

Illegal Immigration in Assam and Indian Security Concerns in North-East Region

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Abstract

Indian security concerns in North-East region are complex and deep in nature. It is the region surrounded by many countries, China in the north, Bangladesh in the south, Myanmar in the east and Bhutan in the north-west. India has been facing many issues with these countries including border and water dispute, infiltration of illegal immigrants, cross-border terrorism and so on. The North-East region has always been a soft target for different groups like separatists, terrorists, anti-India forces, and also neighboring countries like China and Bangladesh (earlier East Pakistan) who tried their best to create the situation of unrest and divide in the region.

The present paper focuses on illegal immigration in Assam from the perspective of Indian security concerns in North- East region. It examines the threats coming into North East region from bordering countries, China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. It argues that while Chinese motives pose strategic challenge to India in the North East region, influx of illegal immigrants in Assam is a major cause of concern for Indian national security. In the past, it could be a mere human mobility but over the period, it is being propelled by anti-national outfits with the hidden intention of balkanizing India. India needs a comprehensive mechanism to deal with this problem.

Keywords: Illegal Immigration, Security, North-East, Assam, East Pakistan, Bangladesh, Panchsheel.

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Introduction

India's security concerns in North-East region are very complex and deep in nature and thus its important to figure out various aspects which are relevant to understand the Indian concerns. India has a distinct socio-cultural, geographical and historical background which is result of its unique past events and situations it has faced. The North-East region of India is surrounded by many countries, China from north, Bangladesh from south, Myanmar from east and Bhutan from north-west side. The region has many issues with all of these countries at different point of times. Its difficult to understand the complexities behind Indian security concerns in the North-East region without having proper information about bilateral relations of India with these countries sharing borders with the region. India has many issues with these countries including border and water dispute, infiltration of illegal immigrants, cross-border terrorism and so on.

When we talk about security concerns in North-East region, we cannot ignore the role of China, which is creating problems since the independence of India. India has always been keen to have friendly relations with it neighbours and has pursued the policy of non-interference in the matter of other nations. First Prime Minister of India, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru signed an agreement with China on 24 April 1954, Panchsheel, which had five elements- (i) Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; (ii) Mutual non-aggression; (iii) Mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs'; (iv) Equality and mutual benefit , and (v) Peaceful co-existence (Verma, 1989). But the agreement was breached by China and India witnessed massive Chinese aggression in 1962. China has also been involved in propelling insurgency in the North-East region of India. Insurgent groups like Naga, MNF, ULFA, PLA, ATTF, NDFB etc. get substantial support from Beijing. After the 'Cultural revolution' of China in 1966, rebels of the North-East received massive financial support and training for the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' (Manoharan, 2012). Prakash (2008) refers to a letter written by Scato Swu, "Kedhage", a self-proclaimed President of

so-called 'Federal Government of Nagaland', to the President of People's Republic of China on 5 May 1966 in which he states,

“ ... as it has become impossible for us to resist unaided the military might of Indian Armed Forces, we have to look to your Government and to your people for any possible assistance in any form so that we may properly safeguard our sovereignty through the liberal hand of your people. Our government feels the paramount necessity of your kind recognition of the existence of the Naga nation and the legality of the Federal Government of Nagaland” (Manoharan, 2012).

The idea of universal brotherhood has been at the core of Indian wisdom since ages as our ancestors believed in *Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam* (entire world is one family). Thus, we pursued a policy of welcoming everyone coming to our land in search of better life opportunities with the ethos of '*Atithi Devo Bhavah*' which resulted in the influx of people into India from various parts of the world, enriching its cultural diversity. In fact, anthropological scrutiny of India reveals that it is the land of immigrants since ages and cosmopolitan society exist here since the ancient period. However, partition of India at the time of independence led to the emergence of some specific problems related to immigration. It is a matter of fact that there has been a free flow of people from Bengal to the regions of North-East in the pre-independence era but because of partition, East Bengal became part of Pakistan. Therefore, movement of people from this region to North- East became international migration which required passport and visa clearances as per international law. Due to better prospects in India, many people migrated from then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to India without following the rules/norms which is continued for long. Over the period of time, this migration also got connected with the problem of proxy war, illegal transfer of goods and people, cross border, money laundering and transnational terrorism which have created the problem of insurgency, internal and national insecurity,

demographic imbalance and the problem of resource allocation in the North-Eastern states.

In subsequent years, Assam became the soft target for separatists and terror organizations. Many of them are also harbouring the dream to balkanize India and attain separate nationhood for this region. When we discuss security concerns in Assam, we find direct and indirect threats emerging out of external and internal factors. On the one side, there are few direct threats that try to influence Indian sovereignty and integrity, for instance terrorism and separatism, and some other indirect threats are also there which help the functioning of major factors for instance terrorist funding, human and drug trafficking and other criminal activities.

India is facing various kinds of challenges in the North-East region from neighbouring countries like China, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. The region has been considered as a long hanging fruit by those who are trying to capture it since starting. Because of its geographical and cultural distinctness, China and Bangladesh have adopted different tactics to influence the region. On the one side, China is actively running the fake propaganda of connecting some parts of Indian Territory with it. China claimed Arunachal Pradesh and some other parts of North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and captured some parts of NEFA illegally during India-China war in 1962. On the other side, Bangladesh is supporting the idea of lebensraum to claim its right over Assamese land to settle migrants from Bangladesh. India is facing such security concerns from these countries since starting. The formation of East Pakistan and Bangladesh made situation more complex because of the decrease in the routes of land connectivity with the North East. India has just one narrow pathway to the North-East, which is also called 'Chicken's Neck'. It is around 22 Km wide Siliguri corridor, which is a part of West Bengal in between Nepal and Bangladesh.

India is trying to solve this problem by creating a friendly environment in the region with its neighboring countries. India tried to solve the border issues with China through Panchsheel

Agreement (1954), which failed after the Chinese attack and capturing of Indian Territory during 1962 war. India also tried to solve the issues with Bangladesh by adapting different strategies like Enclave transfer, development oriented bilateral relations and border management. On the other hand, South-Asia and South-East Asia are strategically very important for India and China both, India is trying to make good ties with these regions to establish a good relation of mutual cooperation and respect to ensure a support system and helping hand for development. In this regard, India has tried to build Indo-Burma Barrier to seal India-Myanmar border to control border crimes like smuggling of goods and drugs, money laundry, illegal arms supply, illegal immigration etc.

India's North-East region and Myanmar have a distinct historical connection, during the first half of 20th century, when India was under the British control and North-East was run by different rulers, Burma (Now Myanmar) tried to capture the North Eastern states but King of Assam met British rulers to seek help and Britishers defeated Burma and later and also included North-East into India. Yet, managing Indo- Myanmar border is a challenging task because of its precarious conditions but India is trying to figure out what solutions could be possible in this regard. India is trying to make good and cooperative relations with South Asian countries because it tends to achieve its national and international interest to counter Chinese hegemony in the region. Myanmar plays the role of a buffer state in the region between India and China and India tried to make good relations with it, for ensuring its national interest in the region with maximizing security and support for North-East. Myanmar is a member of BIMSTEC, ASEAN, Mekong Ganga cooperation and an observer state in SAARC, India tends to make good relations with it in the background of these cooperative organizations.

India is also working under the policy of "Look East" which later transformed into "Act East" to ensure support and security from the region to counter China on the one side and to minimize issues with South Asia and South East Asian countries. Such initiatives are very much needed to solve the problem. Myint-U

(2011) has also discuss these issues about how India, China and other countries in the region are functioning.

On the other hand, Bangladesh also emerged as a source of national insecurity just after its formation, which was helped and guided by Indian government in 1971. While discussing security concerns in the state of Assam, we cannot undermine the issues of illegal immigration, which is one of the most influential factor and source of security threat to the national security of India. Assam is facing the problem of illegal immigration since the pre- independence period but the problem became more complex after the independence and division when immigration became transnational.

Roy (2006) argues that “unlike in the past, the illegal migrants from Bangladesh could now be used to cause security problems in the North-East. Existing linkages between Pak ISI and Bangladeshi (BD) fundamentalist and terrorist groups are being strengthened. Approach of BD government is becoming increasingly anti-India and pro-Pak. It does not bode well for us.”

In case of illegal migration to India, most serious concern arises from Bangladesh. This paper focuses on the illegal migration in Assam from Bangladesh and its consequences to the national security of India.

Security concerns for Assam

According to the World Migration Report (2020), Bangladesh-India migration corridor was the third largest human influx in Asian countries in 2019. The estimated number of people crossing the political boundaries through this corridor was over 3 million. The report states that India is home to significant population of irregular migrants from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (United Nations, 2020). It is crystal clear that the trend of illegal migration from Bangladesh to India is continued and there has been evidences of involvement of those in the activities impersonating security concerns for India in general and particularly in North-East region.

Joseph and Narendran (2013) deal with different perspectives of India and Bangladesh on border issues and tries to find out how

these two counterparts look at each other in this regard. Here they argue that India sees Bangladesh as “Trio of Security Concern”, where entry of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, their role in trans-border terrorism and disputes related to geographical boundaries are of main concerns (Joseph & Narendran, 2013).

On the other hand, Ray (2006) discusses the NCAER (National Council of Applied Economic Research) which is related to study regarding the smuggling in the areas of West Bengal and Assam. He mentions a research, which shows that basic commodities like cycle and livestock etc are smuggled from Bangladesh and it also includes arms, gold and narcotics, which is one of the biggest challenges in front of Indian government, in context of border management. He argues that we are unable to stop smuggling of these goods and materials, how can we think of curbing the movement of people?

Illegal Infiltration and insurgency in Assam

Here it becomes important to discuss that from the pre-independence period Assam has been a soft target for separatists' and supporters of two nation theory. Different people tried to shatter it because of its adjacent border condition with Bangladesh, there were many separatist and anti-India forces that were working to divide Assam and supporting the idea of inclusion of Assam into East Pakistan and Bangladesh. As Onkareshwar Pandey (2006) talks about increasing Islamic terror activities in the North Eastern region and tries to find out its links with terrorist groups like ISI. He believes that infiltration is one of the gravest threats in front of India and it is posing challenges to the integrity and sovereignty of Indian state. Here it is important to know that problem of illegal migration is planned, organized and run by selective organizations and its supporters which are seating in Pakistan under the conspiracy to divide Assam from India. Pandey quotes Moinul Haq Choudhary who was working with Mohammad Ali Jinnah for partition, he was the person who supported the idea of two nations but later on decided to stay in

Assam because of his agenda to divide Assam from India, and he said that, "Within a decade, I shall be able to annex Assam to East Pakistan by the dint of more infiltration of Muslims there..."

Not just some propagators of two nation theory but prominent leaders like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto also gave same kind of statements, as in the book 'The Myth of Independence', he wrote,

"Our controversy with India is not on the problem of Kashmir only; there is the problem of Assam. In Assam, there are some Muslim majority districts which should have been given to Pakistan at the time of the partition; these districts were wrongly included in India"

These comments and emergence of militant organizations have proved us that we cannot look at the problem of infiltration a single and one dimensional yet it is multi dimensional problem, which is connected to some other factors like partition, separatism and terrorism. It shows that few organizations had a dream of dividing Assam, which resulted in the evolution of insurgency in the state.

K.P.S. Gill (2006), on the other hand, talks of the worsened situation during 1960s when process of identification, detection and deportation started taking place and illegal immigrants started attacking Hindus. He argues that illegal migration or infiltration into north-east is a big challenge for India, even bigger than terrorism and other activities. He argues that this migration is planned and organized by people from other side; on the one side this migration initially took place after the 1937 elections when idea of "grow more Muslims" emerged and later on, Bengali speaking people, during the reorganization of state on the basis of linguistic ground, mentioned their language as Bengali to get superiority over Assamese but after the movement by locals, government had to accept Assamese as state language.

Lt. Gen. (Ret.) S.K. Sinha (1998) mentioned,

"As a result of population movement from Bangladesh, the specter looms large of the indigenous people of Assam being

reduced to a minority in their home state. Their cultural survival will be in jeopardy, their political control will be weakened and their employment opportunities will be undermined. This silent and invidious demographic invasion of Assam may result in loss of the geostrategically vital districts of Lower Assam (on the border with Bangladesh). The influx of illegal migrants is turning these districts into a Muslim majority region. It will then only be a matter of time when a demand for their merger with Bangladesh may be made. The rapid growth of international Islamic fundamentalism may provide the driving force for this demand... Loss of Lower Assam (the area close to the Bangladesh) will sever the entire land mass of the North-East from the rest of India and the rich natural resources of the region will be lost to the Nation” (Kumar, 2010).

Because of these issues, illegal immigration is increasing continuously and different steps taken by government were not able to stop it. Bhuyan (2006) discusses the population growth of different districts of Assam in different decades (Table-1).

Table-1 : District Wise Population Growth Rate from 1971 to 1991.

State/ Districts	Growth rate of Muslims from 1971-1991	Estimated decadal growth rate of Muslims, from 1971-1981 and 1981-1991.
Assam	77.42	33.20
Dhubri	71.13	30.83
Kolkrajhar	100.83	41.71
Bongaigaon	92.78	38.83
Goalpara	86.52	36.58
Barpeta	65.19	28.52
Nalbari	93.40	39.06
Darrang	108.10	44.25
Sonitpur	131.73	52.23
Marigaon	70.26	30.47
Nagaon	81.91	34.86

Source: (Bhuyan, 2006, p. 86).

This continuous infiltration has created many problems in front of the state and central governments as mentioned by Gohain &

Borpuzari (2013), who argue that problem of illegal immigration is creating some challenges in front of the state in the form of economy, social environment and law and order. They also raise the issue of fear of indigenous people to be reduced to a minority in their own state because many districts have been changed to Muslim majority districts. Here, it is important to discuss impact of illegal immigration on the Tribal communities of the North-East, which later gave birth to the turmoil in the region.

Vohra (2006) talks about the condition of tribal communities in different states of North-East, he discusses the impact of infiltration on the demographic profile of tribal region which has been sensitive in the matter of tribal aspirations to govern their own state. He says that “the local tribal population had a given percentage in 1947, a given percentage when Tripura became free, and you see their percentage today, they are reduced to a minority. Obviously they cannot digest the situation, much more so when the politics of the day highlights these aspects and these issues to create further dissatisfaction and confrontation and violence”.

Because of all these issues, Assamese people started Assam Movement in 1979 to raise the issues of local population of Assam and their insecurities, on the other side, separatist groups also started insurgent activities. Because of these insurgent activities, Assam had to face a huge loss in the form of civilians and security personnel as mentioned by Sanjeeb Baruah (Table-2).

Table-2: Insurgency- related Mortality in Assam, 2005-2008

Year	Incidents	Civilians	Security Forces	Suspected Insurgents	Total
2005	398	173	7	74	254
2006	413	164	32	46	242
2007	500	286	24	129	439
2008	NA	244	18	125	387

Source: (Baruah, 2009, p. 968).

Indian government later took some strong decisions which put a stop on the insurgent activities in the region but it did not get success in solving the problem.

Terrorist and separatist organizations in the region and security concerns

Roy (2006) deals with different debates over illegal immigration from different perspectives. He argues that infiltrates are employed by Pakistan. Intelligence agencies of Pakistan like ISI are working for spreading Islamisation in the South Asian region and WIT (Worldwide Islamic Terrorism). He argues that if Muslims are in majority in some place, they try to control the land and evict Hindus from there; in the process, they use different tools and techniques like dacoities, killings and riots, which create disorder and chaos. He criticizes functioning of political parties who tend to use these infiltrates for their benefits; they use them as their vote bank without thinking about its effect on the national security apparatus of India. He further argues, “Bangladesh agencies, including BDR, often provide advance information to the Indian terrorist groups, present in Bangladesh, about their plans to conduct raids on their camps, which they have to do for the consumption of international community” (Roy, 2006).

Another aspect is related to the fear of identity loss in the minds of locals who are being affected by the increase in the population of foreigners, which is being resulted in the form of socio-economic, cultural and political imbalance. Assam is facing such problems since starting but situation became worse when terrorist and militant organizations started using Muslim population for their benefits. It led to the increase in the threat of Islamisation to the locals, which later resulted in the emergence of counter-activities from the locals. In this regard, Mrinal Kumar Saikia in his article “Assam towards Islamisation” (1996) argues that Assam is suffering from the fear of Islamisation and common people of Assam are afraid in the matter (Pandey, 2006).

It is important to point that there are many organizations who are working here with different intentions. On the one side, there are some separatist organizations who are working to divide Assam from India. Some others are working to ensure socio-cultural, political and economic influence of locals. On the other hand,

some terrorist organizations are also working to create a link with separatist organizations to wage proxy war against India. In this regard Sanjeeb Baruah (2009) draws attention towards the separatist organizations who demanded the expulsion of infiltrates from Assam, also have confronted the government. ULFA (ULFA is a radical organization which tends to make changes in the Assamese society radically).

These issues are of national importance for India because, while forming policies, we cannot neglect them, nexus of anti-India forces is going to harm the sovereignty and integrity of India that's why it becomes very important for the government to look into the matter from this point of view.

Indian government initiatives to solve the problem

Earlier, colonial masters and Indian leaders were not much concerned about the increasing problem of illegal immigration but slowly they became active after the issue became more problematic and complex. Assam government tried to solve the issue by passing the law of Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistani (PIP) to solve the issue but it did not get much success.

On the other side, Sanjib Barooah (1994) discusses the functioning of organizations like, ULFA, its challenges to India and steps taken by Indian government to counter the problem. He talks about the efforts of Indian government to solve the issue by deporting illegal immigrants to Bangladesh and the debate of human rights violations while deporting. He argues that militant activities came down in 1990s when anti-insurgency acts were done by the government of India which gave birth to the debate of law and order and human rights. Baruah here discusses the seriousness of threats posted by these organizations; he argues that these organizations created problems in the pathways of functioning of political and legal institutions of India and tried to give birth to regime crises in the state (Barooah, 1994).

Later, local people themselves took the action in form of Bideshi Khedao Movement, also known as Assam movement for the

preservation of Assam from illegal immigrants who were getting political and other kind of support. At the end of this movement, Assam accord was signed to ensure the rights and autonomy of Assamese people and preservation of their culture and identity. Different steps were taken here to solve the problem, that got success in some area but it did not get success in solving the problem.

Indian government has tried to solve other border related issues also, as by transferring of enclaves with Bangladesh. There were around 51 enclaves of Bangladesh in Indian region and 111 enclaves of India in Bangladeshi region, Indian government initiated the transfer of these enclaves, physically from 31st July 2015 during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh in 2015. Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) was also further expanded and transfer of enclaves was planned. It is important to know here that, only 989 out of 38,521 people from former Indian Enclaves in Bangladesh opted to hold on their original nationality and others chosen India to settle down, which is a huge number. It shows that people are more interested in getting Indian citizenship rather than Bangladeshi. On the other side, all 14,863 people of Bangladeshi enclaves in India opted to stay in India with Indian citizenship.

At the end, NRC (National Register of Citizen) was updated in the second decade of 20th century to identify and deport illegal immigrants from Assam; the functioning of NRC was made faster after the formation of BJP government. Different tools and mechanisms were adapted to make procedure of identification easy and better.

Besides aforementioned initiatives government has taken many decisions to stop the inflow by border management like increasing border policing, clear marking of border areas and border fencing. In this regard, Prakash Singh (2006) argues that “there are borders where intensive vigilance is required as we have along the Pakistan border because of cross border terrorism or across the

Bangladesh border because of the human waves that keep on trying to cross the borders.”

India has always pursued the policy of peaceful co-existence and non-intervention in the line of ‘Panchsheel’ and ‘Bandung’ declaration. Further, it has given special emphasis on building cordial relations and enhancing ties with neighbourhood for mutual benefits. Indian Prime Minister Ms. Indira Gandhi rendered full support to the liberation movement of Bangladesh and in 1972 both countries signed ‘Treaty of Friendship and Peace’. India played key role in the establishment of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). To boost bilateral contacts India granted Bangladesh a perpetual lease over the Tin Bigha corridor, covering an area of 1.5 hectares. Further, Indian Prime Minister IK Gujral pursued policy of unilateral concessions to neighbouring countries referred as ‘Gujral Doctrine’. However, these efforts have been often looked with speculations in Bangladesh. The assassination of Mujibur-ur-Rehman in 1975, and the assumption of power by General Zia-ur-Rahman brought fundamental changes in Bangladesh. Now, India was seen as ‘threat’ and Zia-ur-Rahman preferred to embrace Islamic ideology bringing the nation closer to Pakistan. Subsequently, the Awami League which has positive approach towards India is branded as India’s ‘stooge’. On the other hand, the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party emphasized on asserts on ‘Islamic identity’. Thus, we see periodical changes in the policies and perception of Bangladesh about India largely guided by the ideology of ruling political parties (Pant, 2007). Similarly, in India issues of illegal migrants have been seen from the perspectives of loss and gains in the electoral gimmick by different political actors making the issue more complex which poses a severe threat to the national security of India.

Conclusion

North-East region has always been a soft target for different groups like separatists, terrorists and anti-India forces, and also by neighboring countries like China and Bangladesh (earlier East

Pakistan) which had tried their best to create the situation of unrest and divide in the North-Eastern states. Because of these intentions, they have adopted different tactics to influence Indian security apparatus. Earlier China tried to put pressure on Indian government on the matter of Tibet and later it started neglecting Line of Actual Control and started proclaiming ownership over different regions of Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, India. Later, India had to face a war in 1962 without preparations. From then, China is trying to impact India in different ways, by providing help and funding to Pakistan for terrorist activities. China also tends to encompass India in the matter of Jammu & Kashmir by raising this issue in international arena. On the other side, Pakistan and Bangladesh are two other enemies, who are working to influence Indian security apparatus, directly or indirectly. Pakistan is the main proponent of terrorism into India, which uses its boundaries and Bangladesh as the sources of infiltration of terrorists into India. It has saved different terrorist leaders at different point of times and also encouraged and funded different separatist groups of India. Bangladesh also has a dream of diving Assam and including it into Bangladesh. India is clearly facing this kind of security threats from these countries and supporting illegal migration to military invasion in North-Eastern states like Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

Here we should keep in mind that illegal infiltration is not the only problem, there are several similar issues which are equally dangerous and needs comprehensive mechanism for its resolution. Issue of demographic imbalance, over consumption of natural resources, environment degradation, unwanted change in the voting pattern and behavior and insurgency are also there. These issues are directly related to the issue of illegal infiltration, which remained a huge matter of concern for the security apparatus of India. India is facing many challenges in dealing the problem of insecurity in the region because of its distinct geographical, cultural and historical condition; enemy countries have tried different tactics to influence the region but did not get success. India has taken many steps to deal with these aspects

and to create a peaceful and friendly environment in the region. Formation of Ministry of Development of North East Region (MODNER) and later providing it the status of full-fledged ministry, formation of good bilateral relations with neighboring and South Asian and South East Asian countries are few of them.

India needs to adopt more comprehensive and holistic approach to deal with the issue by keeping the multi dimensional nature of border issues with its neighboring countries and complex border management conditions in mind. India should focus on the problem solving approach by tightening its borders, stopping illegal movement of people, smuggling of goods, illegal arms and narcotics to confront and control illegal and criminal activities in the region so that point of security can be achieved. Here, India should target those weak areas from where infiltration takes place. Government should strengthen the mechanism like NRC for identification of infiltrates and should also ensure the deportation of these infiltrates by forcing Bangladesh to accept them through international pressure and bilateral relations. On the other hand, we need to counter the chained system of infiltration, in which former infiltrates help new infiltrates in settling down in the North-Eastern states of India. Increasing border patrolling and policing is very important to control the inflow and protect the Indian boundaries. On the other side, India should also try to break the nexus between Pakistan and Bangladesh based terrorist organisations and Indian separatist groups.

Aforementioned issues and complexities are long lasting in nature and are clearly result of historical events and circumstances where we see reluctance in the attitude towards the solution of issues and lack of political will to resolve the issues in historical past, which has resulted in the complexity in contemporary time. But recent government has taken few important steps to curb the problem, either in the form of bilateral talks or talks at regional platforms, which has given us a hope of brightness in the deep darkness of unresolved issues.

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