



Linking Informality with Strategy: Indo-Myanmar Informal Cross-Border Trade and Challenges to India's Indo-Pacific Vision

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ABSTRACT

India's Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiatives (IPOI), which focus on connectivity and regional integration, position the borderland areas of Northeast India as India's gateway to ASEAN. The 1,643 km long Indo-Myanmar border has been providing a safe space for illicit trading networks, while it has been considered a hot zone for Informal Cross-Border Trade (ICBT) that provides a livelihood mechanism for the people inhabiting the areas along the border. This study examines whether Indo-Myanmar ICBT acts as a complement or as a hindrance to India's Indo-Pacific Vision (IPV) for regional connectivity by employing a qualitative comparative analysis based on data from academic literature, government documents, and policy analyses. Although Indo-Myanmar ICBT provides a platform that sustains the borderland economy, its complex structural network comprising of difficult hill terrains and inefficient governance outreach, gives rise to various illicit/illegal systems, besides revenue leakage, which causes security issues for various Indian projects targeting Indo-Pacific nations. These fiscal and security perspectives of Indo-Myanmar ICBT give significant implications to India's Indo-Pacific Vision that aims at the integration of actors in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Keywords: Indo-Myanmar border; informal cross-border trade (ICBT); Indo-Pacific Vision; regional integration, illicit networks.

Introduction

Background: India has been emphasising its foreign policies towards asserting itself as a global maritime power while maintaining its influences in continental peripheries. India's continental strategy has been facing constraints due to persistent issues induced by the sensitivity of its land boundaries. In recent years, India has been reorienting its strategies towards the development of maritime cooperation with nations in the Indo-Pacific region. The country has articulated its ambition through the Indo-Pacific vision which focuses on maintaining a free, open, and inclusive order among the nations in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. With the objective of expanding its influence in the region, India initially framed the doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) in 2015. To convert the principles of the Indo-Pacific Vision into actionable mechanisms Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) at the 14th East Asia Summit in Bangkok in 2019. The IPOI serves as a non-treaty, open-framework mechanism designed to encourage collaboration across seven thematic pillars, ranging from maritime security to trade connectivity with the principles of ASEAN centrality (MEA, 2019).

However, to realise this strategic vision the reality of Northeast India must be critically examined as the Northeast India acts as a gateway to Southeast Asia. This region is characterized by a complex borderland system where political boundaries are often blurred due to the existence of ethnic and cultural ties across the border since ancient times. These socio-cultural relations between communities across the border have implicitly carried a phenomenon of economic transactions embedded within the system (Granovetter, 1985).

This phenomenon embedded within the social relations of borderland communities is what we presently call “Informal Cross-Border Trade”. This informal cross-border trade (ICBT) in Indo-Myanmar border has been practised mostly in the form of barter system since early period (Taneja et al., 2019). Since the signing of the Border Trade Agreement (BTA) between India and Myanmar in 1994 the two nations have been working on how to streamline informal transactions towards normal trade that would ultimately help in the fiscal and infrastructural development of the regions. However, actors involved in this economic phenomenon do not prefer to go through the formal system because the regulatory frameworks for normal trade are inefficient and not cost-effective (Das, 2016). Instead, they tread deeper into the informal system. Although policymakers view the Indo-Myanmar border as a significant economic corridor connecting South and Southeast Asia, the ground reality is different.

Problem Statement: The Indo-Myanmar border region is substantially characterised by informal networks. At the same time, this study in itself is ambivalent in nature. On the one hand, Indo-Myanmar ICBT acts as a vital survival mechanism that sustains the livelihoods of marginalised population with limited access to formal institutions. On the other hand, it creates a favourable environment for illegal networks which could hinder the security and governance framework of the Indo-Pacific Vision (Taneja & et al., 2019). The fiscal and security challenges posed by this informal system include tax evasion, rise of smuggling networks, emergence of cross border insurgency and illicit activities. This ambivalent nature of Indo-Myanmar ICBT creates a paradox wherein economic benefits provided by ICBT clash with the perspective of fiscal and security implications which would ultimately impact India’s Indo-Pacific Vision.

Research Gap: It is clear that Indo-Myanmar informal cross-border trade has substantial socio-economic significance especially for marginalised population of borderland areas. In a similar manner, Indo-Pacific Vision is also crucial as far as India’s geopolitical strategy in the Indo-Pacific region is concerned. However, there is still a gap in research concerning the linking of local level dynamics of Indo-Myanmar ICBT with the broader strategic objectives of Indo-Pacific Vision.

Research Objectives: The study is designed to fulfil the following objectives:

1. To analyse the role of Indo-Myanmar ICBT in sustaining the livelihoods of marginalised population.
2. To examine the fiscal and security challenges posed by Indo-Myanmar ICBT.
3. To investigate the contradictions between the operational realities of Indo-Myanmar ICBT and the strategic objectives of the Indo-Pacific Vision.
4. To propose policy frameworks to reconcile informality with national strategic objectives.

Literature Review

Literature on Indo-Myanmar Informal Cross-Border Trade: Multiple theoretical frameworks are needed to be examined in order to understand Indo-Myanmar informal cross-border trade. David Newman (2006) and van Houtum & van Naerssen (2002) observe that borderland is a dynamic space where state regulations continuously negotiate with local realities. This perspective highlights the importance of Indo-Myanmar ICBT in local economies. The theory of moral economy (Scott, 1976) demonstrates why marginalised population practise informal trade when their access to formal institutions is limited. The reason is the subsistence ethics which means that people with limited means of livelihood follow informal network just to sustain livelihood. The concept of informal trade as an inevitable activity for the communities across the border is explained by the theory of embeddedness which states that economic relations are embedded with the socio-cultural relations (Granovetter, 1985). Portes & Haller (2005) also analyses the informal trade as a strategic survival mechanism which deliberately bypass state regulation not only for economic necessity but also for evasion of custom duties.

Various literatures have also written about the fallouts of Indo-Myanmar ICBT. Although informal trade is vital for livelihood of marginalised population, it gives substantial impact on the fiscal and security dimensions of a nation (Tukur et al., 2023). Loss of fiscal revenue, facilitation of smuggling activities and emergence of illicit/illegal networks are key negative impacts of Indo-Myanmar ICBT. Taneja et al. (2019) gives the reason for substantial revenue loss as the evasion of custom duties. This happens due to existence of large-scale parallel economic systems which the regulatory system cannot administer. Lesser and Moise (2009) explains that high transaction cost and restrictive regulations for formal trade push the traders towards informal system. To continue with, significantly Nayyar (2008) adds one critical aspect about fiscal impact of informal trade. He mentions that cost-benefit analysis of informal trade must not consider only the revenue perspective, it must also take into consideration the social costs of disrupting community livelihood that relies on border trade. Security implication is also critical as far as informal trade is concerned. The routes for trafficking opium and methamphetamine produced in Golden Triangle are significantly overlapping with the informal trade corridors (UNODC, 2022). Mahadevan (2020) in his “Crossing the line: Geopolitics and criminality at the India–Myanmar border” explains how the activity of drug smuggling is integrated with the informal trade of legitimate goods in Indo-Myanmar border. The issue of insurgency in Indo-Myanmar border is also an important implication of informal trade. Bertil Lintner (2000) in his “The Golden Triangle Opium trade: An

Overview" gives a comprehensive analysis on how insurgent groups in Myanmar systematically impose tax on both licit and illicit trade to finance armed operations.

Literature on Indo-Pacific Vision: In post-Cold War period, there has been a fundamental transformation in India's geopolitical strategy. The 1991 'Look East Policy' has been reoriented to a more assertive 'Act East Policy' in 2014. This transition can be considered as an expansion of India's strategic outlook from trade centric perspective towards a broader role of security provider in Indo-Pacific maritime region (Roy-Chaudhury, 2025). The conceptual foundation of India's Indo-Pacific Vision was formally enunciated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. Fournol (2024) analyses that India is expressing its stance of strategic autonomy in the region. India emphasises on the idea of free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region based on United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), sovereignty, freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes (MEA, 2019). India's Indo-Pacific Vision is operationally integrated with the doctrines of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All) (ICWA, 2022). To convert this conceptual Indo-Pacific Vision into actionable policy, India launches the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) at the 2019 East Asia Summit in Bangkok. Suri (2020) describes IPOI as an open, non-treaty based initiative that appeals global nations to cooperate with seven thematic pillars framed for Indo-Pacific Vision. The seven thematic pillars are maritime security, maritime ecology, maritime resources, capacity building and resource sharing, disaster risk reduction and management, science, technology and academic cooperation and trade connectivity and maritime transport. Although the Indo-Pacific Vision primarily focuses on maritime dimension, it still carries critical continental dimension. Tasung (2024) analyses that Northeast India is the only viable land route for India to connect with ASEAN. Suresh (2025) argues that India's Act East policy positions Northeast India not only as a gateway to Southeast Asian nations but also as a strategic land route for India to broader Indo-Pacific region. Infrastructural projects like India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project have been launched to integrate India's economy with ASEAN markets (Kimura et al., 2020).

However, there exists a significant gap between the nation's strategic vision and the existing ground realities of the borderlands. The informal economic network, emergence of insurgent network, transnational crimes, ethnic conflicts and rise of narco-trafficking make the border region vulnerable as far as the security dynamics is concerned (Pulokjyoti, 2024; IPSC, 2025). At the same time, Indo-Pacific Vision calls for a smooth functioning of this overland economic corridor. Existing literatures treat these domains separately. By employing a qualitative causal-explanatory analysis using dialectical approach, this paper will critically examine how the Indo-Myanmar informal cross-border trade dynamics integrates and contradicts with objectives of Indo-Pacific Vision.

Methodology

The study adopts the qualitative causal-explanatory research design to analyse the structural relationship between Indo-Myanmar informal cross-border trade and Indo-Pacific Vision. By employing the dialectical approach, the pros and cons of Indo-Myanmar informal cross-border trade will be systematically analysed to derive a synthesis regarding its strategic implications on the objectives of Indo-Pacific Vision. Data based on secondary sources including government reports, policy analyses and academic literature on borderland studies and Indo-Pacific Vision will be used to establish a causal link between informal trade and Indo-Pacific Vision. This methodological framework will give a critical examination on how local realities contradict with national ambition.

Indo-Myanmar ICBT and Livelihood Imperative

Indo-Myanmar border trade is dominated by informal trade. As per report of Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT), the total volume of Indo-Myanmar informal cross-border trade is Rs. 2,200 crores which is 44 times higher than the formal trade (Chakraborty, 2012). This dominance is due to various factors (or drivers). The factors include price arbitrage, demand for restricted & prohibited commodities, transaction cost, inefficiency of governance, institutional void, marginalised livelihood, cultural and ethnic linkages etc. Indo-Myanmar ICBT exerts critical implications on key livelihood variables. Let us consider the border state of Manipur as an example to analyse the implications.

As per Multidimensional Poverty Index Report, 2023 of NITI Aayog, 8.1% of the total population of Manipur are multidimensional poor (NITI Aayog, 2023) which means that substantial proportion of population in Manipur cannot access to quality health services and education. This can be directly linked to low level real income which in turn greatly affect the consumer preferences of the section of the population. This is where the importance of ICBT commodities lies. The ICBT consumer goods especially those from third countries like China and Thailand are characterised by relatively low-level prices as compared to those available in Indian markets. When consumers shift their preferences from dearer Indian origin goods to cheaper ICBT goods, their real income would increase. Then, this surplus real income can be reinvested in the formation of human capital (health and education), which would ultimately increase their livelihood standard. This pattern of shift in consumer preferences is visible in border-states like Manipur. The development of specialised market sections

for ICBT commodities in Singjamei and Paona markets of Manipur is the proof that consumers have high interest in cheaper ICBT commodities.

Another implication is employment generation. According to 2011 census, 7.9% of the total population in Manipur are job seekers (Census, 2011). This means that this proportion of population cannot access to formal employment institutions due to limited skills or educational level and they are underemployed or unemployed even in agriculture and allied sectors. This section of job seekers tend to enter informal sector like ICBT that has high absorption capacity due to minimal barriers to entry. Though being an ICBT trader is subject to availability of capital, unemployed youths are intending to enter Indo-Myanmar ICBT as transporters or helpers in order to support their livelihoods.

Thus, ICBT works as a critical mechanism for survival of marginalised population especially in border regions like Manipur. Borderland communities are linked with cultural and ethnic ties and economic relations between them are embedded within their social relations. Access to formal institutional system is very limited and consequently ICBT is an inevitable means of livelihood to them.

Indo-Myanmar ICBT and Fiscal and Security Imperatives

The primary fiscal impact of ICBT is the loss of government revenue. After the normalisation of border trade in 2015, all categories of commodities need to be exported/ or imported through formal channel. To do so traders need to pay high transaction cost for custom duties, letters of credit, IGST etc. In order to avoid paying such high cost for transaction, traders use the informal system instead. When ICBT actors opt for informal channels by bypassing or by completely avoiding formal regulatory system, it causes a significant loss of government revenue. Again, Indo-Myanmar ICBT occupies an ambiguous space between subsistence exchange and illicit commercial activity. Though it is a historically rooted small-scale barter and kin-based transaction, the trade networks have become increasingly entangled with illegal and criminal economies. This shift is catalysed by structural incentives, persistent gaps in state authority, and the flexible organisation of informal supply chains (Das, 2025; Global Initiative, 2020). Given the border's difficult terrain, regulatory barriers and limited infrastructures, formal trade mechanisms have remained poorly adapted to local needs. Consequently, traders have continued to rely on informal channels to circulate goods such as betel nut, fuel, consumer goods and minor forest resources (Das, 2019; Van Schendel, 2005). However, the same networks that sustain livelihoods of borderland people have started giving room for transaction of illicit business across the border. Brokerage chains, transport corridors and informal credit systems used for small-scale commerce are readily adaptable to clandestine transactions (Global Initiative, 2020; Woods, 2020). Cross-border traders tend to take advantage of price differentials for prohibited & restricted commodities like live-stocks, timber, fertilizers etc. This network have even started extending towards higher-profit, higher-risk commodities like narcotics, gold and arm & ammunitions (Das, 2025).

Production of synthetic drugs, especially methamphetamine, is concentrated in the Golden Triangle region, with Myanmar as an emerging central manufacturing hub (UNODC, 2023). Record of regional seizures shows the scale and sophistication of trafficking routes. This illicit network extends towards India via ICBT corridors, facilitated through the same brokers, intermediaries and trails used for ordinary commodity movement (The Diplomat, 2024). Gold, timber, subsidised commodities like fertilizers and rice etc. are common legitimate commodities that are frequently smuggled across the border due to higher profit behaviour despite risk associated. Table 1.1. shows data of seizures of legitimate goods and narcotics drug and psychotropic substances (NDPS) as recorded by Custom Division, Imphal.

Arms trafficking is characterised by both insurgent financing and informal commodity networks. Formerly legitimate commodity chains are periodically redirected to move light weapons and ammunition because of already existed logistical systems and trusted intermediaries (CLAWS, 2020; Global Initiative, 2020). And, at the same time, in the absence of proper formal banking services across many border tracks, informal credit and settlement systems remain central to ICBT operations. These platforms serve not only to settle legitimate commercial transactions but also to facilitate illegal and criminal proceedings (Global Initiative, 2020).

The incorporation of illicit flows into ICBT networks creates several governance challenges. The convergence of subsistence-oriented and criminal actors complicates enforcement, making it difficult to distinguish legitimate traders from traffickers (Woods, 2020). Traffickers' ability to dynamically reconfigure routes and commodities undermines static enforcement strategies (UNODC, 2023). Again the inter-linkage of illicit commerce with insurgent and non-state armed groups with weapons and finance funded by well organised illegal network, create an atmosphere of conflict and weaken state authority (CLAWS, 2020; Global Initiative, 2020). These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by persistent structural drivers like market demand, regulatory asymmetries, bureaucratic frictions, limited customs capacity and difficult geography. Post 2021 Myanmar's governance breakdown has further increased opportunities for criminal networks to exploit border regions, deepening the entanglement of ICBT with illicit operations (Gateway House, 2024; Woods, 2020). In this context, informal trade networks have increasingly functioned as hybrid systems in which licit, informal and illicit activities are tightly interwoven.

Table 1.1: Seizures in respect of Indo-Myanmar Border trade by Custom Division, Imphal.

Year	Custom cases		NDPS cases	
	No. of cases	Value (in Rs.)	No. of cases	Value (in Rs.)
2020-21	40	13,61,37,600	4	12,41,12,000
2021-22	27	7,11,50,030	3	18,75,00,000
2022-23	44	34,11,72,631	7	25,37,66,000
2023-24	21	12,98,71,196	6	34,32,55,000
2024-25 (upto Feb, '25)	17	9,24,21,394	3	6,21,76,000

Source: Custom Division, Imphal

The Contradiction

India's Indo-Pacific Vision is anchored in the principles of free, open and inclusive regional order, respect for sovereignty and international law, ASEAN centrality, sustainable connectivity, maritime security cooperation, and a rules-based approach to managing strategic competition. However, the fiscal and security implications of ICBT pose structural hindrance to the principles of Indo-Pacific Vision.

Besides the documentation hurdles, one of the primary reasons for traders to opt informal channels for movement of goods is transaction cost. Avoiding formal regulatory system to evade custom duties and other costs of transaction gives a huge blow to the revenue collection mechanism. The informal mobility and logistical systems characterised by foot trails, clan-linked routes, and shadow brokerage chains weakens efforts to institutionalise formal connectivity. Major projects such as the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project are premised on the movement of goods through regulated gateways. But when traders continue to rely primarily on informal channels, revenue collection remains limited and the anticipated spill-over benefits of corridor development such as local employment, customs growth, and supply-chain integration could not be fully materialised (Taneja, 2019). Consequently, this phenomenon results in huge loss of government revenue which would affect the public expenditure for infrastructural development of the region. This would ultimately decelerate the development process of economic corridors that lead to Indo-Pacific regions.

The rise of contraband business networks including narcotics, gold, timber and small arms business through ICBT circuits erodes rule-of-law in the region. Flexible networks of brokers, financiers, and insurgent groups who impose illegal taxation and regulate movement autonomously, facilitate the flow of such goods across the border (Global Initiative, 2020; Riley & Iyengar, 2019). Such hybrid governance undermines state legitimacy, discourages regulatory compliance, and conflicts with the Indo-Pacific Vision's principle of transparent and rules-based economic exchange. Again, the growth of drug and narcotic business under the umbrella of ICBT presents significant implications to governance and welfare of the region. Methamphetamine and heroin produced in the Golden Triangle are increasingly routed through Manipur and Mizoram, escalating public health risks and contributing to community-level violence (UNODC, 2023). Meanwhile, the emergence of insurgent groups and ethnic armed groups along the border poses great threat to the regional and national security. These groups conduct trafficking of arms and ammunitions using ICBT channels, making it more difficult for the authority to trail such activities. Such armed groups also cause frequent disruptions to development projects that are designed for economic integration and regional connectivity. It is evident from the context of Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) which is a massive infrastructural project sponsored by Government of India to connect Kolkata with Sittwe port of Myanmar and back into Mizoram. Despite the 2022 ceasefire between the Myanmar military and Arakan Army, clashes erupted again post Operation 1027 (The Diplomat, 2024). As a result, The Arakan Army and allied groups gained control over key territories of western Myanmar where Kaladan project has been developed. This leads to delay in development process and uncertainty about whether the project can be completed at all. Thus, emergence of such groups acts as a catalyst in the persistence of political instability in the frontier. Consequently, institutional attention and fiscal resources are diverted towards internal security management, which affect the process of economic integration (CLAWS, 2020). Ultimately, India's credibility as a stable regional actor in Indo-Pacific region would be possibly compromised.

The Reconciliation

ICBT plays a pivotal role in sustaining the livelihoods of those living in the Indo-Myanmar borderlands. The circulation of essential commodities ranging from basic household goods and agricultural raw materials to consumer goods, helps in integrating peripheral communities into broader market ecosystems (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Rakshit, 2020). This process mitigates spatial inequality and increases social and economic resilience. Though divided by territorial boundary communities inhabited along the border are linked by ethnic and cultural ties since time immemorial. Taking into account the gravity of ethnic linkages, kinship-based networks and trust-based credit systems the phenomenon of informal trade cannot be seen only through the lens of legality because it is more of an adaptive institution for marginalised population with limited alternatives. This

dynamics of Indo-Myanmar ICBT could be resonated within the inclusive principle of India's Indo-Pacific Vision, which can be articulated through SAGAR and Act East Policy.

Gradual formalisation through simplified documentation, small-value customs windows and localised border trade mechanisms could bring more informal activities under regulatory framework without suffocating subsistence economies. This approach could aligns regional realities with governance in capturing more revenue by enhancing transparency while preserving livelihoods. Strengthening of targeted regulatory system can address the illicit dimensions of ICBT like narcotics, gold, timber and arms business that exploit informal networks. Digital payment systems, community-scale warehousing, and risk-based customs inspection could reduce transaction opacity and disrupt linkages between informal trades and organised illicit networks. Again, participatory governance such as community-based monitoring, engagement with trader associations, and borderland consultative platforms could bridge trust deficits between actors and regulatory system. These initiatives could position local actors not as passive subjects of regulation but as partners in shaping border economies. When aligned with strategic connectivity projects such as the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project and the India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway, such collaboration can anchor informal networks within broader Indo-Pacific supply chains. These strategies could reframe ICBT not as a structural anomaly but as a social institution that is capable of supporting India's broader regional goals. By preserving economic resilience at the border while deterring illicit economies, calibrated integration could transform Indo-Myanmar ICBT into a complementary force within objectives like reinforcing secure connectivity, rules-based commerce, and inclusive regional development of Indo-Pacific Vision.

Conclusion

Indo-Myanmar Informal Cross-Border Trade represents a deeply embedded economic and socio-cultural practice shaped by difficult terrain, regulatory asymmetries, and enduring ethnic linkages across the frontier. For borderland communities cross-border exchanges are not merely commercial transactions but essential livelihood strategy. Adjusting Indo-Myanmar ICBT strategically within the broader aims of the Indo-Pacific Vision could possibly bring India into deepened economic linkages with Southeast Asia, enhance supply-chain resilience, and reinforce its role in shaping a stable and inclusive regional order. Strengthened border economies that participate in regulated trade networks could contribute to long-term prosperity for Northeast while advancing India's connectivity and security objectives across the Indo-Pacific region.

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