

Why India should worry much more about weaponised migration

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Representational photo: A section of India–Bangladesh border as West Bengal government handed over 27 km of land to BSF for border fencing, in Murshidabad in May 2026. ANI

Around the world, migration is being weaponised again and again. India is particularly vulnerable.

There is one critical thing that India, and the Indian public square, does not think enough about—and it should. The videos from Ceuta, the Spanish territory in northern Africa, is a stark reminder on this issue. I am talking about weaponised migration. To understand the gravity of this threat, one must first anchor it in scholastic theory. The “weaponisation of migration” is most authoritatively defined and analysed by [political](#) scientist Kelly M. Greenhill in her seminal work, “Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy”. Greenhill defines the phenomenon as Coercive Engineered Migration (CEM). She characterizes it as “those cross-border movements of people that are deliberately created or manipulated in order to induce concessions from a target state or states.” In this framework, migrants and refugees are not merely tragic byproducts of conflict or economic despair; they are actively utilized as asymmetric weapons by state or non-state actors. Greenhill identifies different types of actors in this dynamic—generators, or those who actively displace populations to burden a target state, provocateurs, who deliberately provoke crises that lead to displacement, and opportunists, who do not create the crisis but exploit an existing, organic flow of migrants to extract geopolitical or financial concessions from a target state. The core mechanism of CEM relies on exploiting the target state’s political, economic, or humanitarian vulnerabilities. By threatening to overwhelm a target nation’s

borders, strain its resources, or trigger domestic political crises, the coercer forces the target state to yield to specific demands.

INDIA'S GEOPOLITICAL REALITY AND FRAGILE BORDERS

India's vulnerability to engineered migration is inextricably linked to its physical geography and the historical legacy of the Radcliffe Line. The borders India shares with Pakistan (3,323 kilometres) and Bangladesh (4,096 kilometres) are not mere lines on a map; they run through dense forests, shifting riverine landscapes, rugged mountains, and populated villages. Unlike the highly formalised borders of Western Europe or the geographically isolated borders of North America, India's frontiers are remarkably porous. Despite extensive fencing initiatives, the sheer topographical complexity—such as the riverine stretches in Dhubri (Assam) or the shifting sand dunes of Rajasthan—makes absolute border sealing a logistical impossibility. Furthermore, these borders divide ethno-linguistic groups with shared cultural affinities. The presence of cross-border familial ties and historical trade routes creates a natural, organic flow of people. It is precisely this existing porousness and organic movement that hostile actors can easily manipulate, transforming a steady stream of localised movement into a coercive flood of displacement.

The border with Bangladesh represents one of the most complex migration corridors in the world. While the relationship between New Delhi and Dhaka has seen periods of robust cooperation, the structural realities of the region make the eastern flank highly susceptible to the weaponisation of migration, often of the opportunistic variety. Historically, India has already experienced the devastating impact of engineered migration on this flank. The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War was precipitated in part by a massive demographic assault. The West Pakistani military establishment orchestrated a brutal crackdown in East Pakistan, deliberately driving an estimated 10 million refugees into India. This engineered crisis placed an unbearable strain on India's economy and internal stability, ultimately forcing Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to intervene militarily. The 1971 crisis remains a textbook historical example of how mass migration can be utilized to destabilise a neighbour and serve as a *casus belli*. Today, the threat has evolved. The eastern borders are vulnerable to opportunistic exploitation of economic migrants and regional humanitarian crises. The exodus of the Rohingya from Myanmar into Bangladesh, and subsequently into India, highlights this vulnerability. If political instability were to severely fracture Bangladesh, or if a hostile regime in Dhaka chose to turn a blind eye to, or actively encourage, the mass movement of people across the border to extract concessions regarding water sharing or border disputes, India would face a catastrophic scenario. In India's Northeast, particularly in states like Assam and Tripura, the demographic balance is incredibly fragile. Decades of perceived and real illegal immigration have already triggered massive socio-political upheavals, most notably the Assam Agitation and the ongoing, highly polarizing debates surrounding the National Register of Citizens (NRC). An adversary weaponising migration in this sector would not need to field an army; they would simply need to manipulate migratory flows to spark ethnic violence, paralyse the local economy, and force the Indian state into a protracted internal security crisis.

THE WESTERN FLANK: PAKISTAN AND ASYMMETRIC WARFARE

While the eastern flank presents challenges primarily rooted in demographic and economic pressures, the western border with Pakistan presents a direct, adversarial

threat of weaponised migration integrated into a broader strategy of asymmetric warfare. Pakistan's military establishment has long relied on sub-conventional tactics to offset India's conventional military superiority—a strategy often described as “bleeding India with a thousand cuts”. Thus far, this has primarily involved state-sponsored terrorism and the funding of militant proxy groups in Jammu and Kashmir. However, as borders become technologically fortified against armed infiltration, the manipulation of civilian populations offers a potent alternative.

In a hypothetical scenario of heightened tensions, the deliberate displacement of populations near the Line of Control (LoC) or the International Boundary could be used to overwhelm Indian border security forces. Furthermore, the guise of refugee or migrant flows provides perfect cover for the infiltration of sleeper cells, intelligence operatives, and radicalized elements. The weaponisation of migration on the western flank also carries the threat of demographic subversion. By artificially altering the demographic composition of border regions through the quiet, sustained insertion of proxy populations, an adversary can cultivate sympathetic enclaves. These enclaves can subsequently be activated to harbour militants, disrupt logistical supply lines during wartime, or trigger localized civil unrest, thereby forcing the Indian military to divide its attention between external defence and internal policing.

THE INTERNAL REPERCUSSIONS: STRAINING THE SOCIAL FABRIC

When migration is weaponised against India, the primary target is not necessarily the military, but the social fabric of the nation. The sudden influx of engineered migration triggers immediate resource competition between the host population and the migrants. This competition rapidly devolves into identity [politics](#). Hostile actors understand that forcing a migration crisis upon India is a highly effective way to trigger domestic polarization. The [political](#) discourse inevitably fractures between humanitarian impulses and national security imperatives. This fracturing fuels extremist narratives on all sides, leading to radicalization, communal violence, and a breakdown of social cohesion. In essence, by weaponizing migration, an adversary forces India to fight itself, degrading the nation's comprehensive national power without firing a single bullet. Furthermore, democratic nations like India are particularly vulnerable to CEM because they are constrained by legal and humanitarian commitments. Adversaries ruthlessly exploit these constraints. They know that a democracy cannot employ the same brutal methods of border enforcement that an authoritarian regime might use without suffering severe domestic and international political fallout. This “hypocrisy cost”—the gap between a democracy's stated human rights values and the harsh actions required to repel engineered migration—is exactly what coercers leverage to extract concessions.

POLICY IMPERATIVES

Recognising the weaponisation of migration as a primary security threat requires a paradigm shift in how India manages its borders and neighbourhood policies. This is why “smart borders” are critical. Physical fences are insufficient against engineered demographic flows. India must accelerate the deployment of Comprehensive Integrated Border Management Systems (CIBMS). The use of thermal imaging, aerostats, ground sensors, and drone surveillance can help identify and manage mass movements before they physically overwhelm border outposts. India must also actively work in international forums to classify CEM as a breach of international law and a form of aggression. Building global consensus against this practice will increase the diplomatic

costs for nations that attempt to use it as a weapon. The administrative machinery to quickly identify, isolate, and adjudicate the status of undocumented migrants must be robust, transparent, and legally sound to prevent political exploitation of the issue. Ultimately, the best defence against weaponised migration is a stable neighbourhood. India must aggressively pursue economic and diplomatic initiatives that promote stability in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar, reducing the “push factors” that opportunistic adversaries might exploit.

India’s geographical destiny, nestled amid nations with volatile political trajectories and sharing long, intricate borders, dictates a heightened state of vigilance. CEM perfectly encapsulates a highly probable and deeply destabilising threat to the Indian republic. Whether deployed aggressively by Pakistan as an extension of asymmetric warfare, or opportunistically triggered by instability in Bangladesh or Myanmar, the weaponisation of human displacement strikes at the very heart of India’s vulnerabilities: its resource constraints, its complex demographic mosaic, and its democratic commitments. To safeguard its sovereignty and internal harmony, India must look beyond traditional military threats. It must acknowledge that in the 21st century, hostile actors do not need to cross borders with tanks and artillery to wage war; sometimes, the most devastating weapon is the desperate, manipulated, and engineered movement of human beings.

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