

Insurgency in North East India: Genesis and Prognosis

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General

North East India (NEI) today comprises of eight states of India, namely Sikkim and the “seven sister states” of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh (ALP), Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya. NEI is bounded by Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The region is rich in bio-diversity and untapped raw materials. It is connected to mainstream India through the 22 km narrow “Siliguri Corridor”. Thus it has strategic, political and economic significance for India.

NEI has been witnessing insurgency since 1950s and there is no end in sight. Even though some states in the NEI have remained peaceful after ending insurgencies, overall the situation in the region is not conducive to peaceful living and corresponding prosperity. This article covers the genesis of insurgency, the present day situation and makes some recommendations for future.

Historical Perspective

Present day Assam was ruled by the Ahom kings from 1228 till 1826. Due to incursion by the then Burmese kingdom into Assam, the Ahom kings requested the British East India Company for help. As a result, the British defeated the Burmese and then signed the Treaty of Yandaboo on 24 Feb 1826 thereby ending the reign of Ahom Kings and amalgamating Assam into British India. Thereafter, Assam was a province ruled by the British till Independence.

At the time of Independence, NEI consisted of Assam, North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) i.e. present day ALP, and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura which opted for merger with India in 1949. Present day Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram were then part of Assam and were carved out of it later – Nagaland in 1963,

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States of North East India.¹



Map 1

Meghalaya in 1972, and between 1972/1987 Union Territory (UT)/ state of Mizoram. Sikkim was a monarchy which was amalgamated into India after a referendum in 1975. Thus, the present day NEI has been a melting pot of various tribes, languages, cultures, history and ethnicity.

Rise of Insurgency in NEI

The British had generally followed a policy of non-interference in the NEI. However, the newly independent India in 1947 had the formidable task of uniting various princely states not only of NEI but of the Country as a whole. The integration of these distinct cultures of NEI into the “mainstream” was generally met with resentment. The insurgencies started with Naga Hills. Under the leadership of Phizo, the Naga National Council (NNC) declared independence from India on 14 Aug 1947. Despite efforts at political settlement by various leaders of that time, the unrest did not die. As a result, Indian Army (IA) was ordered to undertake Counter-Insurgency (CI) operations in Jan 1956, after the Government of India (GoI) declared Naga Hills as a disturbed area. Thereafter,

various regions proactively voiced their demands for freedom/independence, and initiating insurgencies in the region.

Reasons for Insurgency in NEI

There are various reasons for the insurgencies to be born in NEI. These are as under :-

- (a) **Multi-Ethnic Region.** NEI is the most ethnically diverse region in India. It is home to around 40 million people including 213 of the 635 tribal groups listed by the Anthropological Survey of India.² Each of these tribes is having its own distinct culture. Thus, each tribal sect resents being integrated into the mainstream India as it means losing their own distinct identity. As the Gol resorts to various methods for “integration” into the “mainstream” based on a myopic understanding of peoples and tribes, it leads to rise in insurgencies to protect their own culture. The situation gets further aggravated due to inter-tribal rivalries, which fuel tribal/ethnic insurgencies.
- (b) **Underdeveloped Region.** Due to the difficult terrain configuration of jungles and mountains, infrastructural development in NEI has generally been slow, often at a snail's pace. This has widened the schism between the NEI and mainstream India, and further increased a sense of disenchantment with the Gol.
- (c) **Lack of Economic Development.** Gol's economic policies have also fuelled resentment and insecurity amongst the people. Due to various factors, the development of NEI has lagged behind thereby resulting in lack of employment opportunities. Thus the youth are easily lured by various insurgent groups in order to earn easy money.
- (d) **Sense of Isolation, Deprivation and Exploitation.** Distance from New Delhi and meagre representation in the Lok Sabha has further reduced the *vox populi* being heard in the corridors of powers, leading to more disillusionment in the dialogue process, thereby making call of the gun more attractive.
- (e) **Demographic Changes.** The influx of refugees from former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) into Assam led to a dramatic change in the demographic landscape of the region. In the Mangaldai by-election in 1979, there were about 45,000 illegal immigrants in the electoral rolls.³ This led to discontent

amongst the people of the region, thereby giving rise to insurgency in Assam with the United National Liberation Front (ULFA), formed on 7 Apr 1979, leading the mass anti-immigrant agitation.

(f) **Internal Displacement.** Internal displacement is also an ongoing problem. From the 1990s to the start of 2011, over 800,000 people were forced to flee their homes in episodes of inter-ethnic violence in western Assam, along the border between Assam and Meghalaya, and in Tripura. According to conservative estimates, some 76,000 people remain in internal displacement in NEI due to the prolonged armed violence.⁴

(g) **External Support.** The insurgencies in the NEI have been supported by erstwhile East Pakistan in the late 1950s; and in early 1960s, in the form of training of personnel of Naga Army and giving them weapons. Later, China also provided weapons and moral support.⁵ The Chinese support for insurgency in India was at a high from 1967-1975 when China's foreign policy advocated the spread of 'revolution' around the world. In a 2007 article, the present National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval stated that the Chinese support for the Indian rebels also experienced a 'lull' during the mid-1980s but that there was, of late, 'increasing evidence' of China's revival of its 'covert offensive' in the region.⁶ Pakistan's Special Services Group (SSG) also trained the Naga guerillas in the 1960s through their bases in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).⁷

(h) **Impact of Revolutionary Politics.** Members of the NNC, Thuingaleng Muivah, Thinoselie Medom Keyho and an Angami Naga from Kohima, travelled across the Naga Hills of Myanmar reaching Yunan in Jan 1967, seeking support from the Chinese for their cause. This could be marked as the beginning of the Chinese involvement in NEI.⁸ The success of people's revolution in China motivated insurgent leaders and further fuelled insurgency in NEI.

(i) **Perceived Excesses by IA.** The promulgation of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in most of the NEI has further alienated the local populace. Though imperative for strengthening the hand of IA for CI operations, it is often portrayed as draconian by various Human Rights (HR) organisations and thus has been vilified by various insurgent groups.

Current Scenario

Even though the region has seen an overall decline in insurgency, however, the discontent continues. At present the scenario is less violent than the earlier times. Some of the important recent developments are covered in the succeeding paras.

New Umbrella Organisation. Nine insurgent groups of NEI have come together to form a new unified militant outfit known as United National Liberation Front of South West Asia (UNLFSWA). The initial idea was sown in 2011, by leaders of four North East insurgent groups; namely, Paresh Baruah of ULFA, Khaplang of National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang), (NSCN (K)) and heads of Meitei outfits; namely, United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and People's Liberation Army (PLA). These insurgent leaders met and decided to form a confederation to, what they call, "liberate the ancestral homes by total struggle unitedly." It has taken four years to finally form this outfit on 17 Apr 2015. The outfits that comprise the UNLFWA are : NSCN (K), ULFA, National Democratic Front of Bodoland (Songbijit faction) (NDFB(S), Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) and six Meitei outfits i.e. Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), PREPAK (Progressive), Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) and United National Liberation Front (UNLF).⁹ Khaplang has been announced as the Chairman and Paresh Baruah, either as Commander-in-Chief or Vice Chairman.

Call for Independence. The common objectives of UNLFSWA are, as they put it, "to gain complete independence, to secure sovereign political future from occupation and march ahead together in peace, progress and prosperity of the whole region".¹⁰ Thus, rather than fighting the IA in splinters, the call for struggle for independence is likely to refine their violent operations.

Increase in Attacks on Security Forces. There was an upsurge in the violence against IA by various insurgent groups, in the immediate aftermath of the formation of UNLFSWA, specially the killing of IA soldiers in Jun 2015. However, by the end of 2015, the same has not shown any sign of increasing and seems to have been contained by the IA. In this context, CI operations conducted by the IA in the immediate aftermath of Jun 2015 attack are noteworthy.

Signing of Framework Agreement. On 03 Aug 2015, the 18-year long negotiations with the NSCN (IM) led to the signing of a 'Framework Agreement' between the GoI and the former. Details of the Agreement were not disclosed during its signing. On 07 Aug 2015, the NSCN (K) announced that the 'Framework Agreement' signed with NSCN (IM) was intended exclusively for that group alone and asserted that it was under no obligation to either agree or disagree with the accord. In Sep 2015, Government declared NSCN (K) a terrorist organisation under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967. Finally, on 25 Dec 2015, the NSCN (IM) issued a statement in which it said the Agreement looked at a final solution in which the Nagas would have the right to exercise 'sovereign power' over their 'territories.'¹¹

Efforts by Civil Society. In Nagaland, the civil society is trying to bring the NSCN (K) back to the negotiating table. In Aug 2015, a four-member delegation of the Naga Mothers' Association (NMA), a frontline Naga women's group, walked across to Myanmar and held talks with the NSCN (K) leaders. After the meeting, the delegation informed that the NSCN (K) was not averse to reconsidering its decision. In Manipur, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar met Rajkumar Meghen alias Sanayaima, the detained leader of Manipur's oldest insurgent group UNLF at the Guwahati Central Jail, on 17 Dec 2015. The response of the jailed leader has been good. This was the first major mediatory effort by anyone with the Meitei insurgent groups in Manipur and therefore, could be termed as a significant move towards achieving peace in the state.¹²

Spread of Islamic Radicalism. Islamic radicalism has started spreading its roots in NEI. The arrest of several persons in Assam, many of them directly linked to the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), in the wake of the 02 Oct 2014 blast in West Bengal's Burdwan area, is an indication of the fact that Islamist radicalism of the 'Jihadi' variety is very much a reality in the region.¹³

Recommendations

A peaceful NEI without insurgencies is a strategic necessity for India, especially for the success of the 'Act East Policy'. In order to achieve the same, a few recommendations are outlined below:-

- (a) **Signing of Peace Accords.** To ensure peace and stability in NEI, however temporary, the GoI must sign peace

accords with various remaining insurgent groups in the region, on the lines of 'Framework Agreement' signed with NSCN (IM) in Aug 2015. A similar accord may be signed with the NSCN (K), ULFA and other insurgent groups. Engagement of insurgent groups in talks is vital for conflict resolution and therefore must be pursued actively and persistently.

(b) **Inclusion of Insurgent Leaders.** Now that ULFA's General Secretary Anup Chetia, who was in prison in Bangladesh, has been brought back and has been released on bail in Dec 2015, he must become the pointsman of Gol for further talks with ULFA leading to an agreement with ULFA in a time-bound manner.

(c) **Continued Efforts By Civil Society.** Notwithstanding the progress in peace talks, efforts by the civil society for rapprochement with the insurgent organisations must continue. This enables a respectable way out for the insurgent leaders and leads to a win-win situation for all the stakeholders.

(d) **Increased Socio-Economic Development: Act East Policy (AEP).** In order to weed out one of the root causes of insurgency, Gol must accelerate its plans for the development of the region. PM Modi first used the term 'Act East Policy' in Nov 2014 at Nya Pi Taw, Myanmar. The stress of PM Modi on AEP is, therefore, a step in the right direction. The building of infrastructure like roads, hospitals, schools, sanitation facilities, *et al* are essential in inculcating a sense of oneness in the peoples of NEI.

(e) **Emphasis on Identity, Not on "Mainstreaming".** NEI is a *pot pourri* of various tribes, ethnicities, religions, customs, languages, *et al*. Therefore, the focus should more be on maintaining the individual identities of these peoples. Fear of balkanisation of NEI must not dictate the policies of Gol.

(f) **Continued Military Operations against Select Insurgent Groups.** IA should continue to operate against those insurgent groups who have not shown inclination towards any peace talks, like NSCN (K), NDFB (S), ULFA, etc. This will erode their resisting power and will bring about stability in the region while political solution is being drafted. It is reiterated that a humane approach in these operations is imperative.

(g) **Sanctity of Indo-Myanmar International Border (IB).** India shares approximately 1400 km long IB with Myanmar in states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.¹⁴ The sanctity of the same must, therefore, be strengthened to preclude insurgents from crossing the border at will. This is a herculean task and must therefore, be given high priority.

(h) **Three Tiered Deployment.** In order to focus the military operations against selected insurgent in select areas, a three tiered deployment is imperative. This can be achieved by increasing the deployment of Assam Rifles (AR) along the Indo-Myanmar border in the first tier, IA in the second tier and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in the third tier. This will ensure cohesive operations thereby, further focussing the ongoing military operations in selected areas.

(j) **Continuation of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).** It is strongly recommended to continue AFSPA in regions where there are high levels of insurgency. In this regard, the verdict of Meghalaya's High Court on the subject is unprecedented. Taking into consideration the situation in the region from Jan-Oct 2015 during which various militant outfits had abducted 87 people for ransom including 27 businessmen, 25 civilians, 25 employees of private firms, five government employees and five teachers, the Bench comprising Chief Justice Uma Nath Singh, Justice TNK Singh and Justice SR Sen issued the order on 02 Nov 2015 for enforcement of AFSPA. "We have no option but to direct the Central Government to consider the use of AFSPA in Garo Hills area and deployment of armed and para-military forces to control the situation till life becomes normal and the incidents of rampant kidnapping and killing are totally stopped", the order stated. The bench noted that the police and civil authorities, despite their best efforts, were not able to control the situation.¹⁵

(k) **De-induction of IA from Select Areas.** Consequent to the peaceful conduct of state elections in Apr 2016 in Assam, it is amply clear that the situation in many parts of Assam and NEI has stabilised. Hence, in these areas, IA must go back to barracks and hand over these districts to the civil

administration. If required, the CRPF can fill the void and assist the state police in maintaining law and order in these areas.

(l) **Monitoring Spread of Radical Islam.** GoI must keep on monitoring the situation in NEI to prevent spread of Islamic radicalism by initiating appropriate socio-economic development measures including education. This will preclude youth from falling easy prey to radical Islamic propaganda.

Conclusion

The insurgencies of NEI have continued for the past seven decades despite various efforts by GoI for a permanent solution. However, with the older generation passing away and the new generation having little interest in insurgencies, the time is ripe to hammer out a long term strategy for elimination of residual insurgencies. A wise mix of socio-economic development and political settlement are the pillars of an everlasting peace in the NEI. Winning the hearts and minds should be the cornerstone for achieving conflict resolution in NEI.

As an instrument of state policy in accordance with goals of statecraft, IA has the key role of undertaking CI operations to prevent the insurgent groups from escalating violence. Towards that end, it has performed in an exemplary manner till date and must therefore, continue to do so whenever and wherever mandated. Resolving the ongoing insurgencies in NEI will be the harbinger of peace and consequent economic prosperity for the millions of people in NEI. It is therefore a step in the right direction, for the success of India's AEP, and for India to emerge as one of the global powers in a multipolar world of the 21st century.

Endnotes

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⁵ Subir Bhaumik, op. cit.

⁶ Sanjeevan Pradhan, India's Myanmar Strike: The China Factor, Aug 2015, available at <http://www.icsin.org/uploads/2015/08/16/6a5ea5d954d98888b4dbdc78337e6d94.pdf> accessed 02 Feb 16.

⁷ SSG veteran officer Colonel SS Medhi in an interview with Subir Bhaumik at Oxford on 03 Feb 1990.

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Homeland Security for India: Need to Revisit?

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Introduction

Homeland security is a uniquely American concept, which came to prominence after the 9/11 attacks in the US. Fundamental to the concept of homeland security is grouping counterterrorism initiatives, security from natural disasters and public health hazards with that of national security from any outside adversary. The concept of homeland security for the US was born out of the fact that the landmass that constitutes America was geographically isolated and a strong historic belief that issues and problems of outside world were vastly different from those inside the Country. This belief led the Americans to create legal and constitutional tools to deal with threats from outside which were vastly different from what existed inside the US. Thus when 9/11 strikes occurred in the US, the Government found it very difficult to implement rules and regulations to fight terror inside the US. This was the *raison-de-être* for the Department of Home Security to come up with a new legislation. Later, due to the catastrophic aftermath of hurricane *Katrina*, the aspects of natural disasters and health hazards were also brought within its gamut.¹ In India, the demand for an American-style homeland security model is gaining popularity due to the inability of domestic law enforcement agencies to stop terror attacks in the Indian towns and cities. Probably, such a demand comes more from frustration than a clear understanding of the concept of Homeland Security.

Concept of Homeland Security in India

Homeland Security is not a term widely used in the security lexicon in India. The Indian equivalent is Internal Security (IS) and is looked after by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). Currently, it encompasses an assortment of responsibilities from border management to internal securities. Together with Department of

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