

Tides of Change in Northeast India : Enablers and Impediments to Naga Peace Process

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Introduction

India's Northeast presents a bewildering picture to the policy makers, outsiders as well as the local population. The Naga insurgents' demand is for a Greater Nagaland that will encompass all Naga tribes in the region; but the issue is complicated as the state itself is demographically fragmented. Its people adopt different stances on their nationhood which further complicates the security perspective. Signing of Ceasefire (CF) Agreements by major insurgent groups since 1997 has given way to a better understanding between Government of India (GoI) and Naga Insurgent Groups.

Year 2015 has been a watershed year as far as Naga Insurgency is concerned. The signing of Naga Peace Framework Agreement by GoI with Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak Muivah) (NSCN (IM)) on 04 Aug 2015 has changed the complete perspective of the dynamics of insurgency in Nagaland. Since 2015, major politico-military events in the Northeast India and Myanmar have seen major political and counter-insurgency breakthroughs in Nagaland. The real breakthrough came in February 2018 Assembly elections in the northeastern states. The Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) and Bhartiya Janta Party winning the election and forming the government offered an avenue for furthering the peace process.

Part – I

Security Perspective in Nagaland Post Signing of Peace Framework Agreement in August 2015

Build-up for Talks

Developments during CF Period. The CF with militant groups started in 1997. This helped the Central Government and People of Nagaland to understand each other's viewpoints. Though no major breakthrough was made at national level during the CF period, ground level advantages accrued which included distinct reduction in violence levels in Nagaland. The signing of CF with NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) and its further extension has had a salutary effect on other minority outfits that have realised the futility of their armed struggle and ideology driven insurgency.

Breakthrough. The Government of India (GoI) and NSCN (IM) signed a peace framework accord on 04 Aug 2015. The historic Centre-NSCN (IM) agreement has had many strategic fallouts.¹ The Naga Peace Accord with NSCN (IM) lays down the framework for peace process, though not openly declared, the ultimate end-state visualises peaceful existence of Naga people with their identity protected within the constitutional framework without disturbing territorial integrity of India and neighbouring states.

Changing Perspective. The signed document appears to be more in the nature of a declaration or a preamble, which has been discussed in the Naga region for at least two or three years. Kiren Rijiju, Minister of State for Home Affairs called it 'a framework' for a permanent settlement. Details of the settlement revolve around the 31 points which the Naga side had given to the GoI about a decade back. Of these, two crucial clauses have been dropped: the one on sovereignty, and the other expansion of Nagaland through territorial contiguity. These have long been unacceptable to New Delhi and affected states.

Conflicting Views. There are a few questions and fascinating facets to the 'historic accord' between the GoI's representative and the NSCN (IM). The statements, one by the Prime Minister (PM) of India, and the other by the General Secretary of the NSCN (IM) who is also known as the Ato Kilonser (PM) of the Government of the Peoples Republic of Nagalim, said positive things but their content and approach were different. The PM declared that the 'talents, traditions and efforts' of the 'people of Nagaland' would 'make the nation stronger.' Muivah on the other hand made no reference to any details, but did say that the

current effort would lead to a better understanding between 'the Nagas and India', underlining the separate identities as far as he was concerned, even if it was for public consumption. He praised Modi, saying that under his leadership 'We have come close to understanding each other and have worked out a new relationship'. The statements, thus, kept the avenues open for insurgent conflict by the Group.

Government Outreach. The Gol had sent a group of Naga elders and lawmakers to Myanmar to speak to the Myanmar Naga rebel leader SS Khaplang and get him to accept the agreement. But Mr Khaplang refused to meet them and instead deputed his military wing Chief, Niki Sumi, to speak to the visiting delegation, thus missing the opportunity. A new umbrella group called United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFW) was formed with Khaplang as its head. UNLFW is an alliance formed by NSCN (K), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland-Songbijit (NDFB-S) and Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO). The major terror attack in Manipur in June 2015 was the handiwork of UNLFW. It was the first major operation of the UNLFW which declared the intent of the new outfit.

Leadership crisis. The death of Isac Chishi Swu on 28 Jun 2016 has put additional burden on the Muivah faction to sustain the accord. Indications are that insurgency in many parts of northeast declined substantially. The death of Mr SS Khaplang in Myanmar on 09 Jun 2017 has weakened the group and is undergoing leadership crisis.

Chinese Support. There have been reports that China is back to covertly aiding and abetting insurgent outfits in the northeast. A peace agreement with NSCN (IM) will inevitably lead to better and real time intelligence which will keep China wary. This is especially because NSCN (IM) was the first northeastern insurgent outfit which had established contact with China, a fact acknowledged by Muivah also in one of his many on-record interviews. Moreover, NSCN (IM) used to procure weapons from China and, thus, obviously would be a treasure trove of intelligence in this context.

Insurgent Movements across Myanmar Borders. Since 1980s separatist outfits were allowed to set up camps in Myanmar by Nagas. The 'Myanmar Connection' thus became the common antecedent of insurgent groups operating in the northeast.² The General Elections held in Myanmar in November 2015 and setting up of a friendly democratic government by National League for Democracy has had a positive impact on isolating the militant groups operating from across the borders. The changing political scenario in Nagaland and Manipur where BJP-led governments came to power has reduced insurgent activities. The Counter Insurgency (CI) forces and Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) have formulated strategy to avoid collateral damage.

Effect on Economic Development. In Nagaland, the obstacles to economic development generally arise out of the prevailing political, social and economic conditions. The conditions also relate to the hilly terrain, dense forests and difficult communication networks. The social obstacles are the people's initial apathy to any kind of innovation and lack of education. The economic difficulties are the dearth of capital, absence of marketing centres, and similar other factors. To these we may also add the political condition arising out of the subversive activities of the underground Nagas to complicate the issue to a precarious position. The economic development and progress of the northeast is directly related to the resolution of peace in Nagaland.

Civil Society and Political Activities. Since 2015, the civil society groups and local political leaders had become very active and started contributing to the peace process. The state government got full support from the central government. During 2017, six Naga National Political Groups (NNPG) joined the peace process. Efforts are being made by the central government to get NSCN (K) to join peace talks too. The big challenge for the new government now is how the protracted Naga political problem will be solved.

Part - II

Enablers and Impediments to Peace Process in Nagaland

General. Lasting peace is the ultimate goal in counter-insurgency. The process is very long and it takes decades of efforts. Towards the peace process, there are certain enablers that will promote peace and certain impediments that will have to be overcome to achieve lasting peace. The same are discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

The Enablers

(a) **Regional Plurality.** The protracted conflict in northeast India has social, political, economic and strategic components, which is also true of the protracted peace processes, making for a vicious cycle. The sense of stagnancy in the conflict management scenario in northeast India is due to the inability of the stakeholders to break away from this vicious cycle. The territorial integrity of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur is crucial to the future stability of the Northeast. These are, and have been, multi racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious states and if the region has to make a beginning in effective management of plurality and change, these three states have to stay the way they are. The Nagas should, therefore, demand a just political deal that allows their kinsmen in Ukhrul and Senapati, Tamenlong and Chandel, Tirap and Changlang areas to maintain close development and cultural links with Nagaland. The acceptance of this plurality will help in containing the insurgency.

(b) **Territorial Integrity of North Eastern States.** Pacifying the aspirations of the Nagas or other tribes cannot be done at the cost of breaking up of other states. The GoI and NSCN (IM) negotiations have been shrouded in utmost secrecy and, therefore, the stakeholders in Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are apprehensive of the course which the peace process would take and contents of the proposed 'special federal arrangement' being talked about³. The respective state assemblies of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh have passed resolutions that no territory will be parted for the setting up of a Greater Nagalim, as a solution. The GoI is also firmly supporting this stand of northeastern states.

(c) **Accord for Lasting Peace.** It would require the highest level of statesmanship to build the contours of the framework for peace. For the Naga people, it would be prudent to abandon a glamorous vision of a contested past or to demand exorbitant privileges based on their unique history because history tells us that every other ethnic group before 1947 also had a unique history. This is the only way for Nagas towards a lasting peace.

(d) **Isolation of NSCN (K).** Patricidal rivalry among the Nagas has persisted since the formation of the NSCN (K) and NSCN (IM) following the split of the original NSCN in 1988.⁴ On 16 Sep 2015 the Indian Government banned the NSCN (K) under the Unlawful Activities and Prevention Act for five years for its role in the June 2015 ambush in Manipur; which killed 18 Indian security personnel. Since abrogating the cease-fire with the Government of India on 27 March 2015, the NSCN (K) had repeatedly targeted Indian security forces. The NSCN (K) was unhappy that its repeated demands for inclusion in the Naga peace talks between the NSCN (IM) and the Indian Government had not been accepted. Though the GoI made an effort to reach out to NSCN (K), it did not fructify thus further isolating the NSCN (K).

(e) **Sovereignty of Myanmar Nagas.** NSCN (K) realises that it is very unlikely to get a respectable political deal for the minuscule Naga ethnic community in Myanmar. So, why is the NSCN (K) not fighting the Myanmar Government but is combative in India for the Naga cause, in spite of much larger Naga-claimed lands in Myanmar as compared to India? The answer lies in Myanmar politics. The truth of the matter is that when the NSCN (K) signed a “bilateral ceasefire” agreement in 2012 with the Myanmar Government, it resolved not to join in any political talks for the Naga areas with the Myanmar Government. The Myanmar Nagas are committed to give no trouble to the Myanmar Government and to fully support whatever political decisions are made by the Government for the Nagas in Myanmar. In return, the NSCN (K) obtained safe sanctuary, while waging war against

India, which makes sense from a tactical military perspective of not fighting two enemies together. This has weakened the demand for Nagalim and NSCN (K) outfit as such.

(f) Security Cooperation Mechanism with Myanmar.

India appears to have set up a comprehensive and functional security cooperation mechanism with Myanmar. Over the years, the drastic reduction in insurgency related violence in Manipur and Nagaland states sharing borders with Myanmar has allowed New Delhi and Naypyidaw to explore policy options to seal the gains. These include a generous supply of arms and equipments by India to Myanmar, and setting up forums for the continuous exchange of ideas between the two countries. India and Myanmar reached an agreement to open the fourth Border Liaison Office (BLO) in the Nagaland sector. Three BLOs are already in operation in the Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Mizoram sectors. BLOs have served as mechanisms to promote cooperation between the law enforcement agencies of both countries.

(g) Tourism and Industry. The peace agreement signed with a key Nagaland outfit will help the resource-rich state realise its true economic potential and help attract tourists and industrialists. Nagaland is rich in natural resources such as coal, natural gas, decorative stones, petroleum, nickel, cobalt-chromium and agri-products etc. The cooperation by Central Government will help Nagaland realise its true potential of economic growth.

(h) Positive Impetus by Naga Civil Society Organisation.

Attempts to draw locals into mainstream of development as infringement of their independence and culture by the churches and formation of various Civil Society Organisations has changed the outlook of locals. The civil society organisations in Nagaland such as the Naga Hoho-An apex council of Naga tribals, Naga Mothers Association (NMA), Naga Students Federation (NSF) and United Naga Council (UNC) are playing an important role in laying the groundwork for the emergence of lasting peace in the region⁵.

The Impediments

(a) **Sovereignty and Federalism.** While Mr Rijiju told *The Hindu* that the NSCN (IM) has given up on “Naga sovereignty”, the NSCN’s Muivah said the opposite on 14 Aug 2015 at the 69th Naga Independence Day in his Hebron Headquarters. He clarified that the NSCN had never given up on Naga sovereignty. But he clarified that the final settlement will be based on the concept of “shared sovereignty” because if India recognises the “unique history of the Nagas”, the Nagas should recognise India’s problems and limitations. That spirit of give-and-take is most welcome but should not be misconstrued as a compulsion instead of a choice. “Shared sovereignty” is not a bad idea because it can take Indian federalism forward to new heights. A unique federalist solution would mean greater autonomy and more powers to the Naga State (and to other Indian States as well in future), whatever its final territorial shape may be. But, Mr Muivah’s insistence that they have not given up on Nagalim does complicate the scenario and keeps it open ended.

(b) **Nagalim versus Naga Identity.** The various groups involved in this conflict include several rebel groups, the NSCN (IM) which purportedly wants a Christian Religious State: the NSCN-K which wants an independent “Greater Nagaland” to include territory now in Myanmar, based on ethnicity⁶. Any attempt to parcel off Naga areas to Nagaland will reduce Manipur to less than half its present size and have disastrous consequences for the state and the region. The problem has surfaced in various parts of the Assam-Nagaland and the Arunachal Pradesh-Nagaland border with intense contestations over villages claimed under Greater Nagalim. The local/tribal leaders with personal aspirations will support the demand and try to keep the insurgency pot boiling.

(c) **Transition and Future of NSCN (IM).** The leadership of NSCN (IM) has become aged. Death of Isac Chishi Swu in Jun 2016 and struggle by other leaders are likely to pose leadership crisis. Future of NSCN (IM) and peace talks are hinged on smooth transition of leadership. In the interim the

political leadership in the state is growing stronger thus posing a threat to the insurgent leaders.

(d) Implementation of Ceasefire Ground Rules (CFGR).

Carrying of arms under the cover of jackets and shawls everywhere during CF-which has been done by NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K), defeats the very rationale of having a CF. Such violations have the potential to intimidate and incite violence, as has been demonstrated in the 'peacetime factional fights' which has killed many combatants and non-combatants in various parts of Nagaland and other states as well. The implementation of CFGR by all should be strictly enforced and action taken to curb criminal activities sheltered by ceasefire.

(e) Surrender Policy. Due to protracted talks, the surrender policy is such that it permits insurgent groups who come forward to surrender opting to keep arms and ammunition in reserve, thereby ensuring an option open to go back to the jungles if they are not able to achieve tangible gains out of the peace process. Insurgent surrenders in recent times have shown that the number of arms and ammunition deposited with security forces at the time of their surrender are minimal compared to the estimated levels based on their insurgent operations earlier. There is need to take a relook at the surrender policy and make it more effective in disarming the insurgents.

(f) Education and Employment of Youth. Education, the core of human progress, has declined so much that hordes of students have had to move out of the state to seek better education elsewhere. Beyond the state capital of Kohima there is absolutely no development. Eastern Nagaland bordering Myanmar, the home of the Konyak Nagas, is totally ungoverned territory. Another factor which has been exploited by the militants is the relatively high level of unemployment in the state. The state has a good literacy rate of 80 per cent and the emerging new generation is keen to take up white collared jobs. However, with a weak industrial base and a civil administration mired in controversy and corruption, jobs are not available to the educated youth. The

Gol and State Government should concentrate on higher education and skill development in youth to promote jobs.

(g) **Look East Policy.** National Highway 39 has been projected by New Delhi as part of Trans-Asian Highway, as component of its 'Look East Policy'. The development goals and prospects of the Look East Policy have not been attuned to existing realities of political and ethnic divides in the region. The need is to energise the re-conditioning and re-connections of the other road networks through Moreh (Manipur) and Ledo (Assam) to Myanmar. If the issue of connectivity is resolved, then development would not be a problem.⁷ Efforts are on to provide railway connectivity to state capitals in the region.

(h) **Clash of political and Religious Organisations.** Nagaland is a Christian majority state where religious organisations have had role in elections with Church groups calling for resistance against 'Hindutva' parties. All political parties and religious organisations will have to put development, inclusive growth and nationalism above everything else failing which it has potential to impede the peace process.

Conclusion

Nagaland state has a 'Vision 2020' initiative to develop and become an industrial hub by 2020. Perhaps Nagaland is about to reap benefits from modernisation and globalisation, as the shining example of the Indian Government's Look East Policy. The leadership crisis in the insurgent groups has helped in establishing of law and order and softening of stand by insurgents. Above all the Gol's 'Look East Policy' and friendly neighbour in Myanmar are great opportunities to meet goals of Naga people and neutralise impediments. The current socio-political developments in the northeast India i.e. the State governments of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Nagaland supported by Central Government, stand a good chance of taking forward the peace process.

Endnotes

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³ Namrata Goswami (2015) "Indian National Security and Counter Insurgency". Routledge Publications, pp 73-74.

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⁵ Namrata Goswami (2010). 'The Naga Intra-Community Dialogue : Preventing and Managing Violent Ethnic Conflict; Global Change, Peace and Security. 22 (b) pp 93-120

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