 'dirty money' and 'organised mafia' which could 'damage the country's economy and national security'. The Modi government lodged 3,172 cases between 2014 and 2022, even with the recent Manipur conflict where the drugs were smuggled via the border, impacting management of the state's territory¹⁴. One of the major implications of the illegal network in NER deals with human trafficking, as the region covers vast borders of neighbouring countries, often causing the plight of victims, especially women and children, into transnational crimes. These have even increased the numbers of HIV/AIDS infections in the valley, alarming a serious border challenge for the state.

Illegal Migration:

The large-scale migration has been a persistent issue in the entire NER, affecting the region's economic development, demographics and security, which reflects identity politics and land disputes. The influx of undocumented migrants has led to demographic shifts, especially referencing Assam (CAA,2019). For Tripura, the state has seen a huge change in its internal politics, meeting with the current situation of Manipur (Kuki Meitei conflicts since 2023). The inflow of migration from India's neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Myanmar has negatively impacted its indigenous population, which is in decline. Over 40,000 refugees from Myanmar have taken shelter in Mizoram since a military coup in the neighbouring country in February 2021, and the effect of Bangladeshi transients is likewise apparent in the shaky segment profile in Nagaland¹⁵. A large-scale influx of illegal immigrants in millions has brought significant demographic composition to the region. The arrival of cross-border migrants had layered a compound burden for security personnel in order to counter illicit activities stemming beyond the border.¹⁶

Physical Infrastructure and Connectivity:

Northeast India suffers from climatic topography and underdeveloped infrastructure that creates a major hurdle in border management priorities, affecting connectivity within intra-state and inter-state space as well as positioning the region backward in trade and commerce productivity. The challenging terrain of dense forests, steep mountains and high-altitude areas constraints border surveillance. This complication of monitoring creates space for unlawful penetrations and trafficking across the valley. For instance, the deployment of security forces while constructing NH-15 from Baihata Chariali (Assam) to Wakro (Arunachal Pradesh) indicates the sensitivity of the location. Again, the rail connectivity that merges the rest of India with NER often faces trouble from natural tragedy (earthquakes, floods, and landslides) as well as negative impressions from investment entities and insufficient resource articulation from both the Centre and State levels, resulting in slow progress. Moreover, the consistent demands from various ethnic communities over time for safeguarding local aspirations and identity are deep-rooted in concern for demographic shifts. The state of Meghalaya could be a vulnerable example; protest against railway connectivity as seen for the paradox of outsider influx and erosion of indigenous population in the region lays demand for Inner Line Permit (ILP) in return¹⁷.

The criminal-terrorist nexus has also emerged as a major fault for the poor development of the region.¹⁸ To relate, from 2017 to 2018, 14 cases of kidnappings, shootings and violence against railway supervisors and engineers working on the 'Jiribam-Tupul-Imphal' rail link project were registered.¹⁹ Thus, environmental vulnerability and prevalence of illegal activities have created a barrier for the development of the region.

In response to the emerging border issues, India has priorities to strengthen sustained regional and multilateral diplomacy and accelerate fast-tracking border road-rail projects for connectivity-related infrastructure in the region. The construction of 51.38 kms of the Bairabi-Sairang Railway line and Sairang railway station in Mizoram (with 153 bridges and 45 tunnels) is a prime example of India's transformative boost for unlocking tourism and opportunities in the region²⁰. New Delhi has also urged bilateral talks via Special Representatives Dialogues with China for building peace and mutual respect between the two Asian actors. India has a strong historical relation with Myanmar; this has enhanced between the two countries for greater cooperation and trust-building initiatives. For instance, to secure India's objective for counterinsurgency, both countries had launched two joint operations (Operation Sunrise, 2019-2020) targeting hideouts of militant groups in concealed dense forest. Despite the military coup in 2021 turning a harsh environment in Myanmar, India has kept a steady commitment.²¹ Strategically, India focuses on security and economic ties, thereby initiating meaningful dialogue participation with the Act East Forum and ASEAN for linking NER with Southeast Asian countries via the podium of trade, connectivity, commerce and cultural affinities; BIMSTEC for transportation and transnational cooperation across the Bay of Bengal region, consisting of five South Asian countries (India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal) and two Southeast Asian countries (Myanmar and Thailand); and small dialogue platforms like BBIN for cross-border connectivity and trade, followed by vehicle trespassing permits between Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal, respectively. With the political transition of Bangladesh, New Delhi has voiced concern for minority communities while adhering not to interfere in the domestic affairs of Dhaka while keeping a close eye on 'Neighbourhood First' in view of shared prosperous stability. India has improvised the 'Chicken-Neck Corridor' by deploying multiple military formations, establishing new

military garrisons and advanced assets like Rafale and S-400 for surveillance and readiness for any possible threats.²²

What should India do next?

To effectively address the border security challenges in Northeast India and enhance India's foreign policy strategy, India should follow the urgent need of economic, socio-political and military diplomatic dimensions, indulge in the tech expertise of the nation, ensure the deployment of AI-powered surveillance systems (facial recognition adaptability) and integrate command centres in sensitive border areas to tackle the issue of illegal migration and trafficking in the region. India should take advantage of foreign countries like Japan for investment in areas of economic cooperation, building infrastructure and connectivity (boosting construction of highways like NH-913 and rail networks) with neighbouring countries, keeping focus on local employment opportunities and border trade to build trust among indigenous communities against insurgency and illegal activities, and developing cyber-monitoring units against narrative campaigns of separatist in the valley. The border diplomacy with neighbouring countries in Northeast India is required to ensure joint programmes in socio-economic engagement and cultural affinity and fast-track the effectiveness of pending projects in the region's connectivity to counter Beijing's geopolitical footprints and captivate the promotion of Northeast India as a regional trade hub, primarily under the Act East Policy. This highlights the effectiveness of India's strategic potential in a bigger picture of geopolitics and accelerates the vision of Vishwa-Guru. To end, India, with its capabilities, has to indulge in a magnificent transition with the commitment of strategic goals, dealing with the growth of the Northeast India region and ensuring its proactive utilisation of resources, considering from the lens of humanity as well as from the parameters of geopolitics.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

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