

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No. 040/2024 dated 28 March 2024

“Good Fences Make Good Neighbours”?: India’s Approach to the India-Myanmar Border

Sinderpal Singh

SYNOPSIS

The Indian government’s recently announced decision to fence the long India-Myanmar border signals a potential shift in its perceptions of Myanmar and of the border itself, which has historically been seen as a source of both vulnerability and opportunity for India. This paper highlights three key factors behind this apparent shift, looking at how India’s central government attempts to manage its interests in Myanmar in the context of developments in both Myanmar and the Indian border states of Mizoram and Manipur.

COMMENTARY

In early February 2024, India’s home minister, Amit Shah, announced a decision to construct a fence along India’s 1,643-km land border with Myanmar. The decision was a dramatic departure from India’s growing efforts in the past decade to build better land connectivity across the border with Myanmar, culminating in the implementation of the Free Movement Regime (FMR) in 2018, which allowed cross-border movement without a visa up to 16 km on both sides. As well as being part of India’s Look East Policy with Southeast Asia, the FMR was meant to facilitate local border trade and improve access to education and healthcare for border residents. Individuals were allowed a maximum of two weeks in the neighbouring country by getting a one-year border pass.

The dramatic change in policy towards Myanmar is driven by three key factors. The first relates to Indian concerns about the Indian-funded, cross-border Kaladan Multi Modal Transport Transit Project (KMMTTP) since the coup in Myanmar in 2021. The

second relates to concerns that the rising violence between the Myanmar junta and forces opposing it could spill over the border into India's northeastern states. The third driver is domestic politics, specifically related to recent developments in the Indian state of Manipur, where the two major ethnic groups have engaged in cycles of violence against each other since May 2023.

Kaladan, the Arakan Army, and Cross-Border Connectivity

Work on the KMMTTP, agreed between Myanmar and India in 2008, began in 2010 and was supposed to have been completed in 2014 but the project has been beset with lengthy delays.



A map showing the route of the Kaladan Multi Modal Transport Transit Project (KMMTTP), which has since been beset with lengthy delays. Cross-border connectivity with Myanmar, once a clearly espoused Indian goal, now appears to carry greater liabilities than advantages for the Indian government. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

The project served two objectives for India. The first was its role as part of India's Look East Policy towards Southeast Asia, helping to build greater land connectivity with the region via Myanmar. The second was that it would allow India's northeastern states an option to break out of their relative isolation from the Indian mainland, connected as they are only via the narrow Siliguri Corridor, also known as the "Chicken's Neck". Increased land connectivity with Myanmar would open greater economic options for the isolated northeastern states, and the KMMTTP would potentially lead to greater economic development of those states.

At the time of the Myanmar coup, the only part of the project left to be completed was the last road link between the river jetty at Paletwa in Myanmar's Chin State and the Indian state of Mizoram. The seaport at Sittwe in Myanmar's Rakhine State and the river jetty at Paletwa had already been constructed before the coup.

The key problem for the Indian state since the coup has been two-fold. The first is the inability to make any progress on the overland route between Paletwa and Zorinpui at the Mizoram border because of the increasing violence in Myanmar since the coup. The second issue is uncertainty over who effectively controls Chin State, where India has invested substantially in this connectivity project. A visit by a delegation led by a member of India's Rajya Sabha (the parliamentary upper house) to meet members of Myanmar's rebel Arakan Army (AA) near Paletwa in February 2024 indicates Indian frustration with the situation within western Myanmar specifically.

Since the coup, the Indian government has dealt directly only with the military junta, even when it has requested access to detained National Unity Government (NUG) members. However, this more public meeting with the AA near Paletwa indicates dwindling optimism on the part of India about the viability of the KMMTPP project to serve Indian interests.

Cross-border connectivity with Myanmar, once a clearly espoused Indian goal, now appears to carry greater liabilities than advantages for the Indian government. The visit also signals the Indian state's desire to hedge its options in western Myanmar through contacts with a wider range of actors beyond the military junta.

Border Crossings and Spillover Violence – Myanmar Military

Since the start of 2024, between two hundred and four hundred Myanmar military personnel have crossed the border into the Indian state of Mizoram. Such crossings are largely attributed to rebel groups gaining increasing control of sections of western Myanmar, which include the Chin State, forcing Myanmar military personnel to flee across the border into India.

The crossings have created a quandary for both the Indian central government as well as the Mizoram state government. The Indian government's decision to allow these soldiers to cross into Mizoram at the apparent request of the Myanmar military junta has created two sets of issues. First, within Mizoram, there have been strong protests against allowing refuge for these soldiers. The Mizos view the Chins as their ethnic kin and there has been widespread criticism in Mizoram of the Myanmar military's alleged atrocities within Myanmar broadly and the Chin State specifically. There has thus been pressure from the Mizoram state government against allowing refuge for these soldiers within the state.

Second, allowing such crossings complicates further the central government's attempt to remain engaged with the Myanmar military junta while also hedging its position through both direct and indirect contacts with rebel groups within western Myanmar, given their increasing control of this part of Myanmar. The Indian government thus expedited the airlift of the Myanmar soldiers back into their country as soon as possible, once again trying to balance its position between the junta, the state government in Mizoram, as well as rebel groups in western Myanmar.

Border Violence and Spillover Effects – Manipur and Domestic Politics

Since May 2023, the Indian state of Manipur has witnessed rising levels of violence between the majority Meiteis, who largely reside in the valleys, and the Kukis, who are predominant in the hill areas of Manipur. The divide between the two ethnic groups is more than just spatial – the Meiteis are predominantly Hindus while the Kukis generally identify as Christians. The Meiteis have also historically been the politically more powerful community within Manipur, and they form the majority within the cabinet of the current state government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Manipur shares a 398-km border with Myanmar, which, since 2018, has seen movement across both sides as part of the FMR agreement between India and

Myanmar. Since May 2023, however, many in the Kuki community who straddle the border have been buffeted by two conflicts – the violence in western Myanmar, which has forced Kukis in Myanmar to cross into Manipur, and the ensuing violence in Manipur arising from clashes with members of the Meitei community.

The chief minister of Manipur was at the forefront of public calls to disband, or at least suspend, the FMR, citing border movements from Myanmar as a significant factor in increasing the scale of the violence in Manipur. His government claimed that Kukis crossing the border from Myanmar were providing material support to their ethnic kin in Manipur in clashes with members of the Meitei community. It also alleged that drug smuggling had become rampant as part of this cross-border movement of people from Myanmar into Manipur.

There have been several criticisms within India of the link between Kukis crossing into Manipur from Myanmar and the violence in Manipur but calls to close the border have been difficult for the BJP-led central government to ignore, especially as India nears its general elections this year. In this instance, domestic politics and ethnic politics within Manipur have constrained the Indian government's options on cross-border movement from Myanmar and further complicate the trajectory of its long-term project of building greater connectivity with Myanmar.

Sinderpal SINGH is Senior Fellow and Assistant Director of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS). He is also the Coordinator of the South Asia Programme at IDSS.