

The Impact of COVID-19 on Insurgency and Rebel Governance: Lessons from India's Northeast

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Abstract

Emerging research has suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic has generally favored rebel organizations—rather than states—in situations of intrastate conflict. This article challenges this perspective by analyzing the pandemic's impact on three dimensions of rebel activity—*armed activity*, *popular support and recruitment*, and *rebel governance*. It does so by using illustrative evidence from long-running insurgencies in Northeast India, characterized by long-term rebel weakness and minimal, if any, territorial control. The article finds that during the early, acute phase of the pandemic in 2020, state-imposed lockdowns, rebels' own restrictions, and disruptions to supply chains constrained most dimensions of rebel activity. The easing of restrictions in 2021 revealed complex and multidimensional impacts on different armed groups, which often hinged on pre-existing positions such as armed group strength, strategy, relations with the state, and operational circumstances. These experiences of low-level insurgencies lacking territorial control add important qualifiers to the notion that rebels are inherently best placed to capitalize on stochastic shocks such as pandemics. Beyond the case of Northeast India, these findings make a number of contributions to the analysis of counterinsurgency and rebel governance.

Resumen

La investigación emergente ha sugerido que la pandemia de COVID-19 ha favorecido, generalmente, a las organizaciones rebeldes, más que a los Estados, en situaciones de conflicto intraestatal. Este artículo desafía esta perspectiva analizando el impacto de la pandemia sobre tres dimensiones de la actividad rebelde: *actividad armada*, *apoyo popular y reclutamiento*, y *gobernanza rebelde*. Para ello, utilizamos pruebas ilustrativas obtenidas de insurgencias prolongadas en el tiempo en el noreste de la India, que están caracterizadas por la debilidad rebelde a largo plazo y por un control territorial mínimo, en los casos que este existe. El artículo concluye que, durante la fase temprana y más grave de la pandemia en 2020, los confinamientos impuestos por el Estado, así como las propias restricciones de los rebeldes y las interrupciones en las cadenas de suministro restringieron la mayoría de las dimensiones de la actividad rebelde. La flexibilización de las restricciones en 2021 reveló impactos complejos y multidimensionales sobre diferentes grupos armados, que a menudo dependían de condiciones preexistentes, tales como la fuerza, la estrategia, las relaciones con el Estado y las circunstancias operativas de los grupos armados. Estas experiencias relacionadas con insurgencias de bajo nivel que carecen de control territorial añaden importantes calificadores a la noción de que los rebeldes están inherentemente mejor situados para sacar partido de impactos de carácter estocástico

como las pandemias. Además del caso del noreste de la India, estas conclusiones realizan una serie de contribuciones al análisis de la contrainsurgencia y la gobernanza rebelde.

Résumé

Selon les premiers travaux de recherches, la pandémie de Covid-19 aurait davantage favorisé les organisations rebelles que les États en cas de conflit intraétatique. Cet article remet en question ce point de vue en analysant les conséquences de la pandémie sur trois dimensions des activités rebelles : *les activités armées, le soutien populaire et le recrutement*, et enfin, *la gouvernance rebelle*. Pour ce faire, en gage d'illustration, il emploie des éléments probants issus d'insurrections qui durent depuis longtemps dans le Nord-Est de l'Inde. Elles sont caractérisées par la faiblesse des rebelles sur le long terme et un contrôle territorial minimal, voire inexistant. L'article conclut que lors de la phase initiale, particulièrement aiguë, de la pandémie en 2020, les confinements imposés par l'État, les restrictions des rebelles et les perturbations des chaînes d'approvisionnement ont limité la plupart des dimensions de leurs activités. L'allègement des restrictions en 2021 a révélé la complexité et les multiples facettes des conséquences sur les différents groupes armés, souvent en lien avec des caractéristiques antérieures : leur force, leur stratégie, leurs relations avec l'État et les circonstances opérationnelles. Ce manque de contrôle territorial des insurrections basiques vient nuancer la notion que les rebelles seraient par nature mieux placés pour profiter des crises stochastiques comme les pandémies. Au-delà du cas du Nord-Est de l'Inde, ces conclusions enrichissent à plusieurs égards l'analyse des contre-insurrections et de la gouvernance rebelle.

Keywords: insurgency, rebel governance, COVID-19, Northeast India

Palabras clave: insurgencia, gobernanza rebelde, COVID-19, noreste de la india,

Mots-clés: insurrection, gouvernance rebelle, covid-19, nord-est de l'inde

Introduction

There is an emerging empirical assumption that the COVID-19 pandemic has emboldened and enhanced the appeal and operational capacity of insurgent groups, particularly in 2020 and 2021 (Idler and Hochmüller 2020; Furlan 2020b). This perspective is based upon the belief that rebel groups often benefit from crisis and uncertainty, in particular when states are unable to provide effective public services or where their territorial control is weakened. This provides opportunities for insurgent groups to escalate military activity, strengthen their legitimacy in the eyes of local communities, and further their presence or territorial control. From this perspective, COVID-19 acts as an equalizer favoring insurgents. The assumption underpinning this perspective tends to rely on examples of powerful rebel groups leveraging their existing strengths and advantages such as territorial control, political embeddedness, and an advantageous strategic position vis-à-vis the state.

There are, however, many circumstances where exogenous shocks have had a negative impact upon armed groups' ability to operate and govern (Swed 2021), and

rebel groups and insurgents faced a number of pressures and challenges in the midst of the COVID-19 epidemic. The direct health challenges and anxieties associated with COVID-19 can dampen rebel recruitment and operations. Restrictions upon the movement of civilians and members of insurgent groups, whether imposed by the state or by rebels themselves, can similarly make rebel activities and mobility more difficult. Restrictions on the revenue-generating activities of insurgents can result in a loss of income that threatens the cohesion or even the existence of rebel organizations. In turn, the reduced visibility and presence of insurgent groups can undermine any claim for the social utility of rebel governance, which can, as a consequence, weaken their territorial control and legitimacy. This can be compounded if state authorities demonstrate the capacity to respond effectively to the COVID-19 crisis in disputed territories. The ideological traction of insurgent groups may also become weakened, at a time when communities are preoccupied with the immediate health and economic challenges of COVID-19. All of these factors can dampen recruitment and insurgent activities and weaken their political and military position in relation to state actors.

Each of the above scenarios encompasses a diverse array of rebel activities, such as armed operations, organizational work (including recruitment), and rebel governance, and assume that the shock of COVID-19 has generated a uniform impact across each of these activities, across all groups. This overlooks the differing priorities of rebel groups according to their operational, organizational, and political circumstances, as well as the structural opportunities and constraints different rebel groups face, such as their overall strength or degree of territorial control. There have been no attempts to consider the differential impacts of COVID-19 across these different activities, and across different armed groups.

This article therefore nuances the debate about the impact of COVID-19 by distilling possible “emboldening” and “constraining” mechanisms across three dimensions of rebel activity. Exploring COVID-19’s impact on *rebel armed activity* allows us to examine whether armed groups have intensified their offensives or, constrained by the pandemic, lay low to conserve resources and focus on organizational preservation. *Popular support and recruitment* is framed to assess whether groups have been able to exploit the pandemic to engage in organization-building and winning popular support, or whether recruitment has suffered as civilians are distracted by pandemic pressures. Lastly, focusing on *rebel governance* as a distinct dimension of activity allows us to assess whether rebels have sought to fill governance gaps or opportunities created by the pandemic, or alternatively whether they have been forced to retreat from their governance activities. In this way, the paper avoids a simple dichotomy between COVID-19 “helping” and “hurting” armed groups and holds open the possibility that the pandemic may have generated opportunities for certain rebels in certain areas while constraining them in others.

The article explores these dynamics in the context of long-running, low-intensity insurgencies in Northeast India. This peripheral region of India represents an important starting point from which these mechanisms can be illustrated. With insurgencies generally in decline in the Northeast, and with few groups exercising any degree of territorial control, the experience of Northeast India-based insurgencies with COVID-19 generally runs counter to those cases in which rebels have clearly leveraged operational and political advantages to respond to the crisis, such as firm territorial control. Yet, there is also significant variation within the Northeast. Dozens of armed groups operate in Northeast India, each with varying strategies, degrees of strength, and relations with the state—from cooperation, to armed containment to

outright hostility. Analyzing the multidimensional impact of COVID-19 across this array of groups within a single conflict setting can therefore offer initial insights into the pandemic’s impact on armed groups with different pre-existing strategic positions, albeit within the context of these scope conditions. This illustrative case evidence can then inform the basis for further comparative research to build on and make broader analytical claims.

We adopt a three-pronged approach to data collection. To map broad trends in insurgent activity and political violence in Northeast India before and during the COVID-19 period, the article draws upon two armed conflict datasets—the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) and data from the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP). Newswire data from the SATP provide a record of relevant events—including military skirmishes, incidents of political violence, and the surrender of non-state militants. The tendency of local media outlets to publish armed group statements *verbatim* in English means that the newswire data are valuable in identifying rebel narratives throughout the COVID-19 pandemic period, and these data are supplemented by access to armed group publications such as the Naga militant group outlet *Nagalim Voice*. Lastly, interviews were conducted with twenty-six high-ranking practitioners in the Indian military, police and security services, local academics, civil society members, and one senior rebel commander (see the online appendix), with respondents anonymized due to the sensitive nature of evolving developments around insurgent activities and counterinsurgency operations. Questions were based on our pre-existing analysis of broad trends, specific events, and in-depth regional knowledge. This enabled us to mitigate the challenges of the “official line” in elite interviews (Clutterbuck and Warnes 2013), provide the critical link between macro- and micro-level data while offering insights beyond the official record (von Soest 2022, 2). The analysis is guided by debates in the conflict scholarship on the drivers of insurgency and the dynamics of rebel governance.

The article presents a nuanced picture of the impact of COVID-19 upon rebel activities in Northeast India. Whether a group was observing a ceasefire or in hostilities with the state, *rebel armed activity* was generally curtailed during the initial waves of the pandemic, when the economic impact of the pandemic and government responses were acute and rose steadily throughout 2021. Armed group strategies nonetheless varied; while Manipur-based armed groups reintensified their armed operations, one of the main Assam-based armed groups declared a unilateral COVID-19 ceasefire and

sought to recuperate recent losses through a recruitment drive, pulling back from rebel armed activity and prioritizing popular support and recruitment. Rebel groups reliant on rebel governance structures—particularly in the Naga areas—did not fill governance gaps as has been observed elsewhere, but nonetheless engaged in limited, localized public health interventions, often in conjunction with local allies and through the use of “armed advocacy” vis-à-vis the state (Gutiérrez 2022, 27). These interventions were nonetheless constrained by state-imposed lockdowns, temporarily generating civilian resistance when taxation activities returned after the hardships of lockdown. Indeed, Indian state actors—increasingly in a position of ascendancy in recent years—were able to capitalize in a number of areas, pursuing smaller armed groups, encouraging surrenders, and responding to COVID-19 in outlying areas.

These findings challenge the assumption that COVID-19 is necessarily an equalizer that favors rebel groups. They highlight that there are circumstances where COVID-19 has, at least temporarily, had a negative effect on armed groups’ ability to launch operations, maintain their organizational and support base, and conduct governance activities. The article also underlines the importance of understanding COVID-19’s impact through the prism of current conflict dynamics and the strategies and circumstances of different armed groups, which meant that different armed groups encountered the pandemic differently and their responses varied. By illustrating these mechanisms, while identifying key scope conditions, the paper concludes by reflecting on the implications for further, comparative, work theorizing the ways COVID-19 intersects with insurgency and armed conflict more broadly.

The article is organized as follows. The first section reviews the relevant literature on intrastate armed conflict and rebel governance in order to identify a number of theoretical processes and consequences relevant to the impact of COVID-19 on insurgency. In this context, brief illustrative references are made to insurgencies around the world in order to gauge the impact of COVID-19 in broader perspective and to engage with wider academic debate on the subject. The second section provides a brief background to the conflicts in Northeast India in historical perspective and in relation to the conflict studies literature. The third section explores these conflicts through the three theoretical dimensions and the “emboldening” and “constraining” mechanisms presented above. Finally, the fourth section considers the implications of this for further comparative research across conflicts and different rebel organizations.

The Impact of COVID-19 upon Insurgency and Rebel Governance

Analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on ongoing conflicts is methodologically challenging. The impact of the pandemic, in its intensity, has not been uniform. Governments have varied in their responses, and economic shocks and contractions have impacted conflict parties in varying ways. Preliminary data mapping global armed conflict trends in the wake of COVID-19 have been inconclusive, with some disagreement among analysts as to whether there have been general increases or decreases in conflict (Polo 2020; Bloem and Salemi 2021; Mehr and Thurner 2021). The data of the ACLED, as of July 2022, present a generally inconclusive picture, appearing to show an overall decline in battles and explosions during 2020 compared to 2019, with an increase during the latter half of 2021 and a sharp increase following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 (figure 1). Bloem and Salemi (2021) observe that the impacts of COVID-19 are, to quite a high degree, context-specific and conclude that broad causal implications are difficult to identify. Similarly, Polo (2020) found that general levels of violence remained steady or even escalated during the first 5 months of the pandemic, and that COVID-19-related social unrest spread beyond conflict-affected countries. While research has demonstrated that armed groups have attempted to take advantage of COVID-19 in their political and military activities (Idler and Hochmüller 2020; Furlan 2020b; Breslawski 2021; Zakayo and O’Neil 2021), overall trends do not appear to suggest a generalizable impact.

All of these studies, while recognizing ambiguity on the global level, stress significant regional and case-specific heterogeneity in the way the COVID-19 pandemic has intersected with local dynamics. In the Middle East, for example, Mehr and Thurner (2021) highlight increases in political conflict as a result of increased state lockdown measures. Existing downward trends in violence owing to peace processes were initially accelerated in Colombia and Afghanistan, but these reductions were subsequently reversed. In other cases, such as Yemen, the Philippines, and Thailand, the initial decline in violence brought about by COVID-19-related truces gave way within weeks to renewed offensives and upticks in violent events (Ide 2021, 2–4).

Much of this emerging literature views the impact of COVID-19 through the prism of changes to combatant opportunity structures, particularly from the perspective of non-state armed groups (Ide 2021, 5). The pandemic forced states to divert their security

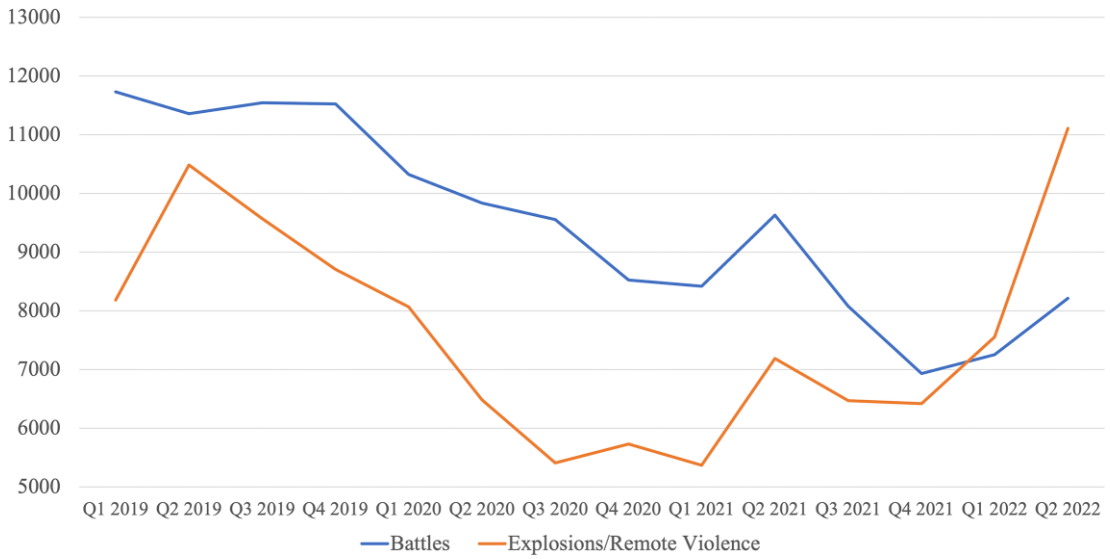


Figure 1. ACLED-recorded violent conflict events globally, Q1 2019–Q2 2022.

forces toward enforcing lockdowns and their financial resources toward mitigating the economic fallout. In this context, COVID-19 is seen as an opportunity for rebels to take advantage of the sudden weakness of governments, either by challenging the state militarily or by filling key governance gaps (Koehnlein and Koren 2021, 2). Indeed, there have been numerous examples of non-state armed groups increasing their attacks, such as in sub-Saharan Africa, where violent incidents increased 37 percent between mid-March and mid-April 2020 (Columbo and Harris 2020). Distinguishing between anti-state rebels and pro-government militias across 127 countries, Koehnlein and Koren (2021) nonetheless find that rebel attacks generally did not increase significantly in the first months of the pandemic. This suggests that the initial response of rebels across different conflict zones was generally to conserve resources and generate legitimacy using other means (Koehnlein and Koren 2021), such as by filling governance gaps and expanding rebel governance institutions to meet these new challenges.

In this context, a limited but gradually emerging literature has started to assess rebel responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of this literature tends to reflect the focal points of the wider field of rebel governance, which seeks to account for variations in the development of rebel political institutions (Mampilly and Stewart 2020; Furlan 2020a), measures variations in the depth and scope of justice and service provision (Kubota 2018; Stewart 2018; Loyle 2020), and explores degrees of civilian cooperation, negotiation,

and resistance (Eck 2014; Grauer and Tierney 2018). Early work on the pandemic's impact on rebel activities has reflected these themes and explored impacts upon the provision of services, justice, social control, and popular support. Breslawski (2021), for instance, draws upon "Geneva Call" data on armed group responses to COVID-19, highlighting a range of typical rebel responses varying in depth and scope. These range from light-touch action, such as the promotion of virus-preventative measures, to more active interventions, such as the imposition of restrictions, cooperation with humanitarian workers, ceasefires, health service provision and administration, and the easing of taxation (Breslawski 2021).

This research on rebel governance responses to COVID-19 tends to emphasize the pandemic's impact as an equalizer effect that favors insurgents while placing pressure upon state actors. Furlan (2020b), for example, argues that rebels tend to be better placed than their state adversaries to exploit emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic because they do not need to demonstrate their governance capacity to the extent that states do, and they provide rebel groups with an opportunity to project themselves as credible and legitimate rulers through their local governance activities.

A number of examples appear to support this argument. Armed groups in Colombia imposed lockdowns in the absence of a meaningful state presence in remote areas (Human Rights Watch 2020), effectively demonstrating their coercive authority while showcasing their ideological credentials by claiming to act in the interests

of the civilian population (Furlan 2020a). Groups such as Hamas and the United Wa State Army have similarly developed, mobilized, and publicized their response and the health infrastructure provision in the territories they control (MAITIC 2020; Winn 2020), showcasing and bolstering their ideological projects for a separate nation upon which their support is based. By distributing medical assistance and deploying medical personnel beyond its communities in Lebanon, Hezbollah attempted to use material assistance to extend its support base beyond its core constituencies, where its ideological appeals had traditionally been less resonant (Moubayed 2020). In many of these cases, the ability of rebels to exploit limited state presence or capacity—whether by actively filling these gaps or by feeding critiques into extant conflict narratives—allowed them to present themselves as viable alternatives and thus gain political traction and support.

These examples are important contributions to our understanding of how rebels respond to crises and exogenous shocks. However, the assumption that COVID-19 acts as an equalizing force favoring rebel groups tends to rely on examples of powerful rebel groups leveraging existing strengths and advantages such as territorial control and political embeddedness. There are many circumstances where shocks such as COVID-19 have a negative impact upon armed groups' ability to operate and govern. Rebels generally lack the capacity of states, and as a result face unique logistic challenges in terms of securing access to supplies, arms, and medical equipment, all of which would likely be exacerbated in the event of border closures and restrictions on economic activity. Rebels typically also lack the health infrastructure available to states. To pay their cadres and maintain internal discipline, they are likely to depend on taxation of economic activity but must also be seen to manage the competing pressures of public health and the local economy if they are to be seen as credible governance actors. This underlines the importance of analyzing shocks such as COVID-19 in the context of both opportunities and threats to insurgents' ability to fight, recruit, operate, and govern.

In many cases, furthermore, as the recent “order turn” in the civil wars literature suggests (Waterman and Worrall 2020; Malthaner and Malešević 2022), treating state–insurgent relations as a straightforward binary is oversimplistic (Ambrozik 2019; Schievels and Colley 2020, 2). This research agenda, which explores shifting relations and patterns of authority between states, rebels, and civilians across war and peace, has highlighted that relations between armed parties frequently involve de-

grees of containment, coexistence, cooperation, and limited war that straddle dichotomies of war and peace (Staniland 2017). In sites of overlapping or contested authority, rebel governance structures often overlap with and are enmeshed in wider state and non-state networks of power, authority, and governance (Thakur and Venugopal 2018; Gutiérrez 2022). Indeed, forms of coexistence, collusion, and collaboration have existed *alongside* military clashes in cases such as Myanmar, Cote D'Ivoire, and Sri Lanka (Bertrand, Pelletier, and Thawngmung 2022; van Baalen and Terpstra 2022). These dynamics render oppositional notions of “gains” versus “losses” problematic and demonstrate the importance of disaggregating specific mechanisms through which rebels may be either emboldened or weakened.

To navigate this problem, we further disaggregate the above scenarios into three key dimensions of activity spanning rebel operations and governance. Hypothetical “emboldening” and “constraining” mechanisms are drawn from the assumptions in the above literature and allow us to explore the impact of the pandemic on three areas of rebel activity, highlighted in table 1. *Rebel armed activity* first refers to direct military activities vis-à-vis the state, allowing us to explore whether rebels either exploit COVID-19 dynamics to either increase their attacks against state forces and civilians or, indeed, reduce their operations to conserve resources in the face of pressures and restrictions. In *popular support and recruitment*, rebels may either exploit the crisis to enhance recruitment by linking the crisis to conflict grievances and drivers or face difficulties in penetrating their constituencies as a result of lockdown measures. Lastly, *rebel governance* refers to a spectrum of possible impacts on rebel governance behaviors, ranging from opportunities to fill governance gaps left by a retreating state to restrictions constraining rebels' ability to conduct governance activities.

In each, the emboldening and constraining mechanisms are intended as heuristic devices, rather than to impose categories upon armed groups, holding open the possibility for spaces in-between being wholly constrained or emboldened by pandemic dynamics. An armed group, for example, may simultaneously face pressures on popular support and recruitment, but in adapting to these circumstances may encounter emboldening mechanisms. Breaking down rebel activities and governance in this way, and placing the impact of the pandemic in this richer, relational context, generates possibilities for nuanced insights into the pandemic's impact on insurgencies and rebel governance in contested spaces.

Table 1. COVID-19, insurgency, and rebel governance: emboldening and constraining mechanisms

	Emboldening mechanism	Constraining mechanism
Rebel armed activity	Opportunity to increase offensives following diversion of state activity or reduced state capacity (Columbo and Harris 2020)	Pressures to conserve resources, reduced mobility due to state/group-imposed restrictions to prevent COVID-19 spread (Koehnlein and Koren 2021)
Popular support and recruitment	Opportunity to exploit COVID-19 spread, and socioeconomic consequences of state-imposed lockdowns, to enhance support and recruitment by linking to conflict grievances (inequality, migration, state neglect)	Support/recruitment constituencies priorities of rebel groups diverted toward immediate pandemic threat; contraction of rebel support base as a result of socioeconomic pressures
Rebel governance	Opportunity to fill governance gaps left by the state (Furlan 2020b), in the form of service provision, public health awareness, and group-enforced lockdowns	Pressures to conserve resources, disruption to community penetration owing to state lockdown measures, unpopularity of governance efforts; poor performance compared to state governance activities

Intrastate Armed Conflict and Insurgency in Northeast India

The diverse nature of insurgent conflicts in India's landlocked northeast underlines the limitations of understanding state-rebel interactions through a binary, oppositional lens, while significant within-case variation makes it an ideal case for examining the complex ways the pandemic has shaped armed group activity. Given the neglect of some intrastate armed conflicts in mainstream conflict analysis (Brenner and Han 2021), this is a case that arguably also deserves greater attention. New Delhi has faced a near-continuous and diverse array of separatist and communal insurgencies since independence. The first and longest major insurgency in the Northeast began in the Naga Hills during the 1950s (Nibedon 1978), followed by the rise of insurgent groups seeking independence from India in Mizoram and Manipur during the 1960s. Insurgencies emerged out of anti-migration movements in Assam and Tripura from the late 1970s and sought either outright independence, statehood, or autonomy within India's political structures. In Assam, in particular, the anti-migration movement saw the emergence of the pro-independence United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) from the Assamese speaking-dominated movement (Mahanta 2013). This in turn prompted counter-mobilizations from armed groups in smaller communities such as the Bodos and Karbis, which demanded their own autonomy arrangements, while similar dynamics emerged in Meghalaya during the early 1990s. In Arunachal Pradesh, the state's eastern dis-

tricts have served as both a resource-rich region ripe for governance and taxation, as well as a natural access corridor for cross-border strikes from rebel sanctuaries in Myanmar (Saikia 2004; Dai 2007).

Of Northeast India's conflicts, only the Mizo insurgency has seen a comprehensive resolution, with the 1986 Mizo Accord bringing the Mizo National Front leader into office as the state's chief minister (Hazarika 2018, 82–127). Across the conflicts in Assam, the Naga areas, Manipur, and Tripura, peace accords have fragmented armed movements and led to the emergence of localized "ethnic autocracies" where power and control over developmental resources have been passed to the hands of repressive minority factions (Lacina 2009). For example, the 1975 Shillong Accord, signed between the Indian government and elements of the Naga National Council, collapsed in 1980 after hardline militants formed the breakaway anti-peace talks National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980, which quickly rose to a dominant position within the Naga insurgency. Having split again in 1988, the two major NSCN factions (the NSCN-Isak-Muivah [NSCN-IM] and the NSCN-Khaplang [NSCN-K]) eventually signed ceasefire agreements with the Indian state in 1997 and 2001, although the NSCN-K resumed hostilities in 2015.

These protracted ceasefires, which did not contain provisions for demobilization, have similarly intensified competition over access to development resources and lucrative extortion turf, exacerbating factional

competition, splits, and violence (Kolås 2011; Panwar 2017; Kikon and McDuie-Ra 2021). The Indian state has thus been forced to adapt its conflict resolution mechanisms to local power dynamics in a bid to manage the violence. The result, as Samrat Sinha documents, is an array of agreements between the state and armed groups ranging from formal incorporation into peace accords, ceasefire arrangements, and several tiers of “Suspension of Operations” agreements containing varying degrees of controls on armed group behavior and space for political negotiation (Sinha 2017).

This multilayered violence management architecture has been coupled with aggressive counterinsurgency operations against anti-talks groups from Assam, Manipur, and the Naga areas and diplomatic efforts to disrupt cross-border sanctuaries in Bhutan during the early 2000s, Bangladesh from 2009, and most recently Myanmar in 2019 (India Today 2019). These efforts have contributed significantly to the weakening of “anti-talks” armed groups, for example, forcing the main anti-talks Bodo armed group (National Democratic Front of Bodoland–Saoraigwra) overground in 2020 to sign a peace accord with the Indian government and other pro-talks groups (Bruah and Siddiqui 2020). Levels of insurgent violence have therefore witnessed a long-term decline since 2010, with conflict-related fatalities dropping from 333 in 2012 to 28 in 2020 (Ministry of Home Affairs 2019, 21; Odyuo 2021). Thus, any assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic must be seen in the context of at least a decade of decline in open insurgent violence.

Despite this decline, India’s northeast remains heavily militarized and characterized by a diverse patchwork of state–insurgent relations (Saikia 2007; Staniland 2017; Thakur and Venugopal 2018; Waterman 2021). Whereas avidly anti-talks groups have remained in open hostilities with Indian security forces, others within the peace architecture operate in the murkier space of limited conflict, containment, cooperation, and collusion. For instance, New Delhi and the NSCN-IM signed a “Framework Agreement” intended to accelerate the peace process in 2015, yet the number of standoffs and armed clashes between the two has increased since 2017 amid reports of deadlock in the negotiations (Waterman 2020, 252). Others are still much more closely tied to the state through disarmament and demobilization clauses.

Further complicating this picture, rebels in India’s Northeast do not enjoy territorial control or a monopoly of violence in their areas of influence (Waterman 2023), setting them apart from groups such as Hamas and the United Wa State Army. Conflict in Northeast India has

also long been characterized by crisscrossing relations connecting politicians, insurgents, civil society actors, criminal gangs, contractors, and security forces (Baruah 2007). For example, the NSCN-IM and a number of other Naga, Kuki, and Meitei groups co-opt and coerce members of local state structures as part of efforts to secure resources and run rebel governance structures, while engaging or coexisting with different security forces in different areas according to different formal and informal rules (Waterman 2021). Although by no means unique to Northeast India (Malthaner and Malešević 2022, 6), the case nonetheless represents a particularly dramatic example of the blurred analytical boundaries between insurgents, states, and the wider social milieu (Brenner 2019, 16). In this sense, Northeast India aptly demonstrates the problems associated with viewing the impact of COVID-19 through oppositional notions of absolute rebel gain or loss. Indeed, whether in Northeast India, or elsewhere, as recent work breaking down the binaries of control in civil wars illustrates (Gutiérrez 2022), such a zero-sum approach threatens to flatten out this heterogeneity and neglects the complex impacts that shocks such as COVID-19 are likely to have on this assemblage of armed politics.

Within a shared context of generally overlapping and mostly limited (or indeed nonexistent) forms of territorial control on the part of rebels, there are significant within-case variations in the pre-existing positions of armed groups in terms of strength, relations with the state, strategy, and operational circumstances as they encountered the COVID-19 pandemic (see table 2). In addition to the patchwork of state–armed group relations highlighted above, armed groups in the Northeast vary considerably in strength, from the 5,000-strong NSCN-IM to the 250-strong ULFA-Independent (ULFA-I). As a result, their organizational and operational strategies differ markedly; whereas ULFA-I and the Manipur valley-based insurgent groups focus on cross-border strikes on security forces and attacks on soft targets, the NSCN-IM operates within the gray areas of ceasefire, engaging in limited clashes with security forces while fighting rivals and maintaining its rebel governance structures. With differing *modus operandi*, this is likely to mean that the operations of groups emphasizing different dimensions of activity (such as rebel governance) may be impacted differently. Lastly, there are also considerable variations in armed group operational circumstances. Of the groups still engaged in hostilities against the Indian state, for example, the Manipur valley-based insurgent groups entered the pandemic in a comparatively better position than their counterparts in Assam, having conducted high-profile ambushes against Indian security forces in 2018, late 2019, and early 2021.

Table 2. Within-case variation across armed groups in Northeast India

Armed group					
Group/group cluster	Strength	Relations with state	Strategy	Pre-COVID operational circumstances	Territorial control?
Ceasefire groups in Nagaland/Manipur: NSCN-IM, NSCN-R, UKLF	NSCN-IM: 5,000 NSCN-R: 1,200 UKLF: <500	Ceasefire, limited clashes	Peace talks in conjunction with limited armed activities against rivals and state forces. Maintains rebel governance structures	NSCN-IM: militarily active, long-term weakening in context of protracted peace process. UKLF is bound to tighter ceasefire restrictions	Areas of influence, overlap with state
ULFA-I	250	Hostilities	Cross-border attacks, hit-and-run attacks on soft targets and security forces	Leading member of anti-talk armed groups sustained major losses during 2019 Myanmar military operations	Nonexistent
Manipur Valley-based insurgent groups	15 separate armed factions Strongest factions ~1,500	Hostilities	Cross-border hit-and run attacks, extortion/intimidation of soft targets in Manipur, limited moral policing activities	2011 regrouping enabled sporadic cross-border ambushes	Non-existent
Karbi and Bodo armed factions in Assam	>200 per faction	Hostilities	Attacks on soft targets, limited clashes with security forces	Sustained counterinsurgency pressure during 2010s, Bodo losses during 2019 Myanmar military operations	Nonexistent

This variation within the case first allows us to consider the impact of COVID-19 across different armed groups facing a shared context of limited territorial control and general rebel weakness. Within these scope conditions, the illustrative case evidence can offer some insight into COVID-19’s impact on an array of lower-level forms of rebel activity, generating some initial observations on how groups with different pre-pandemic circumstances were affected by and responded to the impact of COVID-19.

The Impact of COVID-19

Compared to the worst COVID-19-affected states in India, such as Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu, Northeast India accounts for a small proportion of India’s COVID-19 cases, hospitaliza-

Table 3. Infection and death rates until September 2022

States	Infection numbers	Deaths
Assam	745,436	8,034
Arunachal Pradesh	66,825	296
Manipur	139,800	2,148
Nagaland	39,951	781
Tripura	107,766	938
Meghalaya	96,643	1,622
Mizoram	238,226	723

Source: Government of India.¹

tions, and deaths. Yet, the impact has been significant (table 3), and this goes well beyond the direct impacts of the virus itself. Preliminary data on mobility

¹ <https://www.mygov.in/covid-19>

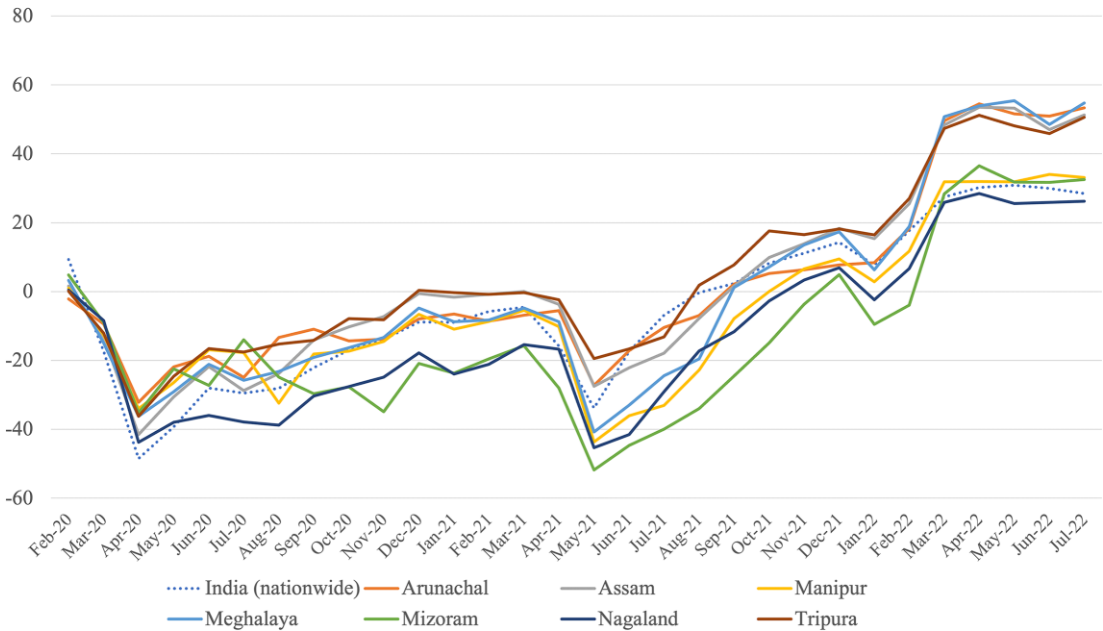


Figure 2. Impact of COVID-19 on base rate mobility in Northeast India vis-à-vis national average
 Source: Google Covid-19 Community Mobility Reports.²

and economic activity (figure 2) suggest that North-east India has suffered from harsh economic contractions as a result of COVID-19 lockdown measures (Dev and Sengupta 2020; Ravi 2020; Barbate, Gade, and Raibagkar 2021; Bayer, Franco-Bedoya, and Galdo 2021; Kesar et al. 2021). In particular, states such as Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya have faced sharper and more sustained average reductions in mobility than the national average, despite the relatively minimal direct impact of the virus in these states. Estimates have projected that the largest state and economy in the Northeast, Assam, is likely to face a 16–27 percent rise in unemployment and a 1.3 percent reduction in economic growth, while the return of migrant laborers from across India is expected to depress wages significantly (Bhattacharjee 2021). There is no doubt—judging by local news commentary, economic indicators, and the interviews conducted for this article—that COVID-19 has had a major direct or indirect effect upon this region of India, and that this has had a bearing on politics and conflict dynamics.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Insurgency and Rebel Governance

Rebel Armed Activity

Despite the potential for the virus to exacerbate the drivers of conflict and create space for insurgents to in-

² See Google (2022).

tenify their violent activities, there was no significant increase in rebel-linked violence during the initial outbreak of the pandemic. In fact, data from the ACLED (figure 3) suggest that the early months of the pandemic saw a temporary but clear reduction in insurgency-related violence. The number of “battles,” which includes direct state-rebel clashes, indirect armed engagements such as ambushes, and interfactional clashes between armed groups, declined particularly during April, May, and June 2020, and subsequently remained low in comparison to 2019. The number then began to rise again with a series of spikes in battles, including several major ambushes by anti-talks rebels, during the third quarter of 2020, and this gradual rise and stabilization continued throughout 2021 and into 2022.

What explains these trends in battles? Clearly, it is important to note broad continuity in the long-term decline in violence in recent years. There is also evidence to suggest that *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar Army) operations in 2019 disrupted anti-talk rebel activity, particularly of groups such as ULFA-I and the Bodo insurgents. However, the 2021 military coup in Myanmar and its subsequent conflict with pro-democracy forces reduced this pressure. This provided breathing space for anti-talks rebel groups with pre-pandemic operational capabilities, such as the Manipur Valley-based insurgent groups, to strike deals with the *Tatmadaw* and relaunch their armed

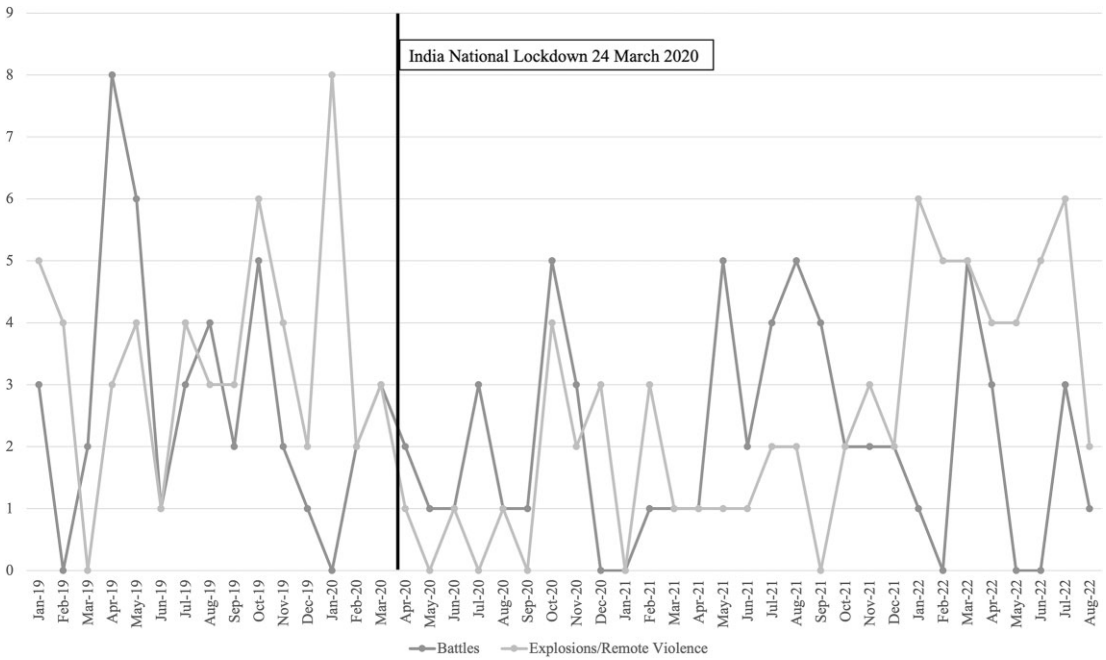


Figure 3. ACLED-coded “battles” and “explosions” in Northeast India.

activities in India.³ However, this does not account for the full spectrum of armed group activity in the Northeast; several armed groups that frequently clash with state forces, such as NSCN-IM and NSCN-R, are in talks with the government and operate primarily within India. Furthermore, the *specific and temporary* nature of the drop in battles after March 2020 suggests, at the very least, that the early impact of COVID-19 did not present opportunities for any rebels (whether anti-talks and those in talks with Delhi) to increase their violent activities against state forces during the height of COVID lockdowns. Interview respondents noted that during the early stages of the pandemic at least, rebels laid low, amid fears that contracting the virus would lead to outbreaks within their camps.⁴ Indeed, it was reported that two of the main cross-border groups in hostilities with the Indian government, NSCN-Khaplang’s Yung Aung (NSCN-K/YA) and the ULFA-I, restricted the mobility of its cadres in Myanmar, limiting market visits and rationing supplies (Naglim Voice 2020a).

³ These groups include the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), Manipur Naga People’s Front (MNPF), and Zomi Revolutionary Army-Eastern Command (ZRA-EC). See Waterman (2022, 377).

⁴ Interviews with security officials, 2020.

While data on battles are useful, they do not provide a full picture of rebel-initiated activities. Data on improvised explosive device (IED) and grenade attacks offer a more specific proxy to measure such activity in Northeast India and point toward a more significant impact on some armed groups. Rather than direct military engagements, many smaller armed groups—particularly in the region’s most violent state, Manipur—mostly conducted IED or grenade attacks against military, political, or business establishments. South Asia Terrorism Portal newswire data record incidents where grenades are planted (as part of an intimidation or extortion campaign), fail to detonate, and are recovered by security forces, serving as an effective barometer of Manipuri rebels’ armed activity. As figure 4 shows, patterns of grenade and IED-related incidents in Manipur suffered a sharp contraction after March 2020, before gradually increasing in late 2021. The sharp nature of this reduction from March 2020 points toward the impact of economic lockdowns on transport, business activity, and both domestic and cross-border IED production supply chains.

These trends in political violence in Northeast India broadly align with the findings of Koehnlein and Koren (2021, 2–3), challenging the scenario of rebels exploiting the pandemic by increasing their conflict activity and militarily challenging the weakening state. The relative lull in activity in the months following

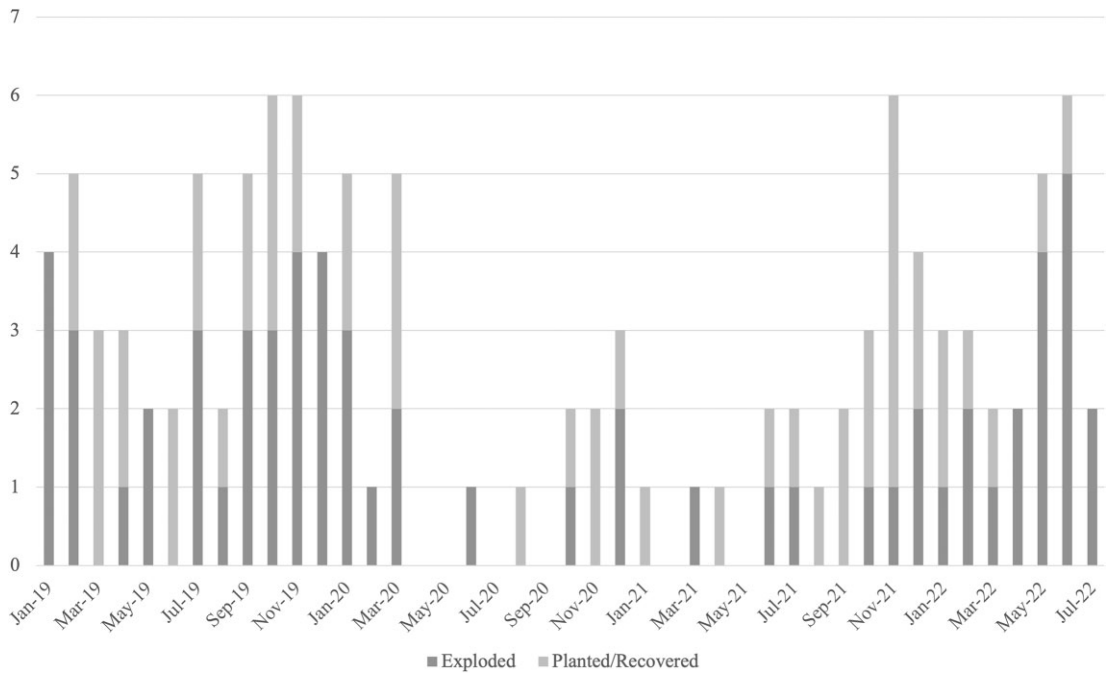


Figure 4. Grenade/IED-related incidents in Manipur, January 2019–July 2022.

Source: [South Asia Terrorism Portal 2021](#).

India's first national lockdown, followed by gradual rises in activity, appears to reflect immediate-term constraints placed on both rebel and state forces. Once these constraints eased as 2021 progressed, armed group activity within the context of the pandemic generally increased. Within this increase, variations can be identified according to individual armed group circumstances and strategies. Manipuri armed groups such as the PLA entered the pandemic from a relatively favorable position, having conducted high-profile attacks on Indian security forces in late 2019 and early 2020. Once the sharp lockdowns of 2020 subsided, the Manipur Valley-based insurgent groups exploited loosening restrictions and favorable conditions in Myanmar to revive their pre-existing strategy of high-profile cross-border ambushes. In-ceasefire groups such as the NSCN-IM returned to their lower-intensity game of “cat and mouse” with security forces. As the next section illustrates, furthermore, not all groups pursued an immediate return to armed activities, reflecting key differences in circumstances and strategy.

The trends are generally consistent with other cases, such as Yemen, the Philippines, and Thailand, where the pandemic temporarily dampened patterns of violence before violence levels subsequently increased again. That being said, it is important to note the context of rebel weakness in Northeast India, which has influenced a

more gradual and small-scale return in violence as compared with more intense civil wars such as Yemen in which rebel groups are both far more embedded and operationally capable.

Popular Support and Recruitment

Koehnlein and Koren's second scenario postulates that rebels—laying low and avoiding direct clashes with state forces—will attempt to exploit the pandemic by cultivating popular support and legitimacy. This includes organizational activities such as recruitment, exploiting pandemic-related grievances to bolster conflict narratives, and engaging in organization building, or by presenting a viable alternative to the state through governance activities. Viewed through this lens, a decline in rebel-initiated violence may reflect enhanced efforts to cultivate legitimacy and build strength for the longer term.

Indeed, not all armed groups opposed to talks with the Indian state revived their armed activities when conditions eased in 2021. In May 2021 the anti-talks group ULFA-I declared and then later extended a unilateral ceasefire, saying that it was their “social responsibility” to halt operations “as the people are facing immense difficulties and suffering” (*The Economic Times* 2021; *The Indian Express* 2021). This clearly demonstrates

an attempt to garner legitimacy among the population, and perhaps reflects a recognition that for many, the immediate threat of the pandemic displaced commitments to support the group. However, the ceasefire is also likely to reflect tactical considerations, following losses since 2019 and blowback after an unpopular grenade attack that year. Since declaring the ceasefire, ULFA-I has undertaken a significant recruitment drive. According to Assam Police estimates, between September 2021 and April 2022, forty new recruits joined ULFA-I, while a further thirty-nine were arrested while attempting to do so, compared to approximately seventy recruits during 2017–2019 (*Al Jazeera* 2022). In September 2020, it was reported that both ULFA-I and the People's Democratic Council of Karbi Longri (PDCK)—a smaller outfit—had deliberately tapped into the economic precarity of pandemic lockdowns to recruit between ten and twenty youths into their respective organizations (*The Sentinel Assam* 2020). ULFA-I had suffered an abnormally high number of surrenders in 2019,⁵ after *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar Army) raids in Myanmar disrupted the group's camps. Its COVID-19 ceasefire, in conjunction with its recruitment drives, may therefore be seen in the context of a wider process of both attempts to garner legitimacy while recuperating from these losses, underlining the importance of locating rebel responses to COVID-19 in the context of armed group strategy and operational circumstances.

Rebel groups have also linked the crisis to existing narratives and sought to utilize the pandemic as part of the struggle for popular support. “Anti-talks” groups have, for example, drawn attention to the high proportion of COVID-19 cases within the Indian security forces deployed to Northeast India. In a statement claiming responsibility for the July 29, 2020, ambush in the Chandel district of Manipur, which resulted in the killing of three Indian security forces personnel, the Manipur Naga People's Front (MNPF), PLA, and ULFA-I referred to Indian security forces as the “super spreader” of COVID-19 (*Das* 2020). Groups engaged in talks, such as the NSCN-IM, have released more calibrated criticisms accusing security forces of exposing villagers to COVID-19 during standoffs between their militants and Indian forces (*The Hindu* 2020a). This can be seen as an attempt to exploit the pandemic to drive a wedge between security forces and the population, tapping into exist-

ing grievances regarding security forces activity while presenting rebel groups as defenders of their respective communities.

Rebel Governance

Groups maintaining rebel governance structures—particularly in the Naga-inhabited areas where this forms a key component of armed group strategy—have attempted to present an image of themselves as responding effectively to the COVID-19 crisis, in a bid to demonstrate their credentials as legitimate and effective governance actors. Most of these groups coexist with elements of the Indian state through ceasefires, peace talks, or local alliances. While groups such as the NSCN-IM enjoy spheres of influence across large swathes of the eastern belt of Northeast India, this does not amount to formal territorial control per se, but instead in hybrid, multilayered arrangements of parallel governance (*Thakur and Venugopal* 2018). These arrangements, which emerged as ceasefires were signed and groups moved into the towns with Indian state presence (and vice versa), vary both spatially and across specific components of governance. For instance, while the NSCN-IM runs direct parallel structures in spheres such as policing and taxation, its influence on service provision does not stem from its ability to run independent services. Instead, it penetrates the state- and/or district-level administration by combining healthy relationships with “natural allies” within local administration with coercive pressure to influence the outcome of local elections and to “direct the flow of contracts and resources” (*Suykens* 2017; *Thakur and Venugopal* 2018, 295–97). At the same time, the group “co-opts and dominates existing Naga customary institutions and civil society organisations” (*Thakur and Venugopal* 2018, 296–97), using its ontological embeddedness in Naga society as a source of legitimacy while using this influence to shape compliance with its directives (*Brenner* 2019, 16). The NSCN-IM's “health ministry,” run from its headquarters in Nagaland alongside rudimentary health facilities, largely fulfils a public awareness function, tapping into its authority vis-à-vis civil society and its ability to pressure government officials.⁶ In this context, Naga rebel governance responses do not reflect the binary image of rebels filling in governance gaps in the wake of state retreat—as is perhaps the case with the Taliban

⁵ There were thirty-six ULFA-I surrenders in 2019, the highest the group has faced since splitting from ULFA's Pro Talks Faction in 2009. The second highest number of yearly surrenders was in 2013 when eighteen militants surrendered. See *SATP* (2022).

⁶ This is akin to Gutiérrez's notion of “armed advocacy” in areas of overlapping rebel and state presence. See *Gutiérrez* (2022, 29).

in Afghanistan—but are nonetheless attempts to garner legitimacy both with and through their constituents.

While the groups themselves lack the capacity to undertake major public health interventions such as those undertaken by Hezbollah in similarly hybrid settings, they have carried out activities that demonstrate their responsibility to their constituents, demonstrating some evidence of the emboldening mechanisms highlighted in table 1. Groups such as the NSCN-IM, NSCN-Reformation, and United Kuki Liberation Front (UKLF) have openly declared their alignment with either the Indian State or the wider global response to the pandemic, advising that constituents adhere to government guidelines (*The Frontier Manipur* 2021), while others have publicly backed and even offered financial incentives to villages in a bid to improve vaccination rates (*Mazumdar* 2021).

Beginning in June 2020, the NSCN-IM released a series of bulletins updating the public on its response to the disease, detailing a number of measures. These included internal measures such as camp lockdowns and the distribution of masks and sanitizing products to the group's cadre base. External measures included education and awareness campaigns (*Nagalim Voice* 2020b), as well as limited interventions into local communities, such as "Operation Covid-19 Flush Out," which included testing, sanitizing, and disinfecting local communities near the group's headquarters at Camp Hebron, Nagaland (*Nagalim Voice* 2020c). The group's "Zeilad Region" also offered contributions to some of Manipur state's existing quarantine facilities and rendered limited assistance to select groups, doing this in conjunction with an array of stakeholders including district and autonomous district council members linked with the state and non-state civil society and tribal bodies (*Nagaland Page* 2020; *Nagalim Voice* 2020b). This reflects a more nuanced picture of rebel attempts to garner legitimacy during the pandemic. Rebels are both constrained by limits on their existing capacity and have complex relations with state actors, meaning that these activities are not necessarily about "filling" state gaps in a binary-like oppositional sense.

These governance activities and outreach attempts nonetheless remained modest and largely performative in nature. Armed groups running rebel governance structures faced severe restrictions on their revenue-generating activities as a result of their reduced mobility, and this resulted in tensions in relations with local populations. Since local businesses, employment, and the transportation of commodities were severely constrained—or entirely brought to a halt for some periods—the imposition of "taxes" and extortion by rebel groups were

curtailed. According to one Nagaland-based analyst, for example, extortion activities during the lockdown period had fallen to approximately 20 percent of their pre-lockdown levels given the closure of major businesses (*Hasnat* 2020; *Sharma* 2020). Indeed, in some cases, this contraction in funding forced armed groups to conserve resources and draw on their pre-existing civilian support base for assistance. In May 2020, for example, a local civil society body in Manipur distributed food, farming tools, and seeds to assist local NSCN-IM militants attempting to sustain themselves through farming (*New Indian Express* 2020), which nonetheless demonstrates the endurance of popular support in the NSCN-IM's areas of influence.

When lockdown restrictions began to ease in Nagaland in June 2020, a prompt return to pre-lockdown extortion levels sparked anger from civil society bodies in the state's commercial capital of Dimapur, given the continued economic precarity of the city's residents and businesses (*Hasnat* 2020). Under pressure from both the state governor and the civilian population, the NSCN-IM was forced to publicly declare reductions in taxation (*The Hindu* 2020b). Amid growing pressure from the Governor, the Nagaland State Police expanded its anti-extortion policing operation, once limited to the main cities, to every district in Nagaland. Thus, COVID-19 has constrained rebel taxation, and attempts to reinstate it have increasingly threatened to alienate local populations. This has, in turn, created clear opportunities for the state and national government to apply renewed pressure on armed group extortion networks (*Singh* 2020). That being said, the main Naga factions have largely resumed their taxation activities; in June 2021, traders in Nagaland voiced their frustrations with price inflation owing to armed group taxation, suggesting that patterns of extortion had stabilized (*Eastern Mirror Nagaland* 2021).

State Response

There were reports that state counterinsurgency agencies exploited the lockdown period to degrade smaller anti-talk rebel groups in particular. In Assam, for instance, police forces used the height of the lockdown period as cover for raids into former National Democratic Front of Bodoland-Saoraigwra camps to secure abandoned explosives and firearms and prevent them from falling into the hands of the small anti-talk splinter faction that emerged following the 2020 Bodo Accord, in doing so constraining any prospect of *rebel armed activity* from these groups. Police also used the disruption of the lockdown period to increase their existing pressure on

smaller armed groups such as the Dimas National Liberation Army (DNLA), the PDCK (Sharma 2020), and the National Liberation Front of Bodoland (NLFB), with the latter two surrendering in 2021. Indeed, interviewed security officials noted that alongside these operations, state agencies sent out feelers assuring that rebels would not face punitive action on surrender, demonstrating the ways state actors exploited the pandemic to apply further pressure on already weakening armed groups.

Furthermore, Indian military and paramilitary forces have integrated the COVID-19 response into their ongoing efforts to win the support of the population (named “Operation Sadbhavana”) in outlying areas, setting up vaccination centers, and offering COVID-19 best practices guidance in medical camps (E-Pao! 2021; *Northeast India* 24 2021; *The New Indian Express* 2021). Although it is unclear how far these operations resonate with local populations who have historically suffered at the hands of the military, the absence of widespread efforts by Naga armed groups to reach out to the population and be seen to be doing so reflects the difficulties faced by even the most powerful groups in this subregion of India.

More broadly, available data suggest that the state governments of the Northeast responded reasonably well to the pandemic (WHO 2020; Deb 2020, 2021). This is measured in terms of addressing the medical crisis, enforcing national- and then state-level lockdowns, constructing state quarantine and care centers to augment existing hospital capacity, and through increases in testing capacity (Chakrabarti 2020). Moreover, the existing Public Distribution System, which already plays a role in alleviating food insecurity in the Northeast (Maity 2020), was supplemented in a bid to alleviate the more immediate impacts of food insecurity emerging from the crisis (Kumar Nath 2020; *The Financial Express* 2020). State governments in the Northeast have faced serious challenges in their responses to COVID-19, particularly in ensuring adequate coverage of the population in the distribution of rations to vulnerable populations, but local sources suggest that they have performed effectively.⁷ For example, when cases rose in May 2021 in the tea gardens of Assam, a population already suffering disproportionately from malnutrition, tuberculosis, and hypertension, the state government banned home isolation and increased the accessibility of quarantine, testing, and vaccination facilities (Deb 2021).

In some cases, these state-level COVID responses have presented opportunities for the state to capitalize and rehabilitate its image vis-à-vis disaffected segments of the population. Assam provides an illustra-

tion of this, as a state that had recently experienced anti-government instability immediately prior to the impact of COVID-19. Five people were killed in December 2019 during protests against the central government’s passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, which allows citizenship to be granted to religious minorities from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The act was perceived to contradict key terms of the 1985 Assam Accord, which related to immigration and had been passed in response to the Assam Movement of the 1980s (Waterman 2020, 259). As protests escalated and Assamese nationalist sentiments resurfaced during 2019, reports emerged that ULFA-I had been given a new “lease of life” and had increased its recruitment by capitalizing on anti-government sentiment in the midst of the protests (Deka, State of Assam, and Union of India 2020). The Assam state’s response to the COVID-19 crisis appeared to offset some of these criticisms, giving Health Minister-turned Chief Minister and senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) politician Himanta Biswa Sarma the opportunity to rehabilitate himself in the public image (Das 2020). In this sense, in the longer-term battle for popular support, the state has arguably capitalized on key perception management opportunities during the crisis in ways that both the anti-talks and pro-talks clusters of armed groups have been unable to.

Conclusions, Scope Conditions, and Implications

The case of Northeast India challenges existing research suggesting that COVID-19 has tended to favor rebel organizations and created new opportunities to deepen rebel governance structures (Furlan 2020b). By bringing a case characterized by general (if varied) rebel weakness and low, overlapping degrees of territorial control into conversation with the wider literature on COVID-19 and rebel governance—which has focused on responses by powerful armed groups with firmer territorial control—we are able to conclude that not all rebels have been better placed to exploit the pandemic than their state adversaries. The picture presented by the illustrative evidence from Northeast India, as table 4 indicates, is one of generally curtailed activity and traction, across each of the dimensions of *rebel armed activity*, *popular support and recruitment*, and *rebel governance*, during the early phases of the pandemic in 2020. During this period, armed groups reined in their operations, restricted their own movements to prevent the spread of the virus, and were largely restricted to localized governance interventions and public statements linking to the pandemic in a bid to mobilize popular support.

⁷ Interview/survey respondents.

Table 4. COVID-19 mechanisms and armed groups in Northeast India

Group	Dimensions of rebel activity		
	Rebel armed activity	Popular support and recruitment	Rebel governance
Ceasefire groups in Nagaland/Manipur: NSCN-IM, NSCN-R, UKLF	– Temporary reduction (2020)	+ Opportunity to bolster conflict narratives by linking COVID-19 spread to Army deployments	– Temporary reduction of taxation (2020 lockdowns) – Post-lockdown taxation generates resistance from local populations and state actors, forcing reduction in tax rates + Limited direct interventions, often coordinated with local civil society and/or local state quarantine centers + Public health advice in broad support of government/global health initiatives, voicing support for (and applying pressure on) government public health servants
ULFA-I	– Reduction (unilateral ceasefire)	+ Opportunity to bolster conflict narratives by linking COVID-19 spread to Army deployments + Unilateral COVID-19 ceasefire + Recruitment drive, particularly since ceasefire	N/A—no rebel governance activity
Manipur Valley-based insurgent groups	– Reduction of grenade attacks in Imphal Valley – Temporary dampening of state-rebel clashes (2020–21) + Resurgence of armed activities (2021–2022)	No observed effect	– Reduction of minimalist, moral policing activities
Karbi and Bodo armed factions in Assam	– State-initiated pressure	No observed effect	N/A—no rebel governance activity

As the initial phase of sharp lockdowns ended, the varied impact on different armed groups became clearer. While Manipur’s Valley-based insurgent groups were relatively well positioned to resume armed activities after the initial lockdown shocks, ULFA-I declared a tactical “COVID-19” ceasefire and focused on recuperating losses incurred in 2019. Groups returning to rebel governance activities after state-imposed lockdowns continued with minimalist, localized responses to COVID-19, but were forced to adapt to initial civilian resistance to taxation practices before these patterns once again stabilized. However, none of these groups were able to make major gains on any of the three dimensions of activity. In fact,

state forces were able to capitalize on a number of opportunities more effectively, such as degrading smaller armed groups in Assam and being seen to respond to COVID-19 in a generally effective manner.

In Northeast India, then, COVID-19 at least temporarily worked to the advantage of the state, challenging existing research suggesting that COVID-19 has tended to favor rebel organizations and create new opportunities to deepen rebel governance (Furlan 2020b). Far from creating opportunities for rebels to capitalize on state inefficiencies through renewed violence or filling governance gaps, the pandemic created opportunities for the state to demonstrate its superior material capacity and abil-

ity to respond to COVID. This was in contrast to rebel protagonists, whose *raison d'être* and appeal to legitimacy were brought into doubt and whose activities were at least temporarily suppressed. This reaffirms existing insights into the role of public service delivery and the provision of human security as an important counterinsurgency tactic, particularly in exploiting key opportunities to drive a wedge between rebels and their constituent communities.

While this evidence challenges the idea of rebels being inherently well positioned to exploit pandemic conditions, there are important scope conditions that shape the generalizability of the observations we draw from the illustrative evidence presented here. First, the Northeast India case is characterized by rebel groups exercising overlapping, limited, or altogether nonexistent forms of territorial control. For this reason, many of the state's counterinsurgency advantages may be unique to cases where the state has a particularly strong presence. In cases where rebel groups exercise enough territorial control to keep state forces out, or indeed maintain a more favorable balance of power vis-à-vis the state (e.g., in the case of Hezbollah), such advantages are unlikely to exist. Indeed, the Taliban, Hamas, and United Wa State Army controlled territory at the onset of the pandemic in a way that Northeast India-based rebel groups simply did not. This likely shaped their ability to act as a "substitute state" (Gutiérrez 2022, 27), decisively filling gaps left by a retreating or indeed nonexistent state. In Northeast India, on the other hand, the state, while far from omnipresent, has spent decades extending its reach into outlying areas, meaning that even the strongest rebel governance structures in Northeast India are overlapping and enmeshed with state governance. While Hezbollah rebel governance structures are interwoven with those of the state, not dissimilar to groups such as the NSCN-IM in Northeast India, Hezbollah's governance structures are far more expansive and span multiple spheres (including health service provision), whereas the NSCN-IM's role in service provision is far more limited, more akin to a form of "armed advocacy" (Gutiérrez 2022, 27). As a result, the impacts on rebel governance observed here could be brought into comparison with other cases of rebel governance as "armed advocacy" in the absence of defined territorial control. Further research should therefore theorize degrees of territorial control and map responses to COVID-19 onto these.

Second, while Northeast India displays considerable within-case variation in terms of rebel operational circumstances, the effect of COVID-19 on armed groups in Northeast India likely reflects the already generally weak position of insurgents in this part of India, com-

pared to cases where rebels were able to decisively respond to the pandemic. In Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban entered the pandemic with high levels of local support and operational and governance capabilities, and were therefore able to respond decisively through governance interventions while launching a renewed offensive in 2021. By the time the pandemic hit Northeast India, however, over two decades of drawn-out peace processes had eroded the cohesion of many armed groups (Hanson 2019), while anti-talk factions have been increasingly isolated by counterinsurgency operations, including *Tatmadaw* operations that disrupted rebel camp networks within Myanmar in 2019. As a result, while few groups were able to make decisive gains around any of the three dimensions of activity, this experience is only likely to be reflected in cases with similar pre-pandemic wartime contexts of rebel decline.

The illustrative evidence—bounded by these important scope conditions—nonetheless tells us that context matters when analyzing the impact of COVID-19 on armed groups. An armed group's pre-existing position, in terms of its territorial control, size, strategy, relations with the state, and operational capabilities, can shape how it encounters and experiences the pandemic. In Northeast India, strategic differences exposed armed groups to different opportunities and threats; larger groups maintaining rebel governance structures were presented with opportunities to make limited governance interventions, but also faced challenges in re-establishing post-lockdown taxation practices. Differences in operational circumstances and group strength shaped whether anti-talk groups sharing similar strategies—such as the Manipur Valley-based insurgent groups, ULFA-I and Bodo, Karbi and Dimas groups in Assam—renewed offensives against state forces, collapsed under security forces offensives, or declared humanitarian COVID-19 ceasefires. In multiactor conflicts with similar contexts, while expecting the same broad overall constraints, we should therefore expect to see similar within-case variations based on the circumstances and strategies of different armed groups.

Future research, rather than asking whether rebels are broadly better placed than states to capitalize on stochastic shocks such as pandemics, can leverage the illustrative evidence presented here to inform careful comparisons of armed groups' pre-existing positions, and the pandemic's impact on rebel activity, across conflicts. Such comparative work should code and compare not only armed groups' strength, strategy, relations with the state, and operational circumstances, but also variations less apparent in this study, such as territorial control. Doing so will allow for generalizable insights

into the impact of COVID-19 on rebel activity beyond cases of limited rebel territorial control and general rebel weakness.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Journal of Global Security Studies* data archive.

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