

EXPRESS VIEW ON INDIA-MYANMAR BORDER: KEEP IT POROUS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Myanmar

The Centre should rethink its decision to fence the country's 1,643-km border with Myanmar. Announcing the move last week, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said that plans to formally end the Free Movement Regime (FMR) regime, suspended since September 2022, are also on the government's anvil.

The FMR, which came into effect in 2018, allowed people living along the border of either side to travel up to 16 km into the other country without any visa.

Admittedly, the situation along the Indo-Myanmar border has deteriorated after the Tatmadaw seized power in Yangon in February 2021. The junta has persecuted the Kuki-Chin people and the turmoil has resulted in an influx of Myanmarese refugees in the country's Northeast.

The instability has sparked security concerns in [Delhi](#). The trafficking of arms and drugs is also worrying. But sealing borders could complicate matters in parts of the Northeast that bear the scars of insurgencies and ethnic strife, past and present. Undermining people-to-people relations can cause heartburn amongst tribal groups like the Kukis in Mizoram and Manipur who share kinship ties with Myanmar's Chin community. Mizoram's Chief Minister [Lalduhoma](#) — like his predecessor Zoramthanga — has opposed the fencing and civil society groups in the state have also criticised the move.

The junta has ruled Myanmar for all but five years since 1990. Unlike Western powers, which have made democracy the sole prism of their Myanmar policy, India has chosen to do business with the military regime, and that also has to do with the latter's help in the denial of a safe haven to insurgents from the Northeast.

Myanmar has also been a part of India's Look East Policy. The strategy to do business with Yangon worked to a large extent till the latest military takeover three years ago. Since February 2021, the country's Chin province which shares a border with Mizoram has become a major battleground in the conflict between the junta and its opposition.

Entire villages have reportedly been burnt down for failing to comply with the Tatmadaw's writ. In August last year, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar told his counterpart in Myanmar that "India's border areas have been seriously disturbed and any action that aggravates the situation should be avoided". That, however, was a rare admonition. Delhi has, by and large, failed to restrain Yangon from acting against Indian interests. Instead, the Union Home Ministry now seems to be picking on the junta's victims.

Mizoram has provided a sanctuary to the refugees. In neighbouring Manipur, however, the Biren Singh government has framed the crisis in ways that help him gloss over his own government's failures to stanch the state's nearly nine-month-long ethnic strife. Singh has accused the chiefs of the Kuki community of "illegally settling immigrants" from Myanmar. Such hostility is part of a playbook that fails to acknowledge and address the complex nature of the frontiers in the Subcontinent, many of which are a creation of the colonial state. India's border with Myanmar cuts through villages and divides families in Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur. It should remain porous.

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