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Q8(b)

Discuss the implications of the scrapping of the Free Movement Regime with Myanmar by the Indian Government on the complex ethno-political dynamics of the north-eastern region.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 2 · 15 marks · Changing International Political Order

Changing International Political Order: Rise of super powers; strategic and ideological Bipolarity, arms race and Cold War; Nuclear threat; Non-aligned movement; Collapse of the Soviet Union; Unipolarity and American hegemony; relevance of non-alignment in the contemporary world.

Core demand of the question

- Explain the Free Movement Regime with Myanmar (16 km, ethnic kinship)
- State why the Indian government scrapped or tightly restricted it (insurgency, drugs, post-coup refugees, Manipur)
- Discuss implications for Naga, Chin-Kuki-Mizo and other north-eastern dynamics

Revision summary

The **FMR** let border highland communities cross a short distance because Naga, Chin, Kuki and Mizo kin were split by the India-Myanmar line.

Delhi's restriction is driven by insurgent sanctuaries, narcotics, post-2021 refugees and Manipur's 2023 conflict.

Security gains are possible in counting and fencing.

Ethno-political costs fall on hill kinship, humanitarian Chin-Kuki links and Naga cross-border society.

A harder border can also empower illegal brokers if political settlement on both sides is absent.

Introduction

The **Free Movement Regime (FMR)** with **Myanmar** allowed hill communities to cross the border for a short distance without a full visa, because the boundary cuts **Naga, Chin, Kuki, Mizo** and related kin. The Indian government's move to **scrap or severely restrict** that regime is a security decision with **ethno-political costs** in the northeast. Both sides of that ledger belong in the discussion.

Body

What the **FMR was**

Colonial and post-colonial borders split highland societies. The **FMR**, in its operational form, recognised that **livelihood, marriage and markets** do not stop at a pillar. It was a rare official admission that the northeast is a **transnational ethnic space**, not only a map of Indian districts.

Why Delhi moved against it

After the **2021 Myanmar coup**, refugee inflows, arms, and narcotics routes thickened. Indian insurgent groups have long used Myanmar's side as a rest area. The **Manipur** conflict from 2023, with its Kuki-Meitei polarisation and charges about illegal immigration and poppy, made an open 16-kilometre belt look, in New Delhi and in Imphal's valley politics, like a **security hole**. The government paired **FMR** restriction with talk of **fencing**. From a classical state view, this is ordinary border modernisation: one regime, one document, one count.

Implications for ethno-political dynamics

For **Mizo and Chin** kinship, and for **Kuki-Zo** communities, the **FMR** was a humanitarian and cultural right, not a loophole. Closing it during a Myanmar civil war can be read as **abandoning kin** and as taking a side in Manipur's demographic argument. That hardens ethnic mistrust toward Delhi and toward valley majorities. For **Naga** politics, cross-border Naga identity is already the sensitive core of ceasefire and integration talks; a harder border can cut insurgent logistics and also cut the social world that any political settlement must live in.

A fenced, visa-heavy border may reduce some armed and drug movement. It will not dissolve ethnic maps. It may **push movement into illegal brokers**, raising the power of those who sell crossings. It may worsen refugee suffering without ending insurgency, if the Myanmar junta and rival armed groups still hold the other side.

The northeast's stability has always required **both** a hard state against guns and a political recognition of kinship. **FMR** scrap tilts toward the hard state. The ethno-political risk is that Delhi wins a map and loses consent in the hills.

Flow diagram

FMR kinship 16 km kinship 16 km -> Scrap restrict fence
Scrap restrict fence -> Drugs insurgency refugees
Scrap restrict fence -> Naga Chin Kuki-Mizo strain
Naga Chin Kuki-Mizo strain -> Manipur polarisation

Conclusion

Restricting the **FMR** answers real problems of drugs, insurgency and post-coup inflows. It also cuts a recognised kinship belt and feeds Manipur's demographic conflict. Implications are mixed: more border control, more hill alienation, and a test of whether northeast peace can survive a fully modern frontier.

Facts & figures

FMR

Free Movement Regime permitting short-distance cross-border travel for frontier residents along the Myanmar boundary.

Myanmar coup 2021

Military takeover that produced displacement, armed flux and refugee pressure on India's northeast.

Manipur 2023

Ethnic conflict that made immigration and border openness a central political charge.

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