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Rethinking Sovereignty in the Age of Globalisation: Neo-Geopolitics and the Manipur Borderland

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Abstract

Globalisation has redefined the classical Westphalian conception of sovereignty. It has questioned the rationality of absolute territorial control. In the context of India, this transformation is evident in Manipur's borderland, where transnational flows of people, goods, and ideas intersect with state security concerns. In this regard, India faces a dilemma whether to persist with traditional notions of sovereignty by abrogating the Free Movement Regime and militarising control or reimagine its frontiers as transnational spaces of exchange in alignment with the Act East Policy. Neo-geopolitics advocates for connectivity, economic corridors, and interdependence among regions, rather than mere territorial dominance. Globalisation has broken down rigid territoriality, spawning new forms of regional connectivity and influence. Thus, Manipur has become a site where the contradictions between national integration and global engagement are in flux, revealing the evolving nature of India's sovereignty in a globalising world.

Keywords: Sovereignty, globalisation, neo-geopolitics, Manipur, Act East Policy

Introduction

Sovereignty, once based firmly in the Westphalian ideal of absolute territorial authority, is undergoing a profound transformation in the age of globalisation. Globalisation has witnessed an increase in cross-border flows of people, capital transactions, and exchanges of information and technology. These transnational activities at the border have debilitated the rigidity of territorial boundaries. The globalising world has exposed the redundancy of Westphalian sovereignty and

classical geopolitics. In the context of India, the Manipur–Myanmar frontier presents a paradoxical site that exhibits contestation between Westphalian sovereignty versus globalisation. Historically, the border of Manipur has been governed through a security-first premise. In recent years, the region has become entangled in globalisation and neo-geopolitics-induced dynamics, giving rise to the Act East Policy (AEP), which envisions borderlands beyond defensive peripheries, viewing them as gateways for regional connectivity and economic integration.

However, this reimagining of the frontier remains profoundly contested. In the case of India, it has adopted two approaches to the borderland of Manipur. The two competing logics are one ingrained in classical geopolitics, which prioritises territorial control, militarisation, and the abrogation of cross-border mobility regimes such as the Free Movement Regime (FMR), and another informed by neo-geopolitical thinking, which advocates for interdependence, economic corridors, and transnational exchanges. The growth of informal trade routes, shared ethnicity, and cross-border social ties challenges the rationality of fixed sovereignty. It has compelled India to balance between the imperatives of national security and the opportunities created by globalisation. In this regard, there is a moot point of how sovereignty is conceptualised, enacted, and contested in contemporary border governance.

Therefore, it is imperative to situate the borderland of Manipur within the scholarship on evolving sovereignty and neo-geopolitics in the present era. Thus, this paper seeks to answer the central research question of how globalisation is reshaping the conception and practice of sovereignty in the region, particularly in India. More specifically, it examines how the tension between territorial control and transnational connectivity is manifested in state policies, security practices, and local social dynamics. Additionally, the paper is based on subsidiary questions that concern the implications of transnational flows for India's security calculus, the transformative possibilities of the AEP, and the socio-political consequences of militarisation vis-à-vis cross-border openness.

The paper is guided by the hypothesis that globalisation and neo-geopolitics have necessitated India to move toward a flexible realignment of sovereignty. This is despite the security concerns, which continue to reinforce traditional territorial approaches. By initiating these debates, the paper problematises the Westphalian sovereignty in the age of globalisation. It argues that sovereignty is an evolving concept rather than a static one. The borderland of Manipur serves as an empirical testing site to examine the tensions between national integration and global

engagement, shedding light on the complex nature of statehood in the twenty-first century.

Objectives

1. To critically examine how globalisation challenges the Westphalian notion of sovereignty in the context of Manipur's borderland.
2. To analyse India's dilemma between enforcing traditional territorial control and adopting neo-geopolitical strategies centred on connectivity and interdependence.
3. To assess the impact of transnational mobility and informal cross-border exchanges on the governance and security of India.
4. To evaluate the role of the AEP in reframing Manipur as a bridgehead for regional economic integration.
5. To explore how competing visions of sovereignty, which are militarised control versus transnational openness.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative and analytical research methodology to examine globalisation in reshaping India's conception and practice of sovereignty in the borderland of Manipur. It is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, as the research seeks to understand sovereignty as a socially constructed and evolving phenomenon, rather than a fixed territorial doctrine. It combines theory, policy, and empirical approaches to explore how competing logics of national security, territorial control, and neo-geopolitical connectivity converge in border governance.

The analysis draws on secondary sources, including government policy documents, security reports, academic scholarship, media coverage, and archival materials. These sources facilitate a critical assessment of shifting state strategies toward the Manipur-Myanmar frontier, especially in relation to the AEP and the FMR. Thematic and discourse analysis is employed to understand state and non-state narratives surrounding security, development, and regional connectivity. Through this qualitative approach, the study elucidates how sovereignty is negotiated, contested, and remodelled within the neo-geopolitical context of Manipur's borderland.

Globalisation and Transformation of Sovereignty

The Westphalian conception of sovereignty is built on the principles of territorial integrity, non-interference, and state supremacy. But currently, it has been fundamentally challenged by the forces of globalisation. The post-Cold War era and twenty-first-century economic interdependence have redefined the meaning of

statehood, legitimacy, and control. As power increasingly operates through transnational flows rather than territorial domination, this results in the reconceptualisation of sovereignty through concepts such as neo-geopolitics, networked sovereignty, and functional interdependence.

The Westphalian system, institutionalised in 1648, established the norms that sovereign states were autonomous and territorially demarcated units of authority. This conception created a template for public authority, where states were both the sole legitimate governors of their populations and the gatekeepers of their borders. Here, the sovereignty is exclusive, indivisible, and supreme, and the territory cannot be infringed upon. Now, Westphalian sovereignty has been eroded by globalisation due to the proliferation of cross-border transactions, supranational institutions, and non-state actors, which have redistributed authority across national boundaries (Caporaso, 2002).

The modern reconfiguration of sovereignty cannot be understood without accounting for the pressures exerted by global capitalism and international organisations. For example, citizenship and sovereignty are increasingly detached from territorial belonging in the globalising world (Linklater, 1996). Thus, the Westphalian state is becoming incompatible with the developing world in the age of globalisation. The external dependence and internal heterogeneity subvert absolute sovereignty (Clapham, 1999). Therefore, the Westphalian concept of sovereignty in the present context highlights the internal contradictions of sovereignty, a dichotomy between autonomy and interdependence.

In the late twentieth century, the idea of absolute territorial control gradually began to lose its value because of heightened globalisation. Consequently, it has produced organised hypocrisy, wherein states still hold the notion of sovereign power, but in practice, they have relinquished authority to global markets and institutions (Krasner, 1999). This mismatch represents a transformation from juridical to functional sovereignty. Globally, states derive legitimacy from participation in transnational systems and cannot afford to remain isolated in the international forum. Thus, the exercise of sovereignty in the contemporary era is increasingly characterised by the negotiated management of interdependence beyond its international boundary.

Similarly, Lansford's analysis of a post-Westphalian Europe is prescient, as he directly links the erosion of absolute sovereignty to the pressures of economic and political interdependence. He argues that the modern nation-state has voluntarily ceded its sovereign authority as a means of adapting to globalisation, which has led to

increased economic and informational interdependence that has become difficult for the state to control (Lansford, 2000). This illustrates that globalisation acts as a primary catalyst for the sovereignty transformation. The European Union (EU) is an example of how supranational entities effectively manage the cross-border capital, trade, and regulatory issues that define a globalised world.

Bauder and Mueller (2021) critically view the Westphalian system because, historically, it has enabled colonial dispossession of indigenous lands through principles like *terra nullius*. Similar to the case of India, the border fencing between India and Myanmar is estimated to cost Rs 31,000 crore, as approved in 2024. It will fence the 1,643 km with an objective to check insurgency, drug trafficking, and refugee inflows, which have been exacerbated by the 2021 civil war in Myanmar. However, the Naga and Kuki-Zo-Chin peoples, who share ancestral lands and kinship networks across the divide, have protested against the fencing as it blocks their relations with their kindred tribes. Geopolitically, the fencing aligns with India's securitisation drives, but it starkly contradicts the AEP's thrust for enhanced connectivity, informal trade, and people-to-people exchanges with Southeast Asia. Consequently, the situation in Manipur is one of irreconcilable conflict, where the assertion of a unitary, territorial state sovereignty critically challenges and seeks to overwrite the contextualised, place-based sovereignty of indigenous peoples. Sovereignty need not be bound to territorial enclosure but can be founded in stewardship, community, and reciprocal coexistence, notions essential to neo-geopolitical thinking.

Under the influence of globalisation, sovereignty has been transformed. Sovereignty has been revamped through the strategic adaptation and management of global interconnections rather than through absolute territorial control (Göksel, 2004; Walshe, 2019). Consequently, states enact sovereignty by orchestrating transnational flows of capital, technology, people, and information, and by negotiating rules within international regimes. This is a shift from a provider of protection to a facilitator and regulator within global networks. Therefore, sovereign power is increasingly defined not by the ability to exclude, but by the capacity to engage and steer interdependent relationships to secure national interests.

The transition from traditional geopolitics to neo-geopolitics is a reorientation of sovereignty from territorial dominance to the concept of connectivity. The spatial flexibility of power argues that borders no longer signify fixed control. In contrast to classical geopolitics, which is obsessed with strategic depth and resource domination, neo-geopolitics privileges flows, corridors, and interdependence. Neo-geopolitics is an idea that emphasises social interrelations over territorial rivalries. Economic

corridors, trade routes, and regional integration have become the contemporary instruments of neo-geopolitical influence. Thus, sovereignty is increasingly exercised through connectivity governance, through the regulation of networks that cross territorial boundaries.

Sovereignty has transitioned from an absolute and spatially fixed authority to a relational, functional, and networked practice in the age of globalisation. The Westphalian sovereignty logic of impermeable borders and non-interference no longer captures the realities of a globalised world where authority, capital, and identity transcend nation-state frontiers. Neo-geopolitics has become a new paradigm of connectivity-based sovereignty, where states derive legitimacy from their ability to engage with other countries.

Manipur as a Borderland

The Indo-Myanmar borderland, especially in the state of Manipur, represents one of South Asia's most intricate intersections of ethnicity, migration, insurgency, and statecraft. As globalisation transforms the core principles of sovereignty, the frontier of Manipur has become a site of tension between connectivity and control, a conflict between the transnational rhythms of borderland communities and the securitised governance of the Indian state. The intertwining of these forces challenges India's ability to reconcile national security imperatives with regional integration goals under its AEP.

Historically, the Manipur-Myanmar border was porous. It was a region of free-flowing cultural and kinship networks, connecting the Naga and Kuki-Chin-Zo ethnic groups. These communities predate the colonial boundary demarcations of the Treaty of Yandabo (1826) and the Independence of India (1947). Their social continuity across the border remains integral to their identity. It is due to this reason that India and Myanmar reached an understanding in 1968 and introduced the FMR, allowing free movement up to 40 km on either side of the border. It reduced the FMR to 16 km in 2004 and finally scrapped it in 2024.

The social and economic vitality of the borderland communities of Manipur is supported by cross-border mobilities. The Indo-Myanmar frontier is animated by transnational exchanges of goods and ideas, producing an economy that resists state categorisation as either "legal" or "illegal". Yet, this fluidity often draws the state's gaze, which perceives porousness as vulnerability. This constitutes an incongruous result in which ethnic communities engaged in routine kinship exchanges find themselves entangled in a surveillance regime. Therefore, the border, instead of

being a line of demarcation, becomes a zone of negotiation between local autonomy and state authority.

Moreover, the 2021 military coup in Myanmar acted as a push factor in accelerating refugee movement from Chin and Sagaing states of Myanmar into Manipur and Mizoram states of India. This cross-border social connection and common kinship offered humanitarian solidarities that exacerbated state concerns over porous boundaries and potential demographic changes that could threaten internal cohesion (Inkah, 2024). These migration issues have become a political tinderbox, fueling the tensions between the hill-based minority Kuki-Zo and the valley-based Meitei-majority groups. Refugee influxes are considered a challenge to territorial sovereignty. Substantiating this, Roluahpuia (2020) noted that, apart from the state's prerogative to control the Indo-Myanmar border, it is also a region of contestation and confluence. Borderland communities tend to resist top-down policies, such as those implemented by AEP.

The Manipur-Myanmar border economy showcases informal trade networks and how they sustain livelihoods while complicating state-led efforts at economic integration. For example, Moreh (India) and Tamu (Myanmar), the twin towns straddling the border, are central nodes where the majority of exchanges bypass formal customs procedures. While India-Myanmar bilateral trade reached US\$1.6 billion in 2017-18, more than 90 per cent of this occurred via sea routes, with road-based border trade remaining negligible. India's 2015 policy shift from barter to normal trade has led to formal border trade being almost negligible, while informal flows have substantially increased in recent years (Taneja et al., 2019). These informal transactions signify local norms of trust and kinship. It has facilitated borderland communities to procure goods and sustain livelihoods in ways that circumvent restrictive tariffs, cumbersome documentation, and infrastructural bottlenecks. The persistence of such networks supports the perception that the borderland is a zone of insecurity.

The AEP positions Manipur as a launchpad to Southeast Asia. However, this vision is fraught with inherent contradictions. India views the cross-border dynamics as vulnerabilities that enable insurgency, smuggling, and illegal migration. Therefore, India's ambivalent position toward non-territorial sovereignties, manifesting in a securitisation strategy that prioritises militarisation through extensive fencing, checkpoints, intelligence surveillance, and military deployments in border towns like Moreh, over inclusive development, has hindered genuine bilateral cooperation with Myanmar on counter-insurgency and infrastructure initiatives (Das, 2018). This

ambiguous stance has perpetuated cycles of instability by alienating transboundary communities whose social and cultural ties defy rigid territorial controls.

India has adopted securitisation along the Indo-Myanmar border, intended to bolster state control against threats like insurgency and trafficking, but it has created a governance inconsistency. It has alienated the local populace, thereby eroding legitimacy (Singh & Khundrakpam, 2021). Militarised interventions disrupt ethnic ties, traditional reciprocity, and livelihoods in Manipur's borderlands, transforming the state's presence into a symbol of exclusion rather than protection. This interaction is prominent in the Moreh border town of Manipur. There are overlapping authorities, including customs officials, paramilitary forces, and insurgent taxation, resulting in fragmented sovereignty and the imposition of control amid illegal migration and criminal economies (Saisin et al., 2023). Ultimately, there is a need for human-centric approaches emphasising local participation and cross-border cooperation.

The FMR controversy is a notable example of India's stance on transnationalism. On the one hand, policymakers celebrate connectivity as a developmental imperative, whereas on the other hand, they view the movement as a threat to national sovereignty. The suspension of FMR, therefore, symbolises a reassertion of the Westphalian logic of sovereignty against the realities of a globalised borderland. For local communities, however, it represents the erosion of lifeworlds and economies built upon fluid borders. The securitisation of the border in this manner damages the AEP's credibility by alienating the very populations it seeks to mobilise as stakeholders in regional integration.

The borderland of Manipur under the AEP divulges a fundamental conundrum. The desire to secure a transnational corridor through militarisation has also exposed the fragility of state sovereignty. The Indo-Myanmar border has become a securitised space where the authority of the state is performative and contested. This securitisation serves the purpose of managing transnational risks, such as insurgency or trafficking, while simultaneously projecting an image of order and control to a national audience. The action of India in revoking the FMR and the border fencing aims to assert control, but it has disrupted the inherent socio-cultural and economic aspects of cross-border communities (Saisin et al., 2025). In this context, India's demonstration of authority along the border does not consolidate its legitimacy but rather highlights the contested and negotiated nature of governance in a zone characterised by invariable transnational flows and social interactions.

Accordingly, the Indo-Myanmar border, explicitly via Manipur, encapsulates the enigma of globalisation and Westphalian sovereignty, with reference to India. Although the AEP aims to transform Manipur from a periphery into an economic corridor and connectivity in tandem with the neo-geopolitics, it risks reproducing marginality under new guises due to securitisation. In the age of globalisation and neo-geopolitics, the challenge lies in governing its flows, balancing sovereignty with inclusion and security with solidarity, rather than fencing the border.

India's Policy at Crossroads

The Manipur-Myanmar border has become a testing ground for two competing visions of sovereignty. The first vision is defensive and territorial, while the second vision is cooperative and networked. The first path, securitisation and border closure, is driven by national security imperatives and a desire to contain insurgency and migration. The second path, which is characterised by regional connectivity and cooperative sovereignty, is bolstered by the logic of economic corridors and people-to-people connections, aiming to transform the border from a line of division into an area of exchange. In this regard, India's policy, when choosing between these paths, will decisively influence Northeast India and also enhance its geopolitical credibility in the Indo-Pacific.

India stands at a policy crossroads in its AEP. India faces a dilemma between the abrogation of open border mechanisms and the integration with border communities. Border fencing creates a bottleneck for economic exchanges, livelihoods, and cultural ties among ethnic groups, such as the Nagas and Kukis. Resultantly, it undermines the goals and objectives of AEP (Majumdar, 2020). The political development of ethnic conflict in Manipur in 2023 and the Myanmar coup of 2021 has vitiated the AEP. It has created instability in the border region. Thus, India is prioritising security over connectivity. This shift risks isolating the state of Manipur, stalling trade corridors, and contradicting AEP's integration goals, potentially favouring short-term stability at the expense of long-term economic synergy.

The demographic shift and security challenges demonstrate that unregulated border opening under the guise of regional integration has generated internal destabilisation, through increased immigration from Bangladesh and Myanmar, which has intensified communal conflicts in Assam, Tripura, and Manipur. The implementation of AEP assumes significant dimensions, as the policy implies border opening, potentially leading to further demographic catastrophe and the legitimisation of existing immigration trends through formalised trade relations (Meitei, 2023). The imperative of the AEP requires border porosity for economic and

strategic cooperation. Therefore, without amending immigration controls, AEP engagement could create a geopolitically engaged but internally fractured Northeast where regional integration externally compounds regional disintegration internally.

The arbitrary cartographic demarcations have divided indigenous communities. For example, the Konyak and Khamniungan Nagas lie between state-centric security imperatives and local lived geographies. These imposed boundaries disrupt traditional land use, kinship networks, and disturb the socio-economic interdependence that once stabilised the frontier. The absence of informed consent in boundary governance has led to the detachment of these borderland communities. It has resulted in zones of contestation (Ketoukhrie-ü's, 2023). The policy, without incorporating the borderlanders' viewpoints, could perpetuate the colonial logic of exclusion under a new semblance of development. The AEP should evolve toward inclusive and cooperative border governance. Sovereignty must be co-produced through trust, dialogue, and shared development, rather than enforced through fences or military presence.

It is pertinent to understand how China and India adopt contrasting approaches to managing their borders with Myanmar. China's border governance is characterised by fluid connectivity diplomacy, using infrastructural investment, trade corridors, and cross-border development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to expand its influence and nurture economic interdependence. This openness enables Beijing to ingrain itself within Myanmar's economy and political networks. Whereas India has resorted to restrictive border management influenced by security anxieties and territorial control. Although India's fencing of the border reinforces sovereignty, but subverts local trust and transnational interaction. While China's policies integrate its peripheries into regional growth, India's hard-border reflex isolates frontier communities and limits its strategic outreach. Consequently, India risks losing geopolitical advantage in Southeast Asia by prioritising securitisation over cooperation and connectivity.

The ambivalence position of India is observable in Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC). India's hesitation toward regional integration under China's initiative constitutes a neo-geopolitical dilemma. India seeks to strike a balance between sovereignty and connectivity in a multipolar Asia. Meanwhile, the BCIM-EC aligns with the developmental vision of the AEP by promising to unlock the economic potential of Northeast India. India's reluctance stems from sovereignty anxieties, insurgency, and fear of Chinese dominance. India's preference for securitised border management over cooperative connectivity

undermines its own strategic objectives (Marchang, 2021). India's continued treatment of the border as a site of control rather than collaboration could renounce the opportunity for its Northeastern frontier to engage in geo-economic integration with Myanmar and the wider ASEAN region. In neo-geopolitical terms, India's pursuit of rigid sovereignty hampers its ability to exercise relational power through infrastructure, trade, and cross-border networks.

India should not reduce the border policy to a binary between abrogation and integration. It should strike a balance between security imperatives and cooperative engagement. The transformation and development of Manipur depends on reimagining sovereignty not as absolute control but as relational governance. India should be able to manage border flows responsibly. Instead of dismantling the FMR, India should explore collaborative avenues, such as biometric identification, joint patrolling with Myanmar, and community-led border management councils.

India must transition from borders as barricades to borders as bridges. This redefinition could be viewed from the perspective of neo-geopolitical logic. The Indo-Myanmar frontier could thus emerge from a militarised periphery into a corridor of influence. The stability and peace at the border will facilitate the smooth operation of the Trilateral Highway and Kaladan Transit Project. These changes require both physical infrastructure and institutional imagination, as well as the willingness to view sovereignty as an evolving practice rather than a fixed principle.

Consequently, the future of the Manipur frontier depends on New Delhi's ability to transcend the binary of security versus connectivity and adopt a relational approach to sovereignty. If India continues to fortify its borders, there is a potential of marginalising the border communities, forfeiting economic opportunities, and ceding geopolitical influence to China. However, if India adopts cooperative sovereignty, it can reimagine Manipur as a gateway to Southeast Asia.

Findings

The study has found that the changing border governance in India's Manipur is a paradoxical form of sovereignty, oscillating between securitisation and integration. The scrapping of the FMR implies a reactive reassertion of Westphalian control, prioritising territorial integrity over social and economic benefits. The security-first approach incongruously destabilises the frontier by sidelining the cross-border communities and sabotaging informal networks that sustain peace. Conversely, the AEP and related connectivity projects demonstrate India's aspiration toward cooperative sovereignty. However, bureaucratic inertia, militarised developmentalism,

and inconsistent policy coordination have limited the potential of the Indo-Myanmar border. Thus, the border dilemma of India is not spatial but conceptual, originating from an inability to reconcile sovereignty with interdependence. The long-term stability and regional leadership of India depend on its ability to govern the border effectively, rather than restrict it. India bears the responsibility to transform the Indo-Myanmar border from a security buffer into a corridor of strategic collaboration. Sovereignty, in this new paradigm, must progress from control to coordination, where security and cooperation coexist as complementary, not contradictory, dimensions of statecraft.

Conclusion

India's engagement with the Indo-Myanmar frontier has shown that sovereignty in the age of globalisation can no longer be understood as an exercise in absolute territorial control. It has been demonstrated that the abrogation of the FMR, while argued as a national security imperative, displays an epistemic crisis within Indian statecraft. There is a sense of inability to reconcile the traditional logic of sovereign containment with the emerging realities of transnational interdependence. Therefore, the securitisation of borderlands with respect to Manipur, through fencing, militarisation, and restrictive mobility, provides only an illusion of stability. In practice, it has fractured the indigenous livelihoods, sabotaged social trust, and enlarged the insecurities it seeks to mitigate.

Furthermore, the AEP is an alternative paradigm of cooperative sovereignty, envisioning the Northeast not as India's periphery but as its geopolitical bridge to Southeast Asia. But the failure of India to institutionalise this vision because of bureaucratic red-tapism, ethnic mistrust, and policy inconsistency has manifested into a system where development coexists with domination. In this environment, the border exists as a corridor and cage, symbolising India's unfinished transition from defensive realism to strategic interdependence.

India must think outside the box to bring development to Manipur. Sustainable peace and influence in Manipur will require a reconceptualisation of sovereignty as relational rather than rigid. The sovereign authority should be founded in participatory governance and cross-border collaboration. The frontier must be governed as a space of negotiation, not exclusion. The connectivity should be a medium to strengthen regional integration rather than threaten national security. The sovereignty reimagine could convert the borderland of Manipur from an area of suspicion into zones of collaboration. Thus, fulfilling the primary goal of the AEP and asserting India as a confident, integrative power in the Indo-Pacific region.

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