

Deciphering The Border Lives: A Study On The Problems Of The Indo-Bangla Borderlands In Assam

Ms. Sarada Jyoti Singha^{1*}, Dr. Biswabijoy Bhattacharjee²

¹*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Assam University, Silchar.

Email: saradajyotisingha7@gmail.com

²Assistant Teacher, Director of Elementary Education, Government of Assam.

Email: bhattbiswa22@gmail.com

***Corresponding Author:** Ms. Sarada Jyoti Singha

*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Assam University, Silchar.

Email: saradajyotisingha7@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Borders are the prime concern for all the states to safeguard their domain and there are countless shreds of evidence where the states developed their border fencing to guarantee territorial protection and ensure security to its citizens in all possible ways. However, it is mainly due to the existence of an isolated condition of borderland that the residents living in those areas feel deprived and marginalized. The problems of borderland are huge in India and particularly in the context of Assam situation is grimmer. Indeed, the citizens who are residing in the border areas of the state are very important stakeholders towards a secure and safe nation and, therefore, the improvement of their living standard and basic facilities is significant. Thus, it is urgently required to understand the ground realities of the borderlands and the problems that people are facing in the border areas of the state. The data for the present study has been collected from secondary sources. The study observed that the border infrastructure in the state of Assam is in dismal condition and it is required to be developed at the earliest. Also, border welfare schemes are required to be formulated to meet the needs of the border areas of the state.

Key words: Border, Borderland, Welfare, Infrastructure, Policy

Introduction:

The state is regarded as the most significant and remarkable political foundation of the world as it is the sole defender of its compatriots. The impact of the state is enormous upon its citizens as it is required to supervise and regulate internal order, external defense, social welfare, education, economic welfare, etc. To be precise, being an autonomous entity, the state even regulates private space and covers the lives of all those living within its borders. For the existence of a state, it needs to possess territory, i.e. demarcated boundary based on which it will exercise sovereignty and will promote and sustain its relationship with other states.

For ages, states are engaged in expanding their borders as well as defending them by constructing different types of fortifications, walls, etc. to secure their people from external aggression and its shreds of evidence can be traced from the states like China, Britain, Denmark, Central America, Vietnam, etc. Although the notion of borders began to take shape in the mid-17th century, mainly with the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648, it marked a significant stride towards the development of the modern nation-state. These treaties, which introduced the concepts of nationalism and self-determination in Western Europe, also played a pivotal role in establishing the borders of nations like England, Germany, France, Sweden, Poland, Spain, and Turkey. Furthermore, these agreements spurred the adoption of cartography for defining the territorial limits of each nation-state. However, with time the Westphalian model of the state became dysfunctional but its very foundation influenced the other states through the means of colonialism (Arora, 2018). Gradually, the idea of demarcating borders to define specific territories gained prominence across the international community, becoming an indispensable hallmark of statehood. In contemporary times, borders have become a paramount concern for states, serving as a means to safeguard their domains. Countless instances demonstrate how states have employed various methods, including border fencing and boundary development, to ensure territorial integrity and protect their citizens from potential threats.

Gradually, the idea of the demarcation of the border, i.e. a definite territory got recognition across the states and became one of the essential characteristics of statehood. Today, borders became the prime concern for all the states to safeguard their domain and there are countless shreds of evidence where the states developed their border fencing/boundaries to guarantee territorial protection and ensure security for their citizens in all possible ways. It deserves mention here that among the existing border issues, which have captured global attention include the US-Mexico border, the Israeli-Palestinian boundaries encompassing the Israel-Gaza Strip and Israel-West Bank divisions, the Kuwait-Iran border, the

Singapore-Malaysia border, and India's borders with China, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Regardless of the specific approaches to border fortification, the underlying objective remains consistent: preventing illicit movement of goods and people while upholding the sovereignty of the state. Due to their strategic significance, borders have not only captivated the interest of statesmen but have also been a subject of scholarly scrutiny.

However, the concept of a border is intricately connected to the notion of a Borderland, which refers to distinct territorial and social zones situated between two states. According to Van Schendel, a Borderland denotes an area or region where an international boundary exists, and its society possesses a distinct social and cultural structure that extends on both sides of that dividing line (Van Schendel, 2002). Parker's definition characterizes a borderland as a geographical region encompassing political and cultural entities, where various factors like political dynamics, geography, culture, demographics, and economics contribute to the creation of borders or frontiers. James Cusick expands this idea by describing borderlands as regions not only politically and judicially linked to a specific nation or province but also significantly influenced by neighboring regions in economic, demographic, and cultural aspects. Scholars like Oscar Martinez have introduced four models for understanding borderlands: a) Alienated borderlands: These are regions where regular interactions across borders are absent because of the prevailing mistrust and animosity between sovereign states; b) Coexistent borderlands: Refers to regions where minimal cross-border contact occurs despite existing state hostility; c) Interdependent borderlands: Characterized by symbolic connections and the flow of individuals and economic resources across the border; d) Integrated borderlands: Encompassing seamless movement of goods and humans between states, aimed at facilitating trade and people's mobility (Martinez, 1994).

The Border is also related to the idea of a soft border (border without demarcation) and a hard border (demarcated border). The former has been in existence for centuries and people were moving across the regions without any barriers. There was no demarcated border and the situation was completely flexible, while the latter is of a recent origin caused mainly due to population pressure on land, scarcity of resources, competition within societies, and territorial security. Here, states emphasized border fencing, restricting the lives of the border dwellers, security system, limiting cross-border interaction. However, restrictions sometimes are area-specific also. Even from the statist perspective also, constructing a hard border is important as it not only protects the nation-states but also the citizens residing on the borderline. It is true that political borders are often hard and controlled but when it comes to the question of trans-border relations from economic perspective borders need to be formal and soft. The fact is that no country is abundant in resources and, therefore, it requires continuing the import-export process for its own sustenance. This categorized borders as extremely permissible (soft) and also extremely non-permissible (hard). However, many a time due to geographical proximity, remoteness and marginalization the informal trans-border relation also develops and sustains. Whatever may be the cause of the formation of the border, states put restrictions on the enjoyment of freedom of the people living in those areas. One of the noted scholars Haselberger highlighted that borders can be thin and thick. The former relates to the issue of putting minimum restrictions, while the latter relates to the issue of tough restrictions and attached it to conflictual zones (Hasan, 2018). It involves a distinctive form influence exerted by the state, observable to the residents of those regions. However, Van Schendel highlighted the presence of existence of covert actions involving border crossings, such as illicit trading and unauthorized immigration. These actions form a counteractive border impact against the state's attempts at surveillance, patrolling, and territorial control (Gohain, 2015). This indicates that other than extending security functions borders have also been viewed based on chronic militarization and conflictual interests. It can be noticed in case all nation-states that the national border is always get protected by law and forces and thus borderlands are very often get secured and militarized (Singh, 2016).

Michel Baud and Willem Van Schendel further classify borderlands into three types: a) Border heartlands: areas where social networks are primarily influenced and controlled by the presence of the border, which is crucial for their survival. b) Intermediate borderlands: regions with varying levels of influence from the border, ranging from moderate to weak. c) Outer borderlands: denoting areas where border effects are present under specific conditions. Borderlands are often delineated as socio-spatially distinct zones (Piliavsky, 2013), with their own unique entities, situated on the periphery of the nation. The isolated nature of borderlands often leads to feelings of deprivation and marginalization among their inhabitants. Consequently, there's a need to address the issues faced by borderland areas and formulate policies that foster their inclusive development.

It is true that the exploration of borders as well as borderlands always captivated the interest of scholars worldwide. Nevertheless, its study in South Asia and specifically in India is relatively scanty. The problems of borderland are huge in India and particularly in Assam it is causing serious challenges before the state administration to deal with the border areas. With this perspective in view, the current study aims to grasp the ground realities in the international border areas of Assam. This study explores the challenges and concerns pertinent to the Indo-Bangla borderlands in Assam, drawing on secondary sources for information. The study delves into relevant articles on borders from various journals and books concerning Assam. Through the analysis of these sources, the study aims to draw meaningful conclusions about the Indo-Bangla borderland issues and concerns in the region.

Literature Review:

The studies of borders and borderlands have gained importance and momentum all over the world. In India also scholars have taken up studies pertaining to the borderland and the inhabitants living in those areas. Scholars like Ranabir Samaddar (1999) tried to thoroughly study the cross-border relationship between India and Bangladesh. His study focused on the situation of hardship and the movement of people to overcome adversity. He argued that the reasons for the migration of people from one place to another are largely responsible for historical, economic, and geographical factors also. He made a critical analysis of the issue of national security and the nation-state in post-colonial South Asia. Sajoy Hazarika's (2000) analysis of border crossings and movement of people from East Bengal to Assam throw important lights on the socio-economic and political factors that have contributed to this phenomenon. His research illuminates the difficulties experienced by the people living in the border district of Dhubri (Assam). His study highlights that the lack of essential infrastructure such as roads, schools, and hospitals forces people to live in abysmal condition. Along with this, the combination of poverty and unemployment has pushed many people to move to different regions of the country in search of better livelihood. The study also analyzes the complex historical, political, and economic factors that contributed to the shifting of people from East Bengal to the state of Assam. He further observes that the British colonial policy that encouraged the migration of East Bengal people to Assam in order to establish tea plantations had a major impact on the demography of the state. The study also discusses various reports, judgments, and procedures related to the issue of migration in the context of Assam. It highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing the issue of migration, including the need for better border management and the need to address the root causes of migration through socio-economic development programmes. Sreeradha Datta (2003) examined the cases relating to the border dispute, qualms, and mistrust that arouse due to an extensive land border spanning 4,096 km and a maritime border of 180 km. She observed that the reason for the existing border dispute has its roots in drawing the imaginary line by Sir Cyril Radcliffe. Without taking the ground realities in view border line was demarcated, which has even divided one village into two separate nations. There are also un-demarcated land border exists in three states, viz., Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal. In the case of Assam, the Government of India demanded using the original Cadestral map of 1915-16 of Dhumabari to be the source for demarcation, while Bangladesh was urged for Theodolite Traverse Data to be the ground for demarcation and it claimed for three villages and two for India. In the case of West Bengal, both States decided to make Sui River to be the source of demarcation. But India argued in favour of the current flow of a river, while Bangladesh was arguing for an earlier flow that would provide them Daikhata area. In Tripura, the disagreement between the two states prevails because both are to give up small portions of land which is at their disposal. Besides, Bangladesh is not ready to accept the existing river course as the boundary line. The author has further explained the issue concerning the Indira-Mujib agreement, 1974, and stated that until the border demarcation is completed, the Agreement wouldn't be ratified by the Indian Parliament. Along with the unresolved boundary issue, the author also highlighted three other interrelated disputes, such as enclaves, adverse possessions, and the existence of some villages nearer to the Indo-Bangla border. The author also examined two major problems resulting from the existing porous border – illegal migration with a reference to the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act and deportation, and the problem of insurgency. It is observed by the author that the bilateral agreements between the two countries allow the cases of repatriation of their respective nationals under certain conditions. But it has always been a matter of concern for Bangladesh and it can be evident from the wide coverage given by the newspapers of Bangladesh that the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) prohibited the attempt of the Border Security Forces (BSF) to 'push in' the people in their state. The problem between the two countries is many, but the dearth of understanding aggravates the problem further and hampers bilateral relations. What is required is to put up trust and continue the dialogue and respect each other's national interest. W.V. Schendel (2005) thoroughly studied the border issues relating to India and Bangladesh. He studied extensively certain critical issues pertaining to the borderlands such as informal trans-border activities, illegal migration, human trafficking, and problems of security forces and their implications on the whole system, etc. The issue of bifurcation of areas by the Bengal Boundary Commission based on religion and its subsequent impact on the lives of the people was critically dealt with by the author. However, the real focus on the lives of the borderlands was not exactly covered by the author and instead highlighted more on the concept of transnationality.

Prasanta Sahoo (2009) in his study elaborated - a) policies, approaches, and strategies utilized for managing Indo-Bangladesh border and ensuring national security; b) forms, reasons, and extents of cross-border migration from Bangladesh to India; c) the main causes behind the violent conflicts and security problems causing threat India's national security; d) the development of border infrastructure; e) the socio-cultural-economic and other benefits of the openness of Indo-Bangladesh border; f) the possible approaches and efficient strategies for border management. The author formulated an exhaustive methodology to find out the relevant information for the aforementioned objectives. A theoretical, historical, descriptive, and analytical case study design was employed in the study. It covered both primary and secondary sources of data, which includes government documents, original records pertaining to the partition (confidential and classified letters and reports of British Indian officials), and research studies of non-governmental institutions. The study covered people of three age groups – above 75 years, between 50 and 75 years, and between 18

and 26 years to understand the border-related issues from three different generations. The author made a thorough and historical examination of the inception and characteristics of the border, conflicts over the border, and the administration of border affairs. He observed that unscientific division of the country through the 'Redcliffe Award' was mainly responsible for the peculiar situation between India and its neighbouring countries. He also critically evaluated the present policies and approaches of both India and Bangladesh in terms of border management concerning force, tools, and technology used for safeguarding the national security interests of India. The study tried to find out the reasons for the growth of several Madrasa education institutions in border areas of Bangladesh. Issues relating to the development of border infrastructure and the benefits of openness of borders and legalized border trade are also examined by the author. He finally concluded that the conventional policies formulated by India to manage borders are probed as a failure, though not fully. It is proved that the Government had either ignored or strategically left underdeveloped the border areas, which in turn contributed to the progress of subversive movements and made the task of border management difficult. Further, it is stated that the economic, social and cultural relations as well as the people to people contact is a means to lessen the tensions associated with the border and also it can smoothen the task of border management. Another outstanding contribution to the issue of borderlands was the write-up of Paula Banerjee (2010), which clearly outlined the significant influence of borders on the borderlanders. The study covered the Northeastern region and Jammu and Kashmir of India highlighting the situation of human trafficking, migrant women, and women peace campaigners. It depicted the miseries of the inhabitants residing in the border areas which are the outcome of conflicts and rigorous laws prevalent in the border regions. Similarly, Prakash & Menon (2011) described the serious issues of the fenced-out families in the Karimganj region of Assam and highlighted how the border fencing seriously affected the existence of the populace and their vulnerability towards international conflicts. They examined the aloofness of the government to embrace any essential means to resolve the issues. Jagrup S. Sekhon (2014) studied the issues relating to the farmers having land across the border fence. He explored the consequence of making border fencing, which has pushed the farmers of the border area into a miserable and impoverished condition. Thus, the existing literature studied in different regions of the country highlighted mainly the problems of border fencing and its consequences on the socio-economic life of the people. Hasan (2018) attempted to investigate the socio-economic status of the inhabitants living in immediate vicinity of the Indo-Bangladesh border in the Dhubri district of Assam. His focus was on analyzing the connection between the state and its citizens living in the border regions. In addition, the focus of the study was also on the aspect of geographical location which determines the societal avenues. To undertake the study, the author conducted an empirical investigation. A total of five villages – Ramraikuti, Binnyachara, Ghewmari, Kalairga, and College Nagar – were purposively selected from the development block adjacent to the border areas. Finally, 178 respondents were selected for interaction from the five villages. Also, interviews with village headmen, panchayat officials, government professionals, and school teachers were conducted to understand in detail the ground realities of the villages. A structured interview schedule with both open and close-ended questions was used at the time of interaction. Along with the primary data, the author collected relevant information from secondary sources also. The author divided the entire research work into six chapters covering all the issues under question examined the various theories associated with border and borderland studies like hard and soft border, socio-spatial theory, elitist theory, core and periphery, and body politics. It is stated that borders are gradually becoming more and more restrictive porous to fenced, informal to formal, civil to militarized, etc. and it has become an important concern for the security of the nation. The author examined the role of the people in borderland activities. He observed that though border roads are constructed for security reasons villages located near the fencing are not able to freely use the road. There is a feeling that the border has become a political imposition. Due to demographic resemblances in terms of language, dress code, food habits, etc, it is difficult to assess the intensity of the problems like migration, smuggling, and transborder activism. In terms of infrastructure, the borderlands of Dhubri are far behind. The borderlanders are unorganized and the worst sufferers are women and children. The study observed that cases of informal trade in the border areas increased in the post-fencing period. However, the borderlanders are in an advantageous position compared to their counterparts with their incorporation in the Indian side. Tripathi and Chaturvedi (2019) examined wide range of border issues related to territorial disputes, security concerns, migration, and cultural exchanges. They have studied the political and historical context of South Asian boundaries, revealing an intricate link with neighbouring countries. They claim that the creation of borders has played a vital role in shaping South Asia's identity and influence on regional politics, economic life as well as its culture. They have also looked at the impact of globalisation on South Asia's borders, including new security challenges, a rise in transnationalism, as well as efforts to expand regional trade and cooperation. Consideration is also given to the implications of these changes for the region's future, with a view to more regional collaboration and integration. Shahriar (2021) conducted a thorough research study and categorized border issues between Bangladesh and India into a number of crucial matters such as border enclaves, unauthorized migration, border trade, fencing activities, border killings, etc. The author, at first, tried to explore the issues relating to the enclaves, which were created in the post-partition phase. There was a total of 198 border enclaves existed, situated within the territorial jurisdiction of both India and Bangladesh. This means that there were Indian enclaves within Bangladesh and vice versa. It is estimated that approximately 55,000 individuals were believed to reside in these enclaves, experiencing isolation from their respective nation-states for over seven decades. It was in 2015 that both Governments decided to resolve the issue of enclaves and finally exchanges were completed. Over the period both countries fostered collaborative

efforts in addressing social, economic as well as security issues across their borders. To effectively address vulnerable areas and ensure mutual border surveillance, the implementation of a synchronized Border Management Plan is deemed necessary. The author stated that the question of illegal migration is always a matter of debate and discussion and is always subject to political as well as rhetorical gains, while migrants face severe hardships and become victims of exploitation by both host countries and home agencies. In terms of cross-border trade, the author observed that smuggling particularly cattle smuggling has emerged as an important economic activity in the Indo-Bangladesh border. To reduce various informal activities, there was a Memorandum of Understanding signed to set up markets (haats) on the northern and eastern borders once each week to facilitate the selling of local commodities by the people living on either side of the border. It is decided to set up 'border haats' in 70 locations in five different border states, out of which four haats were proposed each for Assam and Mizoram, five for Tripura, 15 for the India-Myanmar border, and 35 for West Bengal. However, the major problem for such huts was the shortage of electricity and electrical connectivity. Further, the author stated that the border fencing project of India is a major irritant between the two countries. He observed that the border fencing is not as per the international zero line and cuts through essential public facilities like farmland, schools, temples, and mosques. The author also referred to the case of border killings and stated that violation of human rights is a huge concern for Bangladesh-India borderlands and this is due to the adoption of a policy of 'shoot-to-kill' by the Government of India against the unauthorized Bangladeshi migrants. His study revealed that a total of 1236 Bangladeshi citizens were killed at the Indo-Bangla border from 2000 to 2020. The author was highly critical of the border policies adopted by the Government of India, while did not elaborate on the issues about the threat and integrity of India. The study finally observed that there is a clear deficit of trust and political will exist among the neighbouring countries of the South Asian region in terms of cross-border issues specifically political and security issues. This is the main reason for the decline of trade promotion, institutional collaboration, and greater mobility of the masses.

The existing body of knowledge primarily discussed the challenges associated with border control and their impact on the social, economic, and political aspects of communities living in the border areas. It also brought attention to a range of concerns related to the border regions between India and Bangladesh. Through an examination of the existing literature on the Indo-Bangladesh border, the following conclusions have been derived.

Indo-Bangla Borderland in Assam: Issues and Problems:

Assam's boundary with Bangladesh extends over a distance of 267.5 km. Out of this, Dhubri and South Salmara Manekachar district cover 141.9 km, while the remaining 125.6 km is shared by two other districts in South Assam, namely Cachar (27.3 km) and Karimganj (98.3 km). Those dwelling in Assam's borderland regions, particularly within the Indo-Bangladesh border areas, are experiencing the characteristics of peripherality. Residents in these areas play a pivotal role as important stakeholders in maintaining a secure and protected border. Therefore, enhancing their living conditions and providing essential amenities holds significance in ensuring border security.

The state of Assam and its territorial limits have consistently been a focal point of contention, leading to a complex political landscape. Over time, the political demarcations of Assam have undergone alterations and restructuring, navigating phases of resolution through political agreements. Importantly, the shared border between India and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) has been a locus of significant alteration and perpetual disagreement. The region, once designated as a corridor for humanitarian purposes, has transformed into a breeding ground for various subversive elements against the nation. The substantial influx of forced migrants into India, particularly in Assam, necessitated the implementation of stringent regulations. As a result, the border that separates India and Bangladesh has evolved into a symbol representing crucial security parameters.

Observations reveal that individuals residing in Assam's borderlands, particularly in the southern areas such as Cachar and Karimganj, encountered significant challenges during the construction of border fencing. Unfortunately, they were excluded from consultation, and the entire fencing project was executed without their awareness. Moreover, the development of roads required land acquisition from local residents, with promises of these roads benefiting both the general populace and the Border Security Forces (BSF). Contrary to these assurances, the constructed roads have primarily been utilized exclusively by the BSF, while the local inhabitants are prohibited from accessing them. The fencing initiative was executed with strict measures, yielding multifaceted consequences for the population. As a result, a considerable number of individuals opted to establish new residences beyond the confines of the border fencing. Simultaneously, some individuals were compelled to relocate to alternative regions. Regrettably, the state administration displayed minimal interest in aiding households affected by the fencing project. Government officials appeared disinclined to initiate rehabilitation efforts, possibly due to their engagement in unethical activities. This lack of concern on the part of government authorities exacerbated the hardships endured by the people. It is observed that the matter of rehabilitation has notably gone unaddressed, and the concerns of those residing in the border regions have been consistently disregarded. Decisions and strategies have been imposed from higher authorities without engaging the stakeholders in a consultation process. The current focus of the state primarily revolves around security and territorial safeguarding, which has led to the oversight of fundamental citizen rights. Throughout the study, it has been evident that

the security dimension exerts a substantial influence on the socio-economic aspects of the local populace. Everyday activities such as arranging marriages, providing education for children, and accessing healthcare facilities have turned into formidable challenges for individuals living in the border areas. One important observation is the shortage of basic infrastructure within schools, including essentials like clean drinking water, gender-segregated restrooms, and proper study amenities. These inadequacies are particularly pronounced in the borderland regions, contributing to diminished school enrollment rates. The matter of rehabilitation has been consistently overlooked, with the concerns of borderland residents left unheard.

It is observed that the socio-economic profile of the people living in the border areas of Assam is low and they are deprived of basic amenities. To meet such challenges the Government has launched one centrally sponsored scheme i.e. Border Area Development Programme (BADP). The central focus of the Programme is to cater to the distinct developmental requirements of individuals residing in remote regions near international borders. The aim is to elevate the border areas by facilitating all-encompassing infrastructure advancement through a cooperative strategy that involves Central, State, BADP, and local schemes. However, research highlights the absence of a systematic evaluation of ongoing schemes to gauge their influence on public well-being. Moreover, the uneven distribution of grants within particular centrally sponsored initiatives has led to an unequal allocation of benefits, ultimately depriving the borderland areas in Assam of the advantages of these endeavors. The primary objective of the BADP revolves around addressing the unique developmental needs of those inhabiting remote regions in proximity to international borders. The intention is to enhance the border areas by ensuring comprehensive infrastructure development through a collaborative approach involving Central, State, BADP, and local schemes. However, studies note that an organized assessment of existing schemes to measure their impact on public welfare has been lacking. Furthermore, the allocation of grants under specific centrally sponsored schemes has been inconsistent, resulting in the deprivation of benefits from these initiatives for the borderland areas in Assam.

Conclusion:

Research findings underscore the awful state of border infrastructure in Assam, necessitating urgent development efforts. Moreover, there is a compelling need to design and implement various welfare schemes tailored to address the specific needs of Assam's borderlands. The situation is nuanced and distinct to each region, making a standardized policy unsuitable for meeting the diverse requirements of the population. To address these challenges, active involvement of civil society, particularly non-governmental organisations (NGOs), is crucial. Their engagement in dialogues, decision-making processes, and policy implementation, with a focus on the welfare of borderland inhabitants, is paramount. Furthermore, an immediate and imperative necessity emerges for all-encompassing research specifically centres on borderlands. Such a comprehensive exploration would cast a revealing light on the unique attributes and intricacies that define these border regions. This scholarly inquiry holds the potential to captivate the attention not only of scholars across various academic disciplines but also of policymakers who are vested in formulating strategies that are well-informed and responsive to the intricate challenges posed by these borderlands.

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