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RECALIBRATING THE INDO-MYANMAR LAND BORDER REGIME: STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES UNDER INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY

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I. INTRODUCTION: WHY THE INDIA-MYANMAR BORDER MATTERS NOW

The India-Myanmar border spans over 1600 kilometers, and covers the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The border is much more than a simple geographic line. It is India's most important land border with Southeast Asia, making it a critical point of intersection for India's Act East Policy and SE Asia.

This border has attracted more importance in recent years. Instability in Myanmar since the military coup in 2021 has changed the security dynamics at the border, with Myanmar having fragile armed resistance, insurgent, and state control systems, all of which directly impact India's northeast region. The impacts of these conflicts, however, are not only felt in Myanmar. They extend beyond in terms of border security, the flow of refugees, and transnational organized crime.

In Addition, the region is driven by deep cultural and ethnic linkages. Tribal communities, such the Nagas, Kukis, and Mizos, have sustained socio-cultural and economic relationships that transcend the modern nation-state. Families, trade networks, and cultural traditions span both sides of the boundary, border enforcement tough, and sensitive.

India's transition from the 'Look East Policy' to the more embracive 'Act East Policy' marks a strategic shift. New Delhi is now positioning itself for a more robust engagement with Southeast Asia, especially in the domains of trade, connectivity, and strategic partnerships. Within this context, the India-Myanmar border is no longer a distant security periphery. It is now considered a strategically important border that offers the region integrated connectivity, economic collaboration, and comprehensive security. Therefore, maintaining this border is a trade-off between security and border socio-economic development.

II. HISTORICAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF THE INDO-MYANMAR LAND BORDER

The present-day India-Myanmar boundary has its roots in colonial history. During British rule, administrative arrangements defined much of the frontier. After India gained independence in 1947 and Myanmar in 1948, two countries inherited an administrative boundary that was clearly delineated, but also arbitrarily defined.

A landmark step toward resolving these issues came with the 1967 India-Myanmar Boundary Agreement, which established the

framework for systematic demarcation and joint border management. Through joint surveys and the installation of boundary pillars, the two countries sought to bring clarity to the frontier. However, geography posed a constant challenge. Dense forests, rugged hills, and remote settlements made comprehensive monitoring extremely difficult.

Beyond the physical boundary, the borderlands are home to communities with deep cross-border connections. The Nagas, Kukis, and Mizos have historically inhabited territories that straddle the frontier. These shared identities and traditional movement patterns complicated the rigid application of modern border controls.

Recognizing these realities, India and Myanmar introduced the Free Movement Regime (FMR). Under this arrangement, residents living within 16 kilometers of the border can cross into the neighbouring country without a visa for limited periods. The FMR sought to preserve traditional interactions and maintain social harmony while allowing both governments to regulate the border more effectively.

Over the years, institutional mechanisms have also evolved to manage the frontier. These include coordinated patrols, regular

meetings between security forces, and diplomatic consultations between the two governments. Such mechanisms aim to address emerging issues such as illegal migration, smuggling, and insurgent activity while maintaining cooperative bilateral relations.

III. CONNECTIVITY AND ACT EAST: BORDER AS GATEWAY, NOT BUFFER

Under the Act East Policy, India has begun to reimagine the strategic significance of its northeastern frontier. The India-Myanmar border was seen as a gateway to SE Asia rather than defensive buffer.

One of the most important initiatives in this regard is the **Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project**, which links the Indian port of Kolkata to Myanmar's Sittwe port. From there, the route connects inland waterways and road networks heading to Mizoram in India's northeast. Once fully operational, this project will provide an alternative route to the landlocked northeastern states and significantly enhance regional connectivity.

Another major initiative is the **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway**, which is designed to connect India's northeastern region to Thailand

through Myanmar. This highway was seen potential to transform trade, tourism, and economic integration between South Asia and SE Asia, effectively linking Indian markets with ASEAN economies.

Cross-border trade points such as **Moreh-Tamu** in Manipur and **Zokhawthar** in Mizoram begun to function as emerging commercial hubs. These border towns facilitated local trade while also serving as important checkpoints in broader regional connectivity initiatives.

However, the development of new trade infrastructure comes with risks. New roads, bridges, and transport corridors were exploited by insurgent groups, traffickers, and other non-state actors. This reality has already affected several connectivity projects and raised concerns about long-term sustainability in political instability Myanmar.

Therefore, India faces a dual challenge. While infrastructure expansion is necessary to unpack economic potential and integrate the Northeast with regional markets, it must also be accompanied by stronger security frameworks.

IV. APPLICABILITY TODAY: SECURITY, SOVEREIGNTY, AND INSURGENCY

Today, the India-Myanmar border sits at the junction of numerous security challenges. Insurgency remains one of the most vital concerns. Several insurgent groups operating in India's northeastern states have historically used Myanmar's border regions as safe havens, utilizing an open border and the scant governing presence in the remote areas.

Security cooperation between India and Myanmar has produced results in the past, including joint military operations against insurgent groups. However, the political situation in Myanmar has complicated these efforts. The 2021 military coup weakened administrative control in several border regions and intensified armed resistance against the ruling junta. Consequently, the situation in the border areas has become more unstable.

Transnational criminal syndicates pose yet another problem in the region. The borders are a part of the Golden Triangle, one of the world's most significant hubs for narcotics production and trafficking. A number of drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human trafficking routes cross the open borders. These activities undermine the internal security of India and the social fabric of the communities along the border.

Humanitarian concerns have also emerged in recent years. Political unrest in Myanmar has driven thousands of refugees into Indian states such as Mizoram and Manipur. Local communities often share ethnic ties with these refugees, leading to sympathy and informal support networks. However, managing refugee flows requires mindful policy coordination to balance humanitarian aid with national security priorities.

In this complex environment, recalibrating the India-Myanmar border regime has become increasingly necessary. Strengthening surveillance mechanisms, improving intelligence coordination, reviewing the Free Movement Regime, and accelerating border infrastructure development are all essential steps. Ultimately,

the goal should be to transform the border from a source of insecurity into a bridge for cooperation, connectivity, and regional stability.

V. HUMAN DIMENSION

Ethnic Mosaic - The Naga, Mizo, Kuki and Chin peoples share ancestry, language, traditional customs and practices that surpass Indo-Myanmar Border (IMB) drawn in 1826 through the Treaty of Yandaboo and subsequent demarcations. In Moreh, Manipur some homes physically overlap the border while in Mon, Nagaland the Indo-Myanmar Border (IMB) bifurcates the house of the Longwa village chief, dividing his home between two sovereign nations. A brief of ethnic mosaic along the IMB is tabulated in the next page:-



| Ethnic Group / Sub-Tribes | Primary Location (India) | Primary Location (Myanmar) | Dimension of Mosaic |
|---------------------------|---|--|---|
| Kuki-Zomi | Manipur & Mizoram | Chin State & Sagaing Region | Kinship ties. |
| Naga | South Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland & Manipur | Sagaing Region & Naga Self-Administered Zone | Clans of same tribes, farm lands, same ethnicity. |
| Mizo | Mizoram | Chin State | Similar linguistic family and ethnic affinity with Chins. |
| Meitei | Manipur (Imphal Valley) | Sagaing Region (Kates in Myanmar) | Small pockets in Myanmar, primarily in Kabaw Valley. |
| Singpho Lisu | Arunachal Pradesh & Pockets in Upper Assam | Kachin State | Jingphos and Kachins, same ethnicity |

VI. THE FREE MOVEMENT REGIME (FMR) AND ITS STATUS

The FMR was first instituted in 1950 in the backdrop of Burma Passport Rules of 1948 and the Indian Passport Rules of 1950, allowing free move within 40 km of the IMB, without visa or passport. This was formalised in 1968 Land Boundary Agreement of 1967 and subsequently in 2018, allowing residents within 16 km on either side to cross without a visa. This arrangement facilitated movement for over 300,000 people in border villages and was considered a basis of people-to-people connectivity in North-East India. However, the military transfer of power on 01 February 2021, triggered a cascade of consequences. Thousands of

Myanmar nationals primarily of Kuki-Chin linguistic family took shelter into border areas of Manipur and Mizoram. Mizoram, invoking an ethic of solidarity and humanitarian aspect.

India suspended FMR in Manipur in September 2022 and in February 2024, the Ministry of Home Affairs formally announced the scrapping of the FMR. However, formal government ratification is yet to be done.

VII. MYANMAR AS A GEOPOLITICAL KEY PLAYER

Myanmar has strategic significance for India as it provides India with a land bridge to Southeast Asia, making it the geographic fulcrum of Act East Policy (AEP). Started in 2014, the AEP represented a

connectivity projects, the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP), which links Kolkata to Mizoram through Kaladan River in Myanmar and road networks and the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, which aims to create an overland link from India to Thailand and beyond.

VIII. THE CHINA FACTOR

For China, Myanmar is solution to one of its major strategic vulnerabilities, the Malacca Dilemma (approximately 80% of oil imports of China transit through the Strait of Malacca), which is a chokepoint to strangle energy supply of China. This is the primary reason for increasing footprints of China in Myanmar by being largest trading partner and most significant foreign investor, despite the internal conflict in Myanmar. From 1988 to 2019, approved Chinese FDI in Myanmar exceeded \$25 billion and since military transfer of power an additional \$3 billion has been invested, making China the dominant external economic actor.

Since the 2021, China has adopted a dual-track approach, providing diplomatic cover and military hardware to the junta and simultaneously engaging Ethnic Armed Groups (EAGs), to safeguard its economic interests. The leverage of China in Myanmar was visible in January 2025, when it brokered a

ceasefire between the Junta and the Three Brotherhood Alliance.

INSURGENCY AND NARCOTICS

The IMB, since long, has been safe sanctuary for Indian Insurgent Groups (IIGs), active in North-East India. IIGs have established their camps in Myanmar along the IMB and carry out illegal activities in Indian side.

The IMB is also a critical conduit of the Golden Triangle narcotics trade. Myanmar became the world's top opium producer in 2023, with illicit cultivation expanding to 116,000 acres and IMB is reportedly used as a transit routes. This is clearly visible with drug seizures in the region exceeding Rs 2,000 crore, in fiscal 2022-23 alone. In addition, from April 2024 to January 2025, drug seizures in Mizoram alone were valued at Rs 355 crore, while Assam intercepted narcotics worth over INR 454 crore in 2024 primarily heroin, methamphetamine (YABA tablets), and brown sugar.

INTERNAL CONFLICT IN MYANMAR

On the Myanmar side of the IMB, the security landscape has undergone changes with ongoing clashes between Junta and EAGs primarily along Chin State and parts of Sagaing Region, to gain control.

IX. WAY AHEAD

Recalibrating Strategic Engagement - India needs more to develop a more nuanced engagement beyond junta while avoiding actions that could be construed as recognition of any party to the conflict.

Differentiated Border Management Approach – There is a need to adopt a differentiated border management architecture, high-security physical barriers at identified insurgency and narco-trafficking nodes combined with regulated, technology-enabled movement for border communities to keep ethnic mosaic.

Fast-tracking Connectivity and Economic Integration- India's strategic depth in Myanmar depends eventually on economic ties and connectivity, not just border security. The Kaladan MMTTP and Trilateral Highway must be completed engaging EAO guarantees where necessary to operationalise the land bridge that gives Myanmar its strategic value.

Humanitarian Framework
A formal legislature for a clear administrative framework for Myanmar nationals is needed to distinguish between security threats and humanitarian cases.

Narco-Trafficking

A three-pronged approach of law enforcement, demand reduction by rehabilitation and similar activities and an alternative livelihood program (to poppy-cultivating) is required to counter narcotics menace. India can also leverage bilateral and regional forums to create a regional narcotics monitoring and intelligence-sharing architecture, given the trans-national nature of the Golden Triangle.

Geopolitical Counter to China

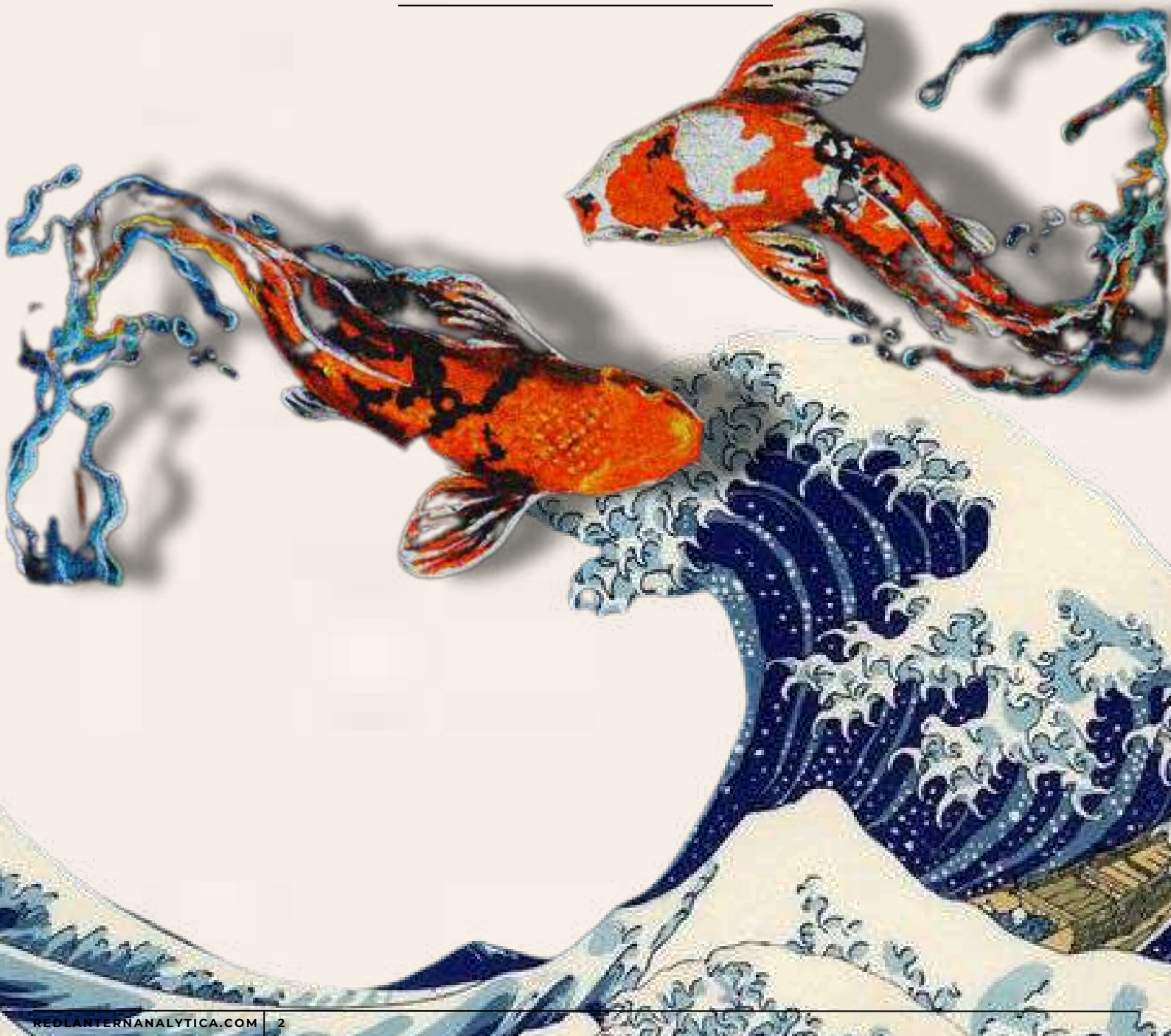
The growing influence of China in Myanmar needs to be countered geo-politically and deepen its defence and maritime ties in South-East Asia.

Confidence-Building Measures along the IMB Communities

The most sustainable border security rests not on fences, but on the voluntary cooperation of border communities. The creation of Border Area Development Programs, enhanced road, digital connectivity and recognition of the legitimate cultural ties of border communities will align the interests of these populations with national security objectives more effectively than punitive border controls alone.

X. CONCLUSION

The core of IMB is collision between the imperatives of the modern nation-state (sovereignty, territorial integrity, demographic management and security) and the realities of peoples whose identities, livelihoods and kinship networks were formed much before existence of IMB. The ongoing internal conflict in Myanmar has converted this chronic challenge into an acute crisis. A long-lasting approach requires India to strengthen security at vulnerable nodes while preserving the human and cultural fabric that gives the northeastern frontier its resilience and its strategic depth. There is also a strong need for sustained diplomatic creativity to prevent the IMB becoming an arena of Chinese activities.





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