

From the migration crisis in Ceuta comes a warning for India

If there is one thing that India is severely vulnerable to, it is collapse of borders as countries next door breakdown



Migrants cross from Morocco into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta on July 30, 2026. (Photo: Antonio Sempere/AP)

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The Spanish enclave of Ceuta is currently experiencing a severe migration crisis, but understanding this flashpoint requires looking beyond the immediate influx of people. Ceuta, along with Melilla, constitutes the European Union's only land borders with Africa. However, their very existence as European territories on the African continent are heavily contested.

To Spain, Ceuta is an integral, sovereign part of the Spanish state, having been under Spanish control since the 17th century (and Portuguese before that). To Morocco, and much of the African Union, Ceuta represents an illegal colonial occupation and a lingering vestige of European imperialism. Morocco claims sovereignty over both enclaves, drawing parallels to Spain's own claims over British-held Gibraltar.

This disputed status directly impacts the border crisis. Morocco has historically been accused of ‘weaponising’ migration — deliberately loosening its border enforcement to allow migrants to flood into Ceuta as a pressure tactic against Madrid. In this light, the mass crossings of thousands of desperate individuals swimming around breakwaters are not just a humanitarian tragedy; they are a geopolitical tool used in a centuries-old territorial standoff. The migrants, fleeing economic despair, become unwitting pawns in a post-colonial tug-of-war.

The events in Ceuta are a microcosm of a much larger, systemic global immigration crisis. Across the world, borders are under immense pressure due to a combination of push and pull factors. The 1951 Refugee Convention was built for a world of contained, resolvable crises. It was not built for permanent, structural pressure from a neighbour that is chronically stressed rather than cleanly failed — which is precisely the condition India now faces on both its western and eastern borders.

While affluent nations offer the pull of economic stability and safety, the push factors from fragile states are compounding at an unprecedented rate. These include chronic economic stagnation, political persecution, systemic violence, and the escalating impacts of climate change. When a state fails to provide basic security or economic viability for its citizens, the inevitable result is mass outward migration. The global architecture for managing these flows — largely designed in the mid-20th century — is currently proving entirely inadequate to handle the sheer volume and velocity of modern human displacement.

India finds itself in a highly sensitive geopolitical position. Much like the European Union’s proximity to North Africa, India is a relatively stable economic anchor bordered by states experiencing severe systemic stress: Pakistan to the west and Bangladesh to the east. The Narendra Modi government is actively pushing for a technology-driven border strategy, launching a ‘Smart Border Project’ in 2026 to deploy drones, thermal cameras, and AI surveillance to counter cross-border threats.

Both neighbouring countries face deep structural vulnerabilities that translate into unique and massive migratory pressures on India's borders. The risks are comparative but distinctly different on each front. On the western border with Pakistan, India faces a highly militarised and fenced geography, where the primary drivers of migration are state fragility marked by high political instability, extreme debt, and militant violence. Consequently, the risk to India is primarily a volatile mix of severe security threats and desperate economic migration. Conversely, the eastern border with Bangladesh presents a deeply porous, riverine geography separating two densely populated regions. Here, the state fragility is driven by economic stress and political polarisation, but the migration push factors are heavily exacerbated by climate change (particularly sea-level rise), inflation, and lack of employment. This creates a primary risk of massive demographic spillover — with estimates suggesting anywhere from 12 to 20 million undocumented Bangladeshis already in India — and acute resource strain in India's border states.

Pakistan is currently navigating one of the worst economic crises in its history, coupled with deep political polarisation and a resurgence of militancy in its western provinces. If the state framework were to fracture further, or if the economy defaults and collapses, the primary safety valve for its population would be geographical. While the Line of Control (LoC) and the International Border (IB) are heavily militarised and fenced, sheer human desperation can overwhelm even the most formidable physical barriers. For India, a migration influx from Pakistan carries the compounded risk of severe security threats, given the historical precedent of cross-border terrorism. For instance, the mass violence that the Pakistani army is now unleashing against civilian protestors demanding better governance in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir could, if it grows uncontrollably, have direct repercussions across the border. Furthermore, just as Morocco uses migration as leverage against Spain, a fracturing state apparatus in Pakistan could potentially facilitate border breaches as a strategic distraction or asymmetric tactic.

Bangladesh presents a different, yet equally pressing, vulnerability for India. Despite impressive economic growth over the last decade, the state

framework remains fragile due to political volatility and immense demographic pressure. Furthermore, Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable nations on earth. As sea levels rise and river systems flood, millions of Bangladeshis will face internal displacement. The Indo-Bangladeshi border is notoriously difficult to police due to its porous, riverine nature, severe weather that deteriorates fencing, and shared cultural infrastructure — such as border villages that share mosques and pathways right on the international line. A systemic shock in Bangladesh — whether economic or environmental — would inevitably lead to a mass exodus into India's eastern and northeastern states, threatening to destabilise local demographics and strain state resources. The Indian government has initiated efforts to strengthen intelligence infrastructure in these border districts to address the escalating complexities.

The distressing scenes in Ceuta underscore a harsh reality of modern geopolitics: walls and fences can delay, but rarely stop, the desperate movement of people fleeing collapsing frameworks. Furthermore, when these borders exist along historical, colonial, or ideological fault lines, the misery of migrants is easily weaponised by states. For India, acknowledging the fragility of Pakistan and Bangladesh is not merely a matter of foreign policy, but a core domestic security imperative. Securing these borders requires a delicate balance — maintaining robust physical and technological security while preparing comprehensive contingency plans for the humanitarian fallout that inevitably follows state failure in the neighbourhood.

(Hindol Sengupta is professor of international relations at O. P. Jindal Global University. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.)