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Walls in the Era of Bridges: The Many Costs of Fencing the India-Myanmar Border

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On 6 February 2024, India's Home Minister, Amit Shah, announced that the Union government had decided to fence the 1,643 km-long India-Myanmar border and construct a patrol track along it to "facilitate better surveillance". He also noted that 10km of the border in Manipur had already been fenced and referred to ongoing work on a pilot project to fence one km each in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh with a "Hybrid Surveillance System (HSS)" (Singh 2024).

Two days later, Shah announced that the government was immediately suspending the Free Movement Regime (FMR) along the India-Myanmar border. Formalised bilaterally by India and Myanmar in 2018, the FMR is a visa-free mobility regime that allows local communities living along both sides of the border to travel back and forth across a 16km zone on each side.

Why does the Indian government suddenly want to fence the India-Myanmar border? Is it even a good idea?

Manipur-centric decision

New Delhi's decision to fence the India-Myanmar border comes amid an intense ethnic conflict between the majority Meitei and tribal Kuki-Zo communities in Manipur over issues of identity, resource allocation, and political representation. Since the conflagration began in May, the Chief Minister of Manipur, N Biren Singh, who is a Meitei himself and belongs to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has repeatedly called on the central government to fence the border.

He called for it just a month before Shah's announcement (Choudhury 2024). In 2021, even before the conflict began, Singh had requested the Centre to fence the border – once in January (Samom 2021) and then again in November (*The Times of India* 2021), days after Manipuri and Naga militants based in western Myanmar staged a deadly ambush on an Assam Rifles convoy near the border in Churachandpur district.

More recently, in September, Singh met senior officials of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), which is in charge of fencing India's international borders, to discuss proposed fencing of a 70km stretch of the Manipur-Myanmar border. At that time, Singh claimed that fencing it was necessary to prevent "illegal immigration" and "drugs smuggling" (@NBirenSingh 2023).

The Manipur government's insistence on a hard border is directly linked to an overwhelming belief among Meitei civil society groups that the unfenced border allows

Kuki-Zo interlopers from Myanmar to enter Manipur and indulge in inimical activities, such as cultivating poppy, peddling narcotic substances, and encroaching on land (*The Sangai Express* 2023). Such perceptions surged when the 2021 military coup in Myanmar pushed thousands of refugees into Northeast Indian border states, including Manipur. The rhetorical dovetailing of longstanding Meitei opposition to the open border with blanket perceptions of Kuki-Zo criminality, combined with the overall paranoia over the Myanmar refugee crisis, have become central to the political discourse around the current conflict. The narrative has also found traction in New Delhi. In August, the Home Minister told the Parliament that the influx of Kukis from Myanmar into Manipur generated insecurities among Meitei, which then sparked the ethnic strife (Choudhury 2023).

The Centre's decision, therefore, should be seen in this specific political context around Manipur, rather than as an outcome of calculations around general border management. This was made even clearer by Shah when he explained the decision to withdraw the FMR (which is intrinsically linked to border fencing) as a means to "maintain the demographic structure" of the Northeastern states – a recapitulation of Meitei political and civil society concerns.

In fact, the only stretch of the border where the Centre has actually erected a fence is on a 10km stretch at Moreh in Manipur's Tengnoupal district, a project that was sanctioned as far back as in 2003. This was done with the notional intent of checking contraband smuggling and restricting the mobility of insurgent groups from Manipur, Nagaland and Assam who had begun to use Myanmar's Sagaing Region as a strategic backyard for training, grouping and cross-border offensive operations. In January, a senior BRO official revealed that the organisation had already fenced that stretch, and would soon begin work on the next 80km section (*The Hindu* 2024a).

However, if the central government thinks it can resolve the Manipur crisis by fencing the border, it is mistaken. Manipur's troubles are do with internal political exigencies, not the open border. Fencing the border would not just be pointless, but also counterproductive, as it would further alienate the Kuki-Zo side from both Imphal and New Delhi and in turn, diminish possibilities of an early reconciliation.

Political costs

The Union government's decision to extrapolate a Manipur-focused decision to the entire border could have serious political ramifications in the Northeast. Besides the Manipur government and Meitei civil society, not many with stakes in the border have proactively sought border fencing. The only exception is the state government of Arunachal Pradesh, led by the BJP's Pema Khandu, that has praised New Delhi's move.

In fact, Kuki-Zo groups within Manipur who perceive any move to harden the border as an ethno-political offensive against their community, have opposed (*Deccan Herald* 2024) it. So have the Mizoram government (*NDTV* 2024) and Mizo civil society groups. In

Nagaland, too, the state government, led by a BJP ally, has said that it would first consult tribal bodies before making a decision (Kalita 2024). Naga civil society groups, such as the Naga Students' Federation, have vehemently opposed it on grounds that fencing the border would partition historical Naga land that cuts across the demarcated boundary (*Ukhrul Times* 2024).

None of this is surprising, as these tribal communities have longstanding familial ties across the border and see the boundary as a colonial construct dividing their historical homelands. They have long cherished its open-ness as a means to preserve their ancient socio-cultural networks and customary practices. One may even argue that the flexibility accorded to them at the border has allowed them to eschew entrenched inhibitions about the Indian national project and reconcile with their postcolonial identity as Indian citizens.

Let alone tribal communities living along the border, even Meitei groups are wary of blanket fencing. This is because of their long-held suspicions that a central government-led fencing project would cede Manipuri land to Myanmar, and in the process, undermine what they deem as the state's "territorial integrity". Even while welcoming Shah's recent announcement, Coordinating Committee (COCOMI), an influential Meitei civil society coalition, cautioned against possible transfer of Manipuri land to Myanmar as part of the fencing process (*Deccan Herald* 2024a). Therefore, for New Delhi to put the cart before the horse – fencing before full and final demarcation – could generate wholesale resistance from all stakeholders.

These are realities that the Indian defence-and-security establishment and even the ruling government in New Delhi have long been aware of. That is why several attacks by Myanmar-based Indian Insurgent Groups (IGs) against Indian security forces, such as in 2015 (*India Today* 2015), did not immediately prompt full fencing of the border. But, since then, New Delhi has become more circumspect about the open border.

The February 2021 coup in Myanmar, which forced hundreds to flee into the border states in the Northeast, drove New Delhi to issue a stern directive to the border states to not accept asylum seekers (*The Hindu* 2021). Eight months later, a deadly ambush (Leivon et al. 2021) on an Assam Rifles convoy in Manipur's Churachandpur district by militants who, according to Manipur CM, Singh, came from across the border (Pandey 2021), aggravated these concerns. Singh immediately announced that border fencing was a priority (*E-Pao* 2021). The coup and the ambush together created a clearer policy incentive towards full fencing. The ongoing Manipur crisis only added an additional political stimulus.

Further, building a fence would require acquiring land from border states that enjoy exclusive autonomy over land allocation by virtue of special provisions under Article 371 of the Indian Constitution. Unless the legislatures in these states allocate state land for fencing, New Delhi would find itself unable to proceed with the construction. The Mizoram

government had earlier refused to allocate land for a pilot fencing project,¹ and it is unlikely that it would do things differently today. While the central government could create an executive or legislative go-around to acquire land for the fencing, such a move could push centre-state relations along the border to the edge.

Notably, on February 28, the Mizoram assembly passed a resolution opposing the move (*The Hindu* 2024b). Two days later, the Nagaland assembly passed a similar order (*The Hindu* 2024c). On February 22, the NGO Coordination Committee (NGOCC), an influential civil society coalition in Mizoram, held a rally in Aizawl to protest the fencing (*The Morung Express* 2024). On February 8, the Nagaland government announced that it would hold consultations with tribal bodies and civil society organisations to discuss the Centre's move, but is yet to do so (*The Times of India* 2024). Needless to say, Kuki-Zo groups in Manipur have opposed it too (*Deccan Herald* 2024b).

Therefore, there is a strong political and civil society consensus against fencing in most of the border states. By going ahead with it without multi-stakeholder consultations, the Centre risks fraying the political contract with large parts of the Northeast.

Security costs

Effective border management is not just about building physical security infrastructure, but also maintaining a favourable and inclusive social consensus. “Security” itself is a broad concept that covers – or should cover – both state and human security. Therefore, the argument that border fencing would automatically strengthen “national security” is fallacious.

One of the reasons New Delhi has avoided hardening the border over the years is to avoid provoking further ethno-political resistance in a region that has long challenged the Indian state with force. The fencing move could reanimate old ethnic discontents and restart the cycle of anti-India insurgent violence that successive governments, including the current one, had managed to quell over the years. It could further complicate the ongoing peace process between New Delhi and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM), which is already hamstrung by serious political differences between the two sides. The influential armed group, which claims to represent “Nagalim”, a transborder “Naga nation”, could point at the fencing move to demonstrate the Centre's apathy towards Naga sentiments and stall the talks further (or worse, abandon them altogether).

This would then create fresh challenges for the security forces in the Northeast who would not just have to deal with resurgent militancy, but also a breakdown of their community-based human intelligence networks along the border regions. Former Indian army chief, General Manoj Mukund Naravane, too, recently argued that hardening the India-Myanmar

¹ Interview with a senior security personnel, Aizawl, October 2022.

border would “further vitiate the already fragile law-and-order situation in border areas” (Naravane 2024).

Fencing the border, which runs through ecologically-sensitive areas, could also harm environmental security. It would require extensive deforestation in several patches, leading to a decline in the forest cover. India’s Forest (Conservation) Act (FCA), 1980 protects notified forests from such invasive measures. But, in 2023, Parliament passed an amendment to the act to exempt non-notified and non-recorded forest land and other forest land “up to ten hectares, proposed to be used for construction of security related infrastructure” from the FCA’s purview (*The Gazette of India* 2023). A fencing along the India-Myanmar border would qualify in the latter category, allowing the government to cut trees for the construction. The Act has, however, been challenged and is currently subjudice in the Supreme Court. On 19 February, meanwhile, the Court passed an interim order (*Livelaw* 2024) to stay the amendment’s narrow definition of ‘forests’. The final conclusion of the legal process would have direct ramifications on the planned border fencing project.

Economic and geo-economic costs

Border fencing is expensive business. Fencing the India-Myanmar border, which runs along treacherous territory dotted with dense forests, hills and rivers, would be even more costly. New Delhi has so far spent more than Rs.35 crores in fencing just 10km of the Manipur-Myanmar border. Extrapolating, fencing the rest of the border would incur an astronomical cost of more than Rs.5,700 crores to the exchequer. Similarly, according to a tender published by the Assam Rifles in March 2023, the allocated cost of the pilot project on Hybrid Surveillance System (HSS) for a one km stretch of the Manipur-Myanmar border – which Shah mentioned in his 8 February announcement – is Rs.3.3 crores. The total cost of installing an HSS along the entire border, therefore, would be around Rs.5,420 crores.

These sums could instead be invested in building better border trade infrastructure, civil facilities for local communities, and non-fence alternatives that use modern technology to monitor adverse movements without an actual barrier.

But, beyond the domestic economic costs, a hard India-Myanmar would do serious damage to India’s Act East Policy (AEP), which was launched in 2014 as an upgrade to the Look East Policy (LEP) of 1991. The AEP framework envisages stronger economic, physical and people-to-people linkages between India, Myanmar and Southeast Asia. For starters, formal border trade between India and Myanmar is already dismal. According to a 2019 ICRIER report, it stands at less than one percent (Taneja et al. 2019). New Delhi has taken steps to improve the situation, such as by building a Land Custom Station (LCS) in Zokhawthar (Mizoram), an Integrated Check Post (ICP) at Moreh (Manipur) and border *haats* in Arunachal Pradesh. These moves have barely made a difference, and fencing the whole border does not help.

Fencing would, particularly, discourage informal trade undertaken by local communities and small traders through their own customary channels. While trade can happen at stipulated border *haats* or other formal crossings, the fence could abruptly punctuate the natural commercial mobility that is a hallmark of the India-Myanmar border. Fencing would also hamper progress on building west-to-east corridors, such as the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway. It is, therefore, against the AEP's core spirit, which was about leveraging Northeast India as a gateway to Southeast Asia.

Fencing is also counter to the current Union government's own argument in favour keeping the border open "to provide connectivity and enhance interaction of the people of North Eastern States of India with the people of Myanmar", as stated in the cabinet note on approval of the India-Myanmar FMR agreement in 2018 (PIB 2018). Just as importantly, fencing the border would send a wrong signal to the people of Myanmar and other ASEAN countries at a time when India is increasingly being seen in the region as an overly protectionist economy because of its decision to not join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Conclusion

As academic, Munmun Majumdar (2020) argues in the *India Quarterly*, "it is important [for India] to recognise that it is the borderlands and the communities that inhabit this space and the junctures through which the globalised economy's flows of raw materials, natural resources, commodities and people are channelled."

New Delhi would do well to withdraw its decision to fence the India-Myanmar border, and avoid reinforcing what is essentially an impetuous reimagination of colonial cartography.

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