
Naga Peace Accord: Dilemma for the Rest of India's Northeast

Rameshwar Roy

For more than seven decades since India's independence, in charting out its destiny in a *realpolitik* world, the struggle to come out of some of the legacies of the 'British Raj' appears to be an ongoing process. On top of this chart is the blatant neglect of India's northeastern region, notwithstanding the pronouncements of the Look East policy of 1991 and the Act East policy of 2015. The sensitivities of India's northeast get more pronounced due to the fact that following the partition of the country in 1947, when East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was created, the natural connectivity of the northeastern states to the outside world, through the Bay of Bengal, got obstructed. This resultantly created a claustrophobic environment for the population of the region, especially given the strategic reality of being surrounded by China (then Tibet), Myanmar and Bangladesh, with the Siliguri Corridor link to mainland India, which at best can be termed a cartographic relic of the British decolonisation process.¹ The corridor is a 200-km stretch with a width varying between 17 to 60 km as it runs along.

In pure connectivity terms, whether through land, sea, or even electronic communications, India's northeast has been feeling completely

Lieutenant General **Rameshwar Roy** (Retd) is former GOC, 16 Corps, and Director General, Assam Rifles.

isolated, and also insecure in many ways ever since. The British seemingly found it unwise to integrate this region with the rest of India's mainland due to lack of financial viability and other constraints of management – thus, leaving it more as a buffer zone. This, however, created an impression that the British did so for 'anthropological' reasons, having tribal sensitivities – an idea that seemingly continues even after seven decades of Indian independence.

Insurgency in Nagaland: A Classic Case of Moving into Errors

In the turbulent political history of the seven northeastern states, the seeds of the Naga insurgency had been sown prior to India's independence. Referred to as the mother of all insurgencies in the northeastern states, the British were not keen to extend their empire into the Naga hills due to the hostile attitude of the hill tribes, who always took the British as an occupation force out to control the freedom of the Nagas and interfere with their distinct cultural identity. In the given situation, the British found it convenient to protect them with the Inner Line Permits. Thereafter, the spread of Christianity and establishment of modern political, administrative, and educational institutions led to an educated, elite class amongst the Nagas. And, in 1918, these Nagas, with the help of the British officials, formed the Naga Club. Thereafter, in 1935, the then Government of India Act designated the Naga Hill districts as "excluded areas" wherein the Nagas could continue to maintain their traditions, culture and lifestyle with little interference from the federal or provincial governments. This ultimately led to the formation of the Naga National Council in 1946, which appealed to the British authorities as well as the Indian political leadership to grant them independence. However, following considerable persuasion, a Nine-Point Agreement was signed in June 1947 between the Naga leaders and Akbar Hydari, then Governor of

Assam, wherein it was agreed that ten years after the signing of the agreement, the Nagas would be free to decide their own future.²

In fact, the Nagas even boycotted the first general elections of independent India in 1952 on expected lines. A few years later, in 1956, the Naga militants, under the leadership of Phizo, created a secret government known as the Naga Federal Government (NFG) with around 1,500 armed guerrilla fighters.³ This started the so-called 'freedom struggle for Greater Nagaland better known as 'Nagalim'. The Indian government, in a reactive approach, first, sent in the Army to control insurrections and, subsequently, Nagaland was given the status of an Indian state in 1962, with the existing boundaries of the state.⁴

What needs to be understood is that 'Naga' is a generic term which refers to a group of over 30 tribes inhabiting not only the boundaries along and within Nagaland, but also some hilly regions of the adjoining states of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, and some parts of the bordering nation, Myanmar, as well.⁵

Manipur got the status of a state in 1972, and the Indian government kept on giving in to the demands of division of other states in the northeast, more on ethnic considerations rather than economic viability and ease of governance considerations. This not only allowed the Nagaland insurgency to grow, but it proliferated similar sentiments and a growing sense of insecurity amongst other sections of the population, resulting in a number of insurrections in this region. Not surprisingly, India's problems got multiplied and further complicated. Today, as India needs a peaceful environment for all-inclusive balanced development of the region, it requires a stable security situation, without which development and growth will remain a dream. In today's world, neither of the two is possible all by itself. Time and again, the government finds it easy and expedient to rush in the security forces to deal with the developing security situation in a piecemeal manner, rather than going in for a long-term, stable, and sustainable political solution which will be acceptable to the people of

It needs to be clearly understood that these groups are forced to come to the negotiating table only when the pressure of sustained operations by the security forces threatens their existence. It is during this phase that the insurgent groups desperately seek a ‘break time’ to regroup and reorganise their struggle and cadres.

the region. Either way, it has always suited the stakeholders at all times to play the game of power politics, and money, rather than provide effective and efficient governance.

The most valuable lesson from the developmental issues is that the problems of the northeastern states must not be considered in isolation, but in an integrated and cohesive manner. Attempts to look at the issues of these states on a case-to-case basis for the sake of expediency and going in for different arrangements with various insurgent groups at different times, with varying conditions, has

not only given mixed signals to the militant groups but, also encouraged them to continue their activities with impunity. Besides, what also has to be learnt by experience is that talks with the insurgent groups should not be either for Ceasefire Agreements (CFAs) or Suspension of Operations (SOO) against them, without them fulfilling at least one pre-condition – i.e., the surrender of their weapons to the security forces as a prerequisite for any kind of ongoing or future talks/dialogue. The failure to do this has resulted in the revival of militancy and insurgency time and again at the cost of negotiations for peace. More importantly, this has been a setback to the security forces’ operations and their morale.

It needs to be clearly understood that these groups are forced to come to the negotiating table only when the pressure of sustained operations by the security forces threatens their existence. It is during this phase that the insurgent groups desperately seek a ‘break time’ to regroup and reorganise their struggle and cadres. Having an edge

over these groups, this is the time for the government machinery to extract concessions from them, so that they abandon their struggle against the state, and not the other way round. The classic case in this reference is the Ceasefire Monitoring Group (CFMG) in Nagaland, instituted in 2001, for ensuring the implementation of the rules of the CFA. It remains the most ineffective instrument in operation till date, since no powers were provided to penalise the violators. Far worse is

The history of the development of these groups suffices to conclude that the Nagaland insurgents and insurgency are the oldest in the region, with linkages to China through Myanmar, and have been a referral point for other such groups across the northeast.

the fact that it is headed by a retired Lieutenant General from the Army and the latest reported update being that a retired Director General of the Border Security Force (BSF) has been appointed as the Chairman of the CFMG, despite the BSF not being even remotely connected to Nagaland, either operationally or otherwise.

Institutionalisation of Insurgency in Northeast

The reality and bitter truth in the contemporary context is that this whole process of the existence of various militant groups has gotten institutionalised. Not surprisingly, the northeastern states use it for constant leverage with the central government to extract more aid and funds, with reducing accountability. It has resulted in a mutually beneficial relationship for the respective state governments and these insurgent groups, with all of them being sustained through the same aid and schemes that they receive from the central government. Although it has not been proved very clearly on the ground, many of the contracts for various development projects are obtained by front-end organisations that are affiliated to the various insurgent groups.

The governments have been buying time to tire out and disintegrate the various factions of the Naga movement.

The state of Nagaland and its militants are referred to as the mother of all insurgent groups in the northeast.⁶ The history of the development of these groups suffices to conclude that the Nagaland insurgents and insurgency are the oldest in the region, with linkages

to China through Myanmar, and have been a referral point for other such groups across the northeast. Despite factional fights and divisions between the Naga groups, the main group, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah [NSCN (IM)] has retained superiority and dominance till date. The Modi government went in for a much publicised Framework Agreement with the NSCN (IM) in 2015, the terms and conditions of which have never been made public, but appear to be slowly unfolding.⁷ What emerges quite evidently is that the final answer to this vexed problem has to be found from within the framework of the Indian Constitution, and the mixed signals emanating from New Delhi support this assumption.

The complexities of the Nagaland problem that has kept peace at bay for such a long time revolve around three key issues. To start with, the government itself never had a long-term vision to delve into this issue in an integrated manner. The governments have been buying time to tire out and disintegrate the various factions of the Naga movement. This actually appeared to be hopeful at times in the past, when inter-group clashes seemed to be hijacking the main agenda, but it never fructified into any concrete gains.

The second major issue has been that all the governments of the day have attempted to solve the problem in isolation, taking one northeastern state at a time, not realising that while each of the respective state's insurgency had its own character and start point, they are interlinked in more than one way, in terms of their support to each other, and their

common aspirations and *modus operandi*. Given that the northeastern states have demographic spillovers, particularly the Nagas, who comprise a sizeable population in Manipur, Assam, and neighbouring Myanmar. The Indian Constitution provides for a federal structure, however, when the Centre intervenes with additional security forces, including the Army, the onus shifts from the state to the central government. In fact, this has been the one single factor that has allowed the states to play politics with the peace processes in the state and shift the blame for the failure on the Centre, thus, causing inordinate delays in finding peace in the region time and again. In the negotiations for the peace processes, the states seem to have distanced themselves from success or failure, denying their own stakes in normalising the situation.

And the third major issue is that a number of ceasefire agreements that were once worked out with the various insurgent groups, continue to get extended indefinitely, thereby chasing the now seemingly elusive peace. The state allows the cadres and their weapons to be kept in safe camps away from the scrutiny of the security forces. Moreover, the cadres are given a stipend or sustenance allowance, with the net result being that the holdings of weapons and cadres in the camps continue to increase. This has been the most noticeable feature with the NSCN (IM) of Nagaland in the Hebron Camp. In fact, in the states, particularly Nagaland and Assam, people have got used to paying taxes at three distinct levels: one, to the insurgent outfits; two, to the state; and three, to the Centre. It is no surprise that these outfits have annual budget outlays running into crores of rupees year after year. For instance, the NSCN (IM) had an annual budget of Rs 180 crore in 2016-17.⁸

Basic Obstacles to Naga Peace Accord and Framework Agreement of 2015

Although the dialogue for peace between the Indian state and the Nagas started way back in the 1950s, it was followed up by three Naga People's

The dream of greater Nagaland, “Nagalim” has given way to the idea of shared sovereignty, though what this means in real terms still remains difficult to define, but redrawing the boundaries of the state of Nagaland is highly unlikely.

Conventions, convened in 1957, 1958 and 1959, respectively, with nothing substantial resulting. The prolonged period has only been witness to more Naga factional fights amongst various sub-groups trying to assert themselves for the so-called cause of the Nagas. Of these, it is the NSCN (IM) which has emerged the strongest and most articulate since 1988. It can be argued that meaningful talks with the Nagas actually started in 1997.⁹ There are four

main challenges that need to be resolved before taking any call on working out a permanent solution to the Naga problem:

- Defining of Greater Nagaland, called ‘Nagalim’.
- Integration of adjoining Naga inhabited areas.
- Unity amongst all Naga groups, despite the NSCN (IM) being the strongest and the lead group.
- Building up of greater confidence among the Naga groups, the state government and the Centre.

On August 03, 2015, the Naga Framework Agreement was signed between the NSCN (IM) and Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the details of which have not been declassified as yet.¹⁰ It did indicate the possibility of enhancing the scope of the talks to include more Naga political groups for building a larger consensus for the agreement. There are significant tribes such as the Angamis, Aos and Konyaks whose interests are not represented by the NSCN (IM). Muivah is a Thangkul from Manipur and his tribe has virtually no presence in Nagaland. Similarly, Isak Swu represents just one faction of the Sema tribes, while the Konyaks comprise the single largest tribe represented by

the NSCN (K).¹¹ The dream of greater Nagaland, “Nagalim,” has given way to the idea of shared sovereignty, though what this means in real terms is difficult to define, but redrawing the boundaries of the state of Nagaland is highly unlikely. The adjoining three states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur are against any move to redraw geographical maps or existing state boundaries to create a greater Nagaland/Nagalim.

Going by the past experiences of the autonomous Hill District Councils in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram, the trend is that their aim, scope, focus, and functioning have never stood the test of time nor found success.

Speaking on the 38th Republic Day of Nagalim on March 24, 2017, at its citadel Camp Hebron near Dimapur (known to be a state within a state), the supreme leader Thuingaleng Muivah pointed out that the framework agreement recognises “the legitimate right of the Nagas to integrate all Naga territories”. What he did not explain, however, was what that would mean. What was also discussed was the arrangement of ‘shared sovereignty’ as an alternative to ‘Nagalim’. How this can be implemented has not been spelt out. Can it be interpreted that the NSCN (IM) accepts its future within India but also retains its empowered status of crafting its own policies for the Naga areas? Or does it imply that the state would no longer be the sole authority in policy-making.¹² There are speculations of a number of Hill District Councils in the adjoining areas of the state having a substantial Naga population. Although on the face of it, it may appear to be the most viable solution, it has its own degree of difficulties in making it work on the ground, functionally and practically, and that too, to the satisfaction of all the Naga groups. Going by the past experiences of the autonomous Hill District Councils in the states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram, the trend is that their aim, scope, focus, and functioning have never stood the test of time nor found

If there is any other state that has achieved total peace amongst the northeastern states after being in a state of turmoil since the 1990s, it is the state of Tripura.

success. These councils had more to do with money and muscle power rather than efficient administration. Another important aspect is that of the mutual confidence among all the stakeholders. Going by the uneasy peace and the pace at which it has prevailed over the last seven decades, with a sprinkling of clashes including inter-factional ones, the existing historical records are not very encouraging.

Tripura: A Contextual Case Study

The state of peace prevailing in Tripura should act as an example of how permanent peace can be achieved in India's entire northeast, though, there is an alternative option of Mizoram that can be cited as a good model for peace. In the case of Tripura, the insurgency began with the formation of the militant group, the National Liberation Front of Tripura, in March 1989, and its armed wing, the All Tripura Tiger Force in 1990. It had its phases of ups and down, but insurgency saw a steep decline during 1996-98 and finally tapered off completely.¹³ If there is any other state that has achieved total peace amongst the northeastern states after being in a state of turmoil since the 1990s, it is the state of Tripura. Many major lessons may be learnt from this case study, including that the following are required:¹⁴

- A strong and thoughtful conflict resolution mechanism.
- A responsible, efficient, credible and responsive state administration.
- A credible surrender policy and rehabilitation system for the surrendering rebels.
- Zero tolerance to excesses by the security forces combined with psychological operations.
- Proactive and dynamic participation by the people.

Tripura has been out of the purview of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) since 2015, and, therefore, could well form the key reference point for conflict resolution in the northeast.

Good Neighbourly Relations: The Key to Peace in the Northeast

The basis of tackling insurgency in the northeastern states has to be upon

The basis of tackling insurgency in the northeastern states has to be upon speedy and proactive improvement in relations with India's immediate neighbours, particularly Bhutan and Bangladesh.

speedy and proactive improvement in relations with India's immediate neighbours, particularly Bhutan and Bangladesh. Beginning with Bhutan, India's relations with the Himalayan Kingdom nation have always been good but what added synergy to India's tackling of insurgency in Assam was the military operation "All Clear" that was launched by the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) in 2003 to weed out United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) insurgent camps from Bhutanese territory in India's support. This resulted in breaking the back of ULFA as an organisation and its leadership, and it became the beginning of the end of this group.¹⁵ On the other hand, improving relations with Bangladesh also resulted in closing the safe sanctuaries for ULFA, with the Bangladesh government displaying great resolve in ensuring that not only the ULFA groups from Assam, but even those operating in Tripura were completely denied safe sanctuaries to operate against the Indian state. The ever improving relations with both these countries have maintained this continuity and pressure on the insurgent groups till date, thereby, denying them safe bases across India's eastern borders.

However, despite this continued cooperation, perhaps amongst India's biggest weakness in reference to safe sanctuaries for the insurgent

groups remain those still existing in Myanmar. This is not to state that the Myanmar government or the Myanmar Army lacks the desire to cooperate with India – rather it appears to be a lack of such capabilities, given Myanmar’s own internal problems with its border with Thailand that holds greater priority for Naypyidaw. It makes for a backdrop of the Indian Army’s trans-border foray into Myanmar in pursuit of insurgent groups operating inside India from across these borders. Here too, it has been mainly been the NSCN – Khaplang [NSCN (K)] from Nagaland and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur having safe sanctuaries, with reports of some ULFA leaders enjoying patronage from these groups for monetary considerations. The dimension of safe sanctuaries in Myanmar also brings in the transit routes for insurgent groups through the state of Arunachal Pradesh. Besides, China’s involvement with these groups for the supply of arms and ammunition is well documented. If India continues to present its vulnerabilities, the adversaries are bound to exploit them. With China gaining a bigger stature in world politics, low level involvement in managing arms and ammunition is likely to continue at the micro ground level.

Amidst all this, with the announcement of policies, from ‘Look East’ to ‘Act East’, it needs to be remembered that unless and until the security situation not only stabilises completely in this troubled region, but also shows a fair degree of sustainable stability and development, the vision that India holds for its northeastern region will never be fulfilled. The Kaladan Multi-modal Transit Transport Project that will connect India’s eastern seaport of Kolkata with the landlocked northeastern state of Mizoram by traversing the Arakan and Chin states in Myanmar through the newly constructed river and highway transport system, has been inordinately delayed, with huge amounts of upward cost escalations which upsets India’s Act East policy coordinates. Given that all these ventures are high-investment multinational projects with much of the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flowing into it, stronger resolve to stabilise peace in the

northeastern states at the earliest needs to be displayed at the operational level by India.

Policy Prescription and Action Plan

The instability persisting in the northeastern states, one way or the other, for the last seven decades, calls for introspection of the policy prescription that has been observed by successive

Indian governments – i.e., wait and watch, buy time, and let the problem tire itself out for a resolution. This approach needs to change now, basically due to the fact that none of the insurgent groups is being driven by just the cause for which it started its movement initially. There is no popular support from the masses: the extortion rackets and fear-driven movement itself is proof enough. Today, the Indian government is in a much stronger position, with greater capabilities to deal with these groups than was the case when these groups emerged decades ago, for one reason or the other. In reality, the insurgent groups operating in the northeast have been reduced to terrorist outfits fighting for their existence rather than any coordinated and synergised action against the Indian state.

Moreover, India does not have the luxury of unlimited time to settle the issue, with too much room being given to public sentiments. In any case, all the northeastern states have been holding regular elections, without any interruptions, as part of the democratic process, and their political leadership is of their own choosing. It has become more and more critical to develop India's northeastern region at a faster pace to improve its security vulnerabilities in the east, particularly against China and its push along the borders. This is also a pressing requirement for India to succeed in pursuing the Act East policy in a reasonable timeframe. Therefore,

The insurgent groups operating in the northeast have been reduced to terrorist outfits fighting for their existence rather than any coordinated and synergised action against the Indian state.

New Delhi, for decades, has not really known the ground realities of the northeast despite its best efforts – resulting in the absence of economic viability combining with an all-inclusive model of development for this region.

the Indian government needs to make its policy prescription for the northeastern states based upon the following:

- Surrendering arms and weapons as a pre-condition for peace talks.
- No suspension of operations by the security forces supported by subsistence allowance by the government.
- A comprehensive and thought through rehabilitation package that must cater to, and be in sync with, the

ground realities and not comprise half-baked politically-expedient media grabbing shows.

- Enhancing the capacity and capabilities of the state security apparatus, including state armed police forces to deal with these groups so that the Army is pulled out of all these states, and also relieves the states from the AFSPA.
- Develop these states as viable self-sustaining economic entities and not keep them dependent entirely upon central aid packages to the tune of over 90 percent dependency, as is the case currently.
- There is a need to follow a comprehensive and all-inclusive developmental model for these states with better accountability of the ‘fund flow,’ since large amounts of funds are allotted by the central government due to the financial non-viability of these states.
- Connectivity to the mainland and a greater push for development of the border areas will go a long way in ensuring better assimilation of the northeast and its people.

The Northeastern Council, headquartered in Shillong, to coordinate the development efforts in this region needs to be revived and made more

vibrant and accountable to the system in a proactive manner than is the case at present.

Conclusion

To conclude, it needs to be accepted that regardless of the government in power at the Centre, the consistent Indian policy for conflict resolution in the northeast has been one of buying time through talks. Most of these talks have lacked good governance models. An equally pressing reality is that New Delhi, for decades, has not really known the ground realities of the northeast despite its best efforts – resulting in the absence of economic viability combining with an all-inclusive model of development for this region. A huge amount of infrastructure, particularly road connectivity and investments, especially in the power sector are the needs of the hour. For far too long, India has protected these areas with Inner Line Permits, and it is time to open them up and allow the people of the region to enjoy the fruits of modern amenities. The northeast is full of natural resources that could be put to optimum usage for the betterment of the native people's lives and will aid in bridging this area to connect India to its eastern and southeastern neighbours even though considerable time has been lost in keeping the insurgency in the northeast in a state of suspended animation.

The northeast is full of natural resources that could be put to optimum usage for the betterment of the native people's lives and will aid in bridging this area to connect India to its eastern and southeastern neighbours.

Notes

1. Ankit Panda, "The Siliguri Corridor is a Terrifyingly Vulnerable Artery in Indian Geography," *The Diplomat*, November 08, 2013.
2. H Srikanth and CJ Thomas, "Naga Resistance Movement and Peace Process in the Northeast India," *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2005, p. 60.
3. Subham Dutta, "The Naga Movement: A Brief Chronological Understanding," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 21, No. 5, May 2016, pp. 37-40.

4. Srikanth and Thomas, n. 2.
5. Ibid.
6. Madhu Gurung and Ramtanu Maitra, "Insurgent Groups in Northeast India," *Executive Intelligence Review*, October 13, 1995.
7. Samudra Gupta Kashyap, "Towards the Govt-Naga Peace Accord," *The Indian Express*, August 04, 2015.
8. Namrata Goswami, "The Naga Peace Accord and the Troublesome Idea of 'Shared Sovereignty'," *Huffington Post Blog*, June 05, 2017.
9. Namrata Goswami, "Peace Negotiations and Dialogue in the Northeast: The Naga Case," in R. Thilagaraj and J. Liu, eds., *Restorative Justice in India* (Springer International Publishing, 2017).
10. Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, "Revealed: RSS Draft Plan for Nagaland Accord," *The Wire*, January 19, 2018.
11. Rupak Chattopadhyay, "The Challenge of Peace in Nagaland," *Forum of Federations*, Vol. 5, No. 2, March/April 2006.
12. Goswami, n. 8.
13. DN Sahaya, "Triumph Over Insurgency," *The Statesman*, July 05, 2017.
14. Ibid.
15. Namrata Goswami, "An Assessment of Insurgencies in Assam, Manipur, and Nagaland in 2009," Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, April 05, 2010.

