

India–Myanmar Border Fencing and India’s Act East Policy

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The greatest event of our age is the meeting of cultures, meeting of civilizations, meeting of different points of view, making us understand that we should not adhere to any one kind of single faith, but respect diversity of belief. Our attempt should always be to cooperate, to bring together people, to establish friendship and have some kind of a right world in which we can live together in happiness, harmony and friendship. Let us therefore realize that this increasing maturity should express itself in this capacity to understand what other points of view are.

—Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan

Abstract

The Manipur–Myanmar border is a fine example in establishing that cross-border linkages are far more central to historical change than previously acknowledged. Fencing of the Manipur–Myanmar border created barriers to economic exchanges and livelihood while dividing cultures and families. Therefore, understanding the ways in which the fencing affects the border communities is important and crucial for comprehending the role of the border communities living along the Manipur–Myanmar border in India’s Act East Policy (AEP), together with in examining the ways in which they can be engaged for the successful implementation of the policy.

Keywords

Look East Policy, Act East Policy, Border communities, Myanmar, Manipur

Introduction

The hard territorial lines that demarcate and delineate the territorial configuration of the state within the international system were considered sacrosanct during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The last fifty years, however, has

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seen an alternative border discourse that focuses on the process of bordering, through which territories and peoples are respectively included or excluded within a hierarchical network of groups, affiliations and identities (Houtum, 2000). While modern technologies, particularly cyberspace, have made the barrier role of borders redundant in some areas, they have at the same time created new sets of borders and boundaries, enclosing groups with common identities and interests who are dispersed throughout the globe, lacking any form of territorial compactness or contiguity.

Building of walls and fence is an occurrence existing in history, and the dynamics of nation-state system has created political boundaries that have been drawn for different reasons. Originally, borders were used to delimit the territorial possessions of sovereign states, and borders became central to the nationalist agenda and the development of nation-states. Anssi Paasi identified such boundaries as institutional constructs (Paasi, 1999). At the core of such constructs is the fact that boundaries result from international agreements that are established by mutual understandings between states. These create complex, intermeshed networks of government policies and functions that interact to form international boundaries delineating sovereign spaces. Scholarship on borders also focuses on the culture of local borderland communities. The literature often describes how these communities may either enhance the effect of dividing territory and communities when their culture, that is, their language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and place of belonging, differs, or bridge an international boundary when they share the same culture. Michael Keating, for instance, argued that there are stateless nations, bounded by culture, as defined by race, religion, language and socioeconomic status (Keating, 2001). Furthermore, the idea that multinational communities live in peace within the boundaries of a state is only recent (Taylor, 1983).

The demarcation of boundaries is also such that some fences are being destroyed while others are being erected (Biger, 2013). Some have been built to defend states from its enemies or terrorist incursions, while others to prevent immigration or illegal trafficking of goods and persons. It is an emerging trend that states worldwide have built a growing number of border walls and reinforced fences (Espejo, 2013). Together with opening up of borders as a natural corollary of globalisation, barriers are also being erected as evidenced from Donald Trump making immigration restrictions one of the centrepieces of his presidential election campaign.

There are many reasons that are responsible for closing as well as re-opening of borders that in turn shape cross-border linkages. Whereas the globalisation theories have emphasised on dissolution of borders, it is true that vast network of exchanges were in place long before the ability of people to be highly mobile. These exchanges were largely outside the state control and have occupied the realm of shadow economy or informal economy. What makes it extreme presently is the phenomenon of globalisation, which is driven by unprecedented level of the ability to conduct, communicate exchanges with each other graced by technology and technological innovations. The combination of extreme interdependence and the fourth industrial revolution has the potential to build a world of unavoidable complexities that is increasingly being marked by connectivity and non-linear behaviour.

Borderlands are dynamic in the sense that the realignment of borders and the creation of new kinds of borders are recurrent processes throughout history. What is important to note is that borders may shift and change, but they do not disappear altogether, and the coexistence of borderland communities in spite of the border and the extent to which they function as barriers to movement and interaction, or act as an interface by creating meeting points, are important.

While the border communities are involved in the process of globalisation and development, the state on its part simultaneously participates in projecting frontier areas into national territory, using this space to reinforce state authority. To a large extent, therefore, the borderlands can be seen as products of social and political negotiation space. And the border denotes much more than an artificial line drawn. It represents national identities. And the barrier created constitutes barriers to economic exchanges, livelihood while dividing cultures and families.

Borderlands in Asia are often seen as marginal, isolated and remote. National borders in South Asia are distinguished by two particular features: first, topographic diversity and, second, the arbitrariness by which European colonial powers delineated South-Asian boundaries and imposed their notions of the territorial state (see Mishra, 2011). The result of these artificially created boundaries engendered many territorial disputes and left large areas porous for a variety of irregular and illegal cross-border activities. The Manipur–Myanmar border is one such example.

The eight north-eastern states of India, comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura, cover 8 per cent of India's land, and shares a total of over 5400 km of borders with five neighbouring countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar and Nepal—while it is connected with the rest of India by the narrow 22 km Siliguri corridor in the state of West Bengal called the 'Chicken's Neck'. The fact that just 2 per cent of the borders of the north-east Indian States are national borders the consequent geo-strategic significance is difficult to ignore. The significance of the borderland of north-east India has grown over the years because of its land linkages with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and China. The histories of migration of many ethnic groups from different parts of Southeast Asia to Assam and adjoining areas (for more on cross-border history, see Thant Myint, 2011) are still preserved in folklore, cultural artefacts and language among other things and it has been across what is today the India–Myanmar boundary that many of these migrations have taken place.

Both India and Myanmar share similar problems in consolidating their respective borderland areas. The nature of bilateral relations between the two countries since the end of the Second World War has to a large extent determined the making of the borderland in terms of whether the shared space became militarised and neglected. Recent advances in archaeology and textual history have added considerable new understanding of how physical geography and communities have participated actively in networks of religious activity and commerce. The crossing of state borders by the borderland communities, workers from Myanmar and even school children on a daily, unrestricted, basis in the Nagaland–Myanmar border or the Manipur–Myanmar border for example is an indication of an integrated

borderland and transition zone, as is the act of intermarriage between members of different cultural and religious groups which makes the cross-border linkages central to historical changes than previously acknowledged. It is against this background that the paper attempts to understand in what ways then fencing between the Manipur and Myanmar border would implicate India's Act East Policy (AEP) and the role that the borderland communities can play in the AEP.

India's Look/Act East Policy

The end of the Cold War and the subsequent reforms in India's economic and foreign policies have been crucial in India's articulation of its Look East Policy (LEP) that stressed the importance of economic dimension, particularly in its relations with the ASEAN¹ countries. The renewed vision to seek closer relations with countries in India's extended eastern neighbourhood was essentially a response to domestic economic challenges and the changing international order, marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The LEP was a logical outcome of domestic compulsions and a changed external environment that enabled the successful promotion of economic growth. Subsequently, trade has stagnated in part because of the international financial and economic crisis. The ASEAN region, together with India, comprises a combined population of 1.85 billion people, which is one-fourth of the global population. Their combined GDP has been estimated to be over US\$3.8 trillion. Trade between India and ASEAN was over \$81 billion in 2017–2018 and constitutes 10 per cent of India's total trade. Over the years, India's relations with ASEAN have become multi-faceted to include security, strategic, political, cooperation to curb terrorism, and defence partnership in addition to economic ties.

A very important element of the LEP was the attempt to link India's landlocked north-eastern states with the economies of the ASEAN region. The north-east perspective had emerged at the official level in 2007 in a meeting of the then Foreign Minister Sri Pranab Mukherjee and the Chief Ministers of the north-eastern states on the initiative of the Ministry of DONER.²

Years of infrastructural and educational under-investment had fuelled discontent in the northeast (see Hazarika, 1995). One way to address this problem was by opening commercial linkages with ASEAN countries. The contention advanced was that an economically underdeveloped northeast was more prone to insurgency, political instability and external security threats. As such India's security centric approach was to be replaced by smart border principle for more fluid borders and increased trade efficiency in this neglected space.

India's north-eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram share a long land border with Myanmar's states of Kachin, Sagaing and Chin. Engaging with Myanmar became a crucial component of the LEP to open the window of economic opportunities for the north-eastern states for trade and investment with the ASEAN nations since it is the only ASEAN state that provides a land bridge as well as a springboard for India's north-east to connect with

ASEAN nations. From India's perspective, Myanmar is an immediate neighbour of vital importance for defence and internal security needs, stability and development in the north-east India, and expansion of India's influence in the Bay of Bengal area and Southeast Asia (Bhatia, 2012).

The Narendra Modi-led government accorded high priority to India's LEP. During his opening statement at the 12th ASEAN summit in 2014 held in Nay Pyi Taw, he unveiled the AEP when he said: 'A new era of economic development, industrialization and trade has begun in India. Externally, India's "Look East Policy" has become Act East Policy (AEP)' (2014).³ India's deep historical and cultural affinity with the Eastern world has played a crucial role in shaping its foreign policy towards the Southeast and East Asian regions. And the socio-politico-economic scene in India's Northeast region has guided certain aspects of the country's domestic and international policy.

The AEP of the government of India aims to build relations with the countries of Southeast Asia, including trade relations, for which the north-east serves as the gateway. The relevance of the policy is connected to the complex region of north-east India that has immense implication for India's north-eastern states more so when the borderland communities cannot be excluded from this venture. These communities will play a significant role especially when the road infrastructure passes through their land, and therefore, it is important to include these communities and link rural infrastructure and local markets with the international market.

Myanmar and the other ASEAN countries and Bangladesh were the logical pull factors. India's AEP puts ASEAN at the Centre of India's regional engagements, and it is this understanding that is leading New Delhi to push for viewing India's north-east as key to linking up with Southeast Asia. While the AEP continues to be driven by economic and security interests, it is a calibrated response to the changing situation in the region as well as to evolution of India's priorities in its economic and security strategies (Bhatia, 2016). Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Singapore on 14–15 November 2018 for the ASEAN–India Breakfast Summit (MEA website, n.d.a) clearly communicated the importance of trade and investment. Earlier on 25 January 2018, New Delhi hosted the ASEAN–India Commemorative Summit themed 'Shared Values, Common Destiny'. The leaders of the ten ASEAN states attended the summit. The Delhi Declaration (MEA website, n.d.b) was issued on this occasion, covering the entire spectrum of political-security, economic, socio-cultural and development cooperation. However, any mention of Northeast India or the role of borderland communities was missing. Scholars have argued that 'the marginalization of ethnic communities within nation states' can be compensated if these communities receive 'trans-national recognition' (Baruah, 2004). The creation of trans-boundary regions goes a long way to transforming a borderland into a transition zone, replacing the barrier impact of a border with an interface where contact takes place.

Although the security challenges facing India have driven its policy of border fortification, simultaneously an impetus also exists to reinforce regional cross-border cooperation. Prime Minister Modi had emphasised the significance of regional connectivity and developmental corridors for economic prosperity during

the 12th ASEAN–India Summit (Nay Pyi Taw, 2014b). Regional economic integration is increasingly being seen as a solution for unauthorised cross-border movements, so as to transform the space into spheres of economic and cultural interaction, especially in borderlands such as the Manipur–Myanmar border where local people have shared culture, heritage and resources.

An important aspect of the AEP in the context of the North-East is in being projected as the future macro policy of economic development, by limiting the effects of the business cycle to achieve the economic goals of price stability, employment and growth. Once again then the role of the communities living in the Manipur–Myanmar border in this exercise is crucial, especially in terms of reducing transaction cost which cannot be undermined. At the same time, it is important to note that while all of these hold immense potential, it can see fruition only when there is appropriate representation of the borderland communities to the new pattern of investment and development under the AEP. The unique ways of doing trade by the borderland communities for ages must also be considered as much as the implications of the volume of grey trade which is far greater than the formal trade. Therefore, it is important to evidence this informal trade just as it is important to evaluate how these communities respond to the opening of borders and its consequent transformation.

Opening up of north-east India to Myanmar would indeed have considerable impact on livelihoods on diverse ethnic, religious and occupational communities. For these reasons, a better appreciation of the border areas and the people is critical to the understanding of the process of social and cultural change taking place with connectivity, trade and security under the AEP. The transnational aspects highlight the impact of border areas and the people; therefore, the understanding of their role and consequences of such an engagement is important. Knowledge about border trade, border communities, construction and use of traffic links from a security perspective, as well as existing and envisaged security arrangements are vital for investment decisions and cooperation between India and Myanmar and the AEP. Therefore, what must not be a lost sight of it is that the prospects of transnational cooperation are possible with the cooperation of the communities that inhabit this borderland.

Nevertheless, the role that the borderland community can play is yet to be spelt out in clear terms. Clearly in view of the fact that India's north-east shares more than 98 per cent of its borders with foreign countries, the people inhabiting this borderland, their role and contribution should be appropriately defined. Hence, it is imperative to take a close look at this Indian frontier and explore the consequences of border fencing for the borderland communities and in establishing economic, cultural, connectivity linkages through the AEP.

Why Barbwire Fencing in Manipur–Myanmar border?

India and Myanmar share a long land and maritime border in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. The two borders were delimited and demarcated by two bilateral agreements: the land-boundary agreement signed on 10 March 1967 and ratified shortly thereafter and the maritime-boundary agreement of 1982.

The topography of the India–Myanmar land border varies from low mountains in the south to high ridges and peaks in the north, adjacent to the Himalaya. Unlike the India–Bangladesh borderland, it has low population density (US State Department, 1968). Again, most of it is unfenced and bears little resemblance to the India–Pakistan or India–China border.

Historically, Manipur–Myanmar borderland is a home to many ethnic groups, namely, Chin, Kuki, Mizo, Nagas, and Tsinphos (see Pau, 2012). There is also a small ethnic Tamil community of traders who reside along the Manipur–Myanmar border, whose numbers have been dwindling over the years. These Tamils include descendants of those who were originally taken to Burma by the British but were forced out of the country following General Ne Win’s military coup in 1962. After living for a while as refugees in Tamil Nadu, they made their way overland back to the Indian side of the Manipur border with Myanmar hoping to return eventually to their home in Myanmar someday.

Before the colonial period, these ethnic groups and their homelands were never annexed or conquered by either India or Myanmar. The formation of Myanmar as a separate State in 1935 and decolonisation of the sub-continent in 1947 divided ethnic communities living along the Indo-Myanmar border. After Manipur merged with India in 1949, India–Burma Boundary Agreement was signed on 10 March 1967 and a Joint India–Burma Boundary Commission was constituted to work out the modalities.⁴

Unfortunately, for the people occupying this land the British administrative boundaries became the international boundaries when India and Burma gained their respective independence from British Colonial power (Sakhong, 2010). The drawing of the borders divided these people living along the artificially constructed borders (Das, 2010, p. 1). While the borderland became a marginal space or hinterland cut off from the mainland of India as well as Myanmar in terms of connectivity, media and research, the borderland communities found the newly created boundary to be inconsistent with the traditional limits of the region they inhabited. They were not only divided but also became relegated to the status of ethnic minorities on both sides of the border.

To address their concerns and enable greater interaction among them, the Indian and Myanmar’s governments established the Free Movement Regime (FMR). The FMR permits the tribes residing along the border to travel 16 km across the boundary without visa restrictions. An FMR billboard inside the Indian security checkpoint clearly states: ‘Citizens of India and Myanmar living within 16 km of the border are most welcome to cross the Indo-Myanmar border’. It also states that ‘the free movement regime has been formalized to promote economic and social interaction between the two friendly countries’, and that the ‘free movement regime will safeguard the rights of the tribal communities accustomed to free movement across the land borders’.

The FMR allows access to intermingle and has helped the tribes continue maintain their age-old ties, and engage in barter trade with head loads. These practices had continued unhindered even during the British period. This is strength as well as an opportunity to maintain the bonding between the people of both nations. However, it has also become a cause of concern for the security establishment more so because the border traverses a region in which numerous

insurgencies operate (for an overview of the various conflicts in the region see Saikia (2016) and Lintner (2016)).

The effort to fencing of the border in a certain sector of the Manipur–Myanmar border stems from both security and political reasons. The security considerations generated by the endemic violence in the region manifest in the form of cross-border insurgencies have assumed gigantic proportion over the years. The inhospitable terrain and an underdeveloped border region provided an ideal platform for insurgents, non-state actors, drugs and weapon traffickers to operate with impunity on either side of the Manipur–Myanmar border and spread their network. The shared ethnic and cultural linkages enable these elements to obtain sustenance from both sides of the border. The insurgents have been taking advantage of the FMR and have been crossing over to Myanmar. The provision in the FMR that allows tribal people to carry head load has facilitated smuggling of arms and narcotics from across the border as these head loads are largely exempted from standard custom procedures and hence are seldom checked. Militants and trans-border criminals use this to smuggle weapons, contraband goods and fake Indian currency notes.

Over the years, the Manipur–Myanmar borderland has become the hub for narcotics production and main conduit for the trafficking of arms and heroin from Myanmar (UNODC, 2010). Further, drug addiction is rampant in these border provinces with Myanmar being a major source of supply. Aligned to this problem is the spread of AIDS. It has become a safe haven for smuggling of ephedrine and pseudo-ephedrine and unbridled trafficking of women and children, infiltration and cross-border movements of insurgents (UNODC, 2008). The porous borders have created grey territories and the lack of government control over these remote areas has caused instability. The increasing severity of transnational challenges such as drugs, bird flu, and arms drugs nexus has made this once neglected physical space a zone of vulnerability in both traditional and non-traditional security dimension, involving the flow of goods and services.

The decision to construct fencing all along the border between Manipur and Myanmar was primarily for security reasons because strict patrolling is almost impossible owing to the hostile and harsh terrain. There is no doubt that if the non-state actors and/or extra-constitutional super empowered individuals or organisations are allowed to continue their activities, they will become lethal and unmanageable at some point in time. India was forced to take certain measures to ensure that the porous border is not used as an easy passage of insurgents, flow of arms, and drugs or to siphon off the rich natural resources and abundant forest products of the north east.

The decision to construct a border fence was necessitated by a gradual accumulation of events through the years. During the years 2001–2003, the Indian security forces held that the nature of the porous border responsible for the deaths of 200 security personnel and civilians in the region (Kipgen, 2014) have not only raised serious concerns about the efficacy of the existing border security system in thwarting such breaches but also a consequent demand for the construction of the border fence.

In 2003, India and Myanmar carried out a detailed survey of fencing along the international border (*Mizzima News*, 2003). By the end of 2006, a 400-kilometre

border with Myanmar was already fenced and was being extended in height. In addition, a stretch of 14 kilometres near the international boundary at the border town of Moreh was identified for fencing (Kuppuswamy, 2006). The Government of India under the Ministry of Home Affairs (Department of Border Management) began the work for constructed fencing in India–Myanmar border at Moreh (Manipur) between Border Pillar No. 79 to 81 approximately 10 km long.⁵ Border Roads Organisation (BRO) undertook the fencing work. Fencing therefore can be seen as an effort to concretise parts of the borders as *de facto* demarcation lines as a simple solution to a complex problem arising from cross-border security problems, drug trafficking and so on. Construction of barbed wire fencing along the border near Moreh in Manipur aimed to address the insurgency problem, irregular immigration and human trafficking, drug trafficking including transport of goods, arms and counterfeit Indian currency smuggling (Das, 2010). By constructing a border fence, India hoped to curtail illegal cross-border activities, including transport of goods, arms and counterfeit Indian currency smuggling, drug trafficking and insurgency.

What Fencing Means to the Border Communities

For the borderland communities who inhabit this borderland spanning both sides of the artificial line drawn, close kinship ties between them have been a distinct characteristic feature. People on both sides of the border have been engaging in economic, social exchanges from time immemorial. Fencing meant that people to people contact would be severed. It meant severing of the age-old ties of the trans-border communities and isolation of these pockets from the rest of India with which they do not have adequate connectivity and at times no connectivity. Such severing of age-old links without establishing links with the rest of India can be detrimental for the border communities. Just as the process through which boundaries are opened, visa restrictions and movement are eased, it can be a traumatic event for some borderland communities, especially if they grew up to fear the unknown and the invisible on the other side, creating a fence between people who have freely moved and intermingled with each other for ages.

Historically, the people of the border regions have engaged in barter trade and have been dependent on each other. This foreseeable reliance on each other was the natural outcome of the fact that they lived in remote areas and had very little choice other than a symbiotic relation in order to meet their daily needs. This in turn sealed the bond between the borderland people living along the Manipur–Myanmar border. The opening of border *haats* is a positive direction to regulate the exchange routes. As much as the Friendship Road and proposed Asian Highway will further boost economic ties, fencing on the other hand would be a setback to solidification of linkages and restriction of trade as well (*The Hindu*, 2013).

The border communities such as the Kukis and the Nagas practice *jhum*⁶ cultivation as their main economic activity. They have been using this borderland space and were free to choose the location for *jhum*. Fencing this borderland space

that will create two entities would mean a division of the cultivable land. What is worse still is that they do not know or have any alternative to this practice. Therefore, construction of the fence meant dividing communities, their land, forest and the produce from their land and forests with which these communities are sentimentally attached. Similarly, drinking water sources of some villagers will be cut off (*The Shanghai Express*, 2011). Without an alternate supply of drinking water, these communities will be starved of their basic needs and rights. Additionally, a fence would reduce the interaction, and result in lack of intelligence and situational awareness. Fencing as an attempt to tighten border control then gives rise to several complexities that has tremendous implication for the border communities who rely on blurred borders to survive (*The Indian Express*, 2013). Consequently, fencing has always been greeted with hostility claiming that it interferes with their natural way of life and trade more so since these people residing in this area were never consulted about fencing of their land (*The Shanghai Express*, 2013). While the construction of the border fence has been halted temporarily, a mutually acceptable solution is yet to be agreed upon.

In 2004, local communities protested against the move to fence the border. The controversial Manipur–Myanmar boundary falls between Border Pillars No. 64 and 68 at Tuivang (Molcham area), Border Pillars No. 75 and 79 at Tamu (Moreh area) and Border Pillars No. 88 and 95 at Choro Khunou. Again in 2007, the sensitivity of the fencing issue was further complicated and several boundary disputes concerning the work of the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) arose that was further complicated by a dispute over the ownership of the border pillars. The central government directed the Manipur state government to look into the matter.

Several political parties joined the local people's protest, beginning in 2013. Similar to the concerns of the local people, political parties voiced strong opposition to the fence on the grounds that at least 18 villages from Manipur were likely to be affected. The protesters claim that the 10-km fence between border pillars no. 79 and 81 is being constructed several metres inside the Indian Territory. A 23-member all-party delegation complained to the Prime Minister and Union Home Minister that the border fencing on a 10-km stretch in Moreh area along the international boundary accused the fencing of eating into the Indian side of the land paving the way for the people of Myanmar to come and occupy it (Kumar & Bhatnagar, 2013). The public ire got further aggravated when Myanmar's troops began to set up a camp in Hollenphai village of Manipur located 3 km from the international border pillar number 76. The Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on 3 December 2013 assured representatives of political parties from Manipur that not an inch of India's territory would be compromised (*The Times of India*, 2013).

Construction of the fence has perturbed communities living on the side of the Myanmar border with Manipur too. Their concern revolves around the porous nature of the international boundary that sparked counterclaims. The borderland has witnessed demonstrations from Namphalong to Tamu district headquarters where people held placards and shouted anti-India slogans. It is evident that the communities living on both sides of the international border are aggrieved, which is as much as a pointer to border management being critical. And that the management of the border should be such that it is able to facilitate, rather than become an obstacle for, cultural, religious and social exchange.

The location of the India–Myanmar border throws up many challenges for effective management of the boundary and the rugged terrain; the internal dynamics of the region in terms of clan loyalties of the tribal people, inter-tribal clashes, insurgency, trans-border ethnic ties makes the situation even more complex. What can be inferred is that the Manipur–Myanmar border connections that have sustained over time and that the contingent processes (social and political) have advanced a dynamic character to boundary lines. This also means that fencing of the border with severe implications for the lives and livelihoods of diverse border communities, and the tangible and intangible flows across borders cannot be ignored.

Border Communities and the AEP

The foremost question that arises then is that will the 10-km fence secure the border and prevent the cross-border movements of insurgents, gunrunners and drug peddlers along the international border with Myanmar? The answer is anything but affirmative. Cross-border drug trafficking in this region has grown to move in both directions. Heroin and synthetic drugs come from Myanmar to India, while chemicals like acetic anhydride and ephedrine, essential from converting raw opium into heroin, are transported from India (Lintner, 1994; Suraj Singh, 2008). It is a recognised fact that policing an area marked by harsh terrain and dense forest is difficult. The Assam Rifles, deployed along the border to guard the boundary, are inadequate to prevent large-scale infiltration as well as smuggling across the border. So, fencing is not a solution to the problem; it is only a trip-wire and not an obstacle to prevent infiltration, nor will it be able to stop the drug trafficking. It would only alter the method and means to do so. It has also been brought to light that the troops deployed behind the fence guard the fence rather than the border. More often than not, the focus is to ensure that the fence is not damaged rather than to find out the signatures of the trespassing or explore the grey territories.

Hence, any attempt to create physical infrastructure to secure the border in the midst of the prevailing public resentment creates a situation that may further fuel discontent and disturb peace that could be detrimental for the AEP. After all, India can act east successfully only when its borders are peaceful, and in engaging the border communities which can be possible only when these communities are not restive.

A very important dimension of India's LEP as mentioned earlier was the linking of the policy with India's domestic considerations by attempting to link India's landlocked north-eastern states with the economies of the ASEAN region. Undoubtedly, engaging with Myanmar and establishing connectivity therefore became a priority. After all, India's efforts to expand its outreach to the ASEAN region embedded in the construction of Trans-Asian Highway and Trans-Asian Rail Network will remain unfulfilled without taking Myanmar into the loop. The idea is to build a comprehensive network of economic connectivity that will help sustain growth momentum for decades ahead. Myanmar is an indispensable

partner in these plans. India's connectivity projects will certainly promote development in the border areas, and these border areas and its people have a chance for a better quality of life. There is no doubt that connectivity will pave the way to leverage economic benefits. However, what needs to be emphasised is that connectivity is not merely about creating physical infrastructure; it is also about connecting people by reviving shared links. Just as the Restricted Areas Permit (RAP) for Foreigners and the Inner Line Regulation are preventive measures that are in place to prevent free movement of people, fencing would thwart rather than facilitate easy movement of people and allow greater people to people interaction. Fencing as a result reinforced the marginalisation of these groups of people even further and in contravention to the vision of opening up the northeast India through the AEP.

Instead, the shared ties of the border communities along the India–Myanmar border can be used as a link to Southeast Asia given the fact that the ethnic bonds are the oldest connection between India and Myanmar. The trans-regional trade and exchange of cultural similarity, which have been the salient features of most of these frontier communities who have been regarded as peripheries for centuries, can become pathways and soft power bank resource to further relations. For this, India will have to explore ways in which the potential of the borderland communities to play a significant role in advancing the AEP that offers north-east India to reap the benefits from the consequential transformation of its landlocked status to a land linked one.

Fencing would be a retrograde step since fencing is seen in this region as a barrier, which interferes with their lived experience. It is essential to understand the context of the Manipur–Myanmar boundary, and how the borderland communities have been conducting their relations for explaining the present-day situations and seek a solution from their experience rather than impose fencing as an answer. Just as the pattern of the relations between India and Myanmar has a direct bearing on security and development of north-east India so also the relations between the borderland communities. Therefore, it is crucial to address the grievances arising out of the border fencing, capitalise on the relations the borderland communities' share, their role as pathways rather than peripheries. It is important 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. In this way, India can strengthen its relations with Myanmar whether economic or strategic or in ensuring energy security, and fortify the stated objectives of the AEP as well.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, one can conclude that fencing has become a structural barrier for families living at the country's territorial edge. The objectives of border fencing—control and prevent illegal immigration, cross-border terrorism, trafficking of goods, transnational crimes and other non-traditional security threats—are hardly achieved and indeed question whether fencing of border will do well to the

communities living across borders. Hence, the policy of looking at the border merely with insurgency and illegal trade in mind needs to be re-looked. India cannot either look or act east without the participation of the borderland people. Therefore, the voices and concerns of the borderland communities that stem from fencing needs to be accommodated. A careful tuning of the imperatives of India's AEP to secure its strategic economic interests, which will ensure the crucial participation of the borderland communities in the AEP, is certainly the need of the hour. After all, it is only greater association and participation of these communities that will in the end determine the successful implementation of the policy.

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Notes

1. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in Bangkok in August 1967. The original members were Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei joined in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.
2. F.No.17/8/2009-DONER (LEP) Government of India Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region.
3. Opening Statement by Prime Minister at the 12th India–ASEAN Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, 12 November 2014. Available at <http://mea.gov.in/aseanindia/SpeechStatementASEM.htm?dtl/22566/Opening+Statement+by+Prime+Minister+at+the+12th+IndiaASEAN+Summit+Nay+Pyi+Taw+Myanmar>
4. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, Report 1968–69.
5. See Management of Indo-Myanmar Border, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi.
6. Slash and burn agriculture.

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