

Ensuring Peace in the Northeast



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Summary

The internal security situation in the North-eastern states is complex. It requires people with in-depth knowledge of the terrain, society, politics and culture and history of insurgency in the region to be placed in positions entrusted with the handling of affairs. Frequent change of interlocutors, for example between Naga groups and Government of India, would not be desirable since delicate negotiations require a great degree of trust between negotiators and that can only come about with longevity of engagement. The Government must focus on concluding final peace agreements with the groups that are part of the peace process as soon as possible so that all the energies could then be applied in tackling the groups that remain intransigent. India's Act East Policy could only be successful if we develop connectivity in the North-eastern states and permit greater people-to-people contact with the people of the ASEAN, and particularly with the people of Myanmar. Investments in the region are required for the economic advancement of the people. These would require the creation of a peaceful environment in the North-eastern states. Finally, instead of letting turf wars decide the outcome, Assam Rifles must continue to be responsible for guarding the India-Myanmar border.

A number of attacks in the last three months on Army and Assam Rifles convoys and posts in Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur invite focus on the deteriorating security situation in the Northeast region. An umbrella organisation called United National Liberation Front of West South East Asia (UNLFW), comprising of a number of insurgent groups – the National Socialist Council of Nagaland [Khaplang] (NSCN[K]), United Liberation Front of Assam-Independent (ULFA-I), Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP), Kanglei Yawol Kunna Lup (KYKL), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PRPK), People's Liberation Army (PLA), United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (Songbijit) (NDFB[S]) – and established earlier this year has claimed responsibility for all these attacks. The latest of these attacks on an administrative convoy of 6 DOGRA on 4 June 2015 resulted in 18 fatalities. This was the single largest loss to the Army after the attack by NSCN (Isak-Muivah) insurgents in Mokokchung District of Nagaland in 1994, when the Commanding Officer of 16 Maratha Light Infantry Col. NJ Nair and a score of his comrades lost their lives.

Enough has been reported about the well planned and executed surgical strike against two insurgent camps across the Myanmar border in the early hours of 9 June. The operation was indeed a reflection of the political will as well as the capability of the Armed Forces, and must have delivered a strong message to insurgent groups operating in the region.

The Army had carried out Operation Golden Bird against a group of about 200 ULFA, PLA and NFLT terrorists moving from Bandar Ban in Chittagong Hill Tracts along the Indo-Myanmar border in April-May 1995. Having been part of that operation, the author knows that we could have dealt a fatal blow to all the three groups if we had had a measure of coordination with Myanmar on that occasion. Indian troops crossed the border on several occasions in hot pursuit of the leaders and cadres of these groups, but were challenged by the Myanmar Army at various places. At the height of the operation when the terrorists were fatigued and short of rations, the Indian government announced the conferring of the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding on Aung San Suu Kyi. Immediately thereafter, the Myanmar Army helped the terrorists escape from our dragnet.

The recent cross border operation is being rightly described as a success because we could now combine political decision making and intelligence acquisition with operational capabilities of the Armed forces. This need not be the only surgical operation to be carried out against terrorist camps, but this is again also not likely to be the norm followed repeatedly. A scholar from Northeast who undertook a motorcycle journey from Imphal to Mandalay in 2013 mentioned that there were many agents located across Moreh who offered, for a fee, to take him to the camps of any of the Manipur insurgent groups located not far from the border. If this is true, then a higher degree of coordination with the government of Myanmar would be necessary. Having signed a peace agreement with the NSCN (K), the government of Myanmar may not be as forthcoming to act against terrorists based in North Sagaing region particularly at a time when it is deeply involved in fighting

the Kokangs, Kachins and other rebel groups within its territory. There are reports of permissiveness on the part of Myanmar Army units and sub-units in allowing the presence of camps of some Indian insurgent groups in Chin state and Sagaing Division.

Looking at the bigger picture, according to the Annual Report of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the number of militancy related incidents came down from 1489 in the year 2007 to 627 in the year 2011. This period was marked by ceasefire agreements with a number of insurgent groups. However, there was an uptick in militant incidents to 1025 in 2012. But this number again declined to 732 and 824 in 2013 and 2014, respectively. The number of civilian casualties came down from 498 in 2007 to 70 in 2011, but the numbers have gone up steadily thereafter reaching 212 in 2014. The number of fatal casualties to security forces came down from 79 in 2007 to 20 in 2014.¹ During the same period a large number of extremists were arrested, neutralized or surrendered.

The recent spurt in extremist activities is attributed to the abrogation of the ceasefire agreement by NSCN (K) in March 2015 and the formation of the UNFLW. Insurgent groups forming part of the UNFLW have their pockets of support in Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The formation of the umbrella organisation has, perhaps, led to a pooling of cadres, weapons, intelligence and logistics. The obvious conclusion is that the security forces have been behind the curve in not anticipating daring attacks by the extremists and lacked adequate intelligence. Since the attacks on security forces had come down significantly in the past couple of years, it is likely that troops had become complacent and did not follow Standing Operations Procedures (SOP) such as sanitising the route before the movement of a convoy, maintaining distances between vehicles and ensuring that Quick Reaction Teams (QRT) are ready, etc. This must have also contributed to the losses suffered by the Army and Assam Rifles. Appropriate lessons are always drawn from such incidents by the Army and, at least for some time to come, such incidents are unlikely to take place.

It may be of interest to note that NSCN (K) by itself is not a major force in the Northeast. It was formed in January 1980 after its forerunner – NSCN – split in two, with the Isak-Muivah faction walking out in 1988 due to deep mutual suspicions and a midnight massacre of about 140 Tangkhul and Sema cadres by insurgents loyal to Khaplang who are mainly Konyaks. Post the split, NSCN(K) drew its support from Konyak, Aao, Angami and some smaller Naga tribes in Nagaland and Manipur besides Nagas in Myanmar from where Khaplang hails. The NSCN(K) also suffered a major split in 2010 when some Konyaks and Semas walked out and formed NSCN (Kole-Kitovi). And the NSCN (K) again split in March 2015 when NSCS (Reformation) was formed by ex-Khaplang loyalists, Wangtin and Tikhak, who differed with their leader on the issue of abrogation of the ceasefire agreement with the Government of India. Since then, the Zeliangrong regional committee has also walked out of NSCN (K). Although NSCN(K) has a small dispersed cadre base among various

¹ See, [http://mha.nic.in/sites/upload_files/mha/files/AR\(E\)1415.pdf](http://mha.nic.in/sites/upload_files/mha/files/AR(E)1415.pdf), pp. 10-11.

tribes in Nagaland and Manipur as well as in Tirap and Changlang districts of Arunachal Pradesh, it draws its main strength from the 2012 ceasefire agreement with the Government in Myanmar and from the close relationship it has developed with five Manipur-valley based terrorist groups (earlier members of the Coordination Committee), the Paresh Baruah faction of ULFA and NDFB(S) to whom it provides bases and logistics support in Northern Sagaing Division of Myanmar. It does not enjoy strong support in any districts of Nagaland and Manipur any longer.

The broader issue here is that India's Act East Policy is being held hostage to the unstable security situation in the North-eastern states. The situation in Manipur is most disturbed. Frequent blockades of the National Highway and other roads in Manipur have been tolerated on political grounds in the past. This has created a perception of government weakness. Rail and road projects through Manipur, which are necessary for actualising the Act East Policy, are facing inordinate delay. Signing of the ceasefire and Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreements are not adequate to establish stable peace unless the negotiations with various groups are taken to their logical conclusion within a reasonable timeframe. Groups like NSCN-IM have retained their arms and have been running a parallel government including the imposition of illegal taxes on government servants, businesses and households in Nagaland and parts of Manipur. Imphal Valley based terrorist groups in Manipur are now running organised businesses and, according to some reports, extort a percentage of salaries from government servants. Political parties in North-eastern states are known to have nexus with one or the other insurgent group.

The following table gives the number of Terrorist, Insurgent and Extremist groups in North East India:²

	Proscribed Groups	Active Groups	Inactive Groups	In Peace talks / Suspension of Operation / Ceasefire Groups
Arunachal Pradesh	-	4	2	-
Assam	3	7	36	13
Manipur	6	6	24	6
Mizoram	-	1	1	-
Meghalaya	1	7	4	1
Nagaland	-	6	2	2
Tripura	2	-	25	1

² <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/terroristoutfits/index.html>

Given the fact that there are a large number of terrorist/insurgent groups operating in the region with different aims, objectives and demands, the situation is indeed complex. However, it is possible to bring the situation under control in a not so distant future by focusing attention on issues that can be solved. The first should be the finalisation of the peace accord with the Naga groups, particularly the NSCN-IM. By all indications, most of the issues have been agreed upon and the balance can be resolved through creative thinking.

Simultaneously, there is a need for taking strong action against insurgent groups which are outside the peace process. There are adequate numbers of troops available for this purpose given that a number of Army and Assam Rifles formations have been raised in the recent past.

The Government must also show resolve in keeping the lines of communication open through Nagaland and Manipur to gain a psychological upper-hand over the insurgents and to reassure the people of Manipur that they are no longer at the mercy of anti-national elements. More and more people will support the government if they find it succeeding against the terrorists.

Yet another issue which deserves careful consideration is assigning responsibility for guarding the Indo-Myanmar border to a particular force. There have been reports that the Ministry of Home Affairs is thinking of handing over the responsibility of guarding the 1643 km long Indo-Myanmar border to the Border Security Force (BSF), reportedly on the premise that Assam Rifles, which is presently responsible for this task, is not doing a good job of it. One does not know the reaction of the Army in this regard but some commanders may think that Assam Rifles units, if relieved of the responsibility of guarding the border, could become available for conventional war. However, the long term effect of this change will only be disastrous. With due regard to the commitment and sacrifices of the BSF, it is a known fact that the force, at least in the past, has not been able to control migration and trans-border crime across the India-Bangladesh border. Should it be given the additional responsibility of guarding the India-Myanmar border, it will need to raise many more battalions which will take many years to become effective, will have less than the optimum number of officers available and, therefore, will not be in a position to handle the added responsibility any better. Assam Rifles, composed mainly of troops hailing from the North-eastern states, has a greater stake in managing the India-Myanmar border and should, therefore, continue to be responsible for it.

Conclusion

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India's Act East Policy could only be successful if we develop connectivity in the North-eastern states and permit greater people-to-people contact with the people of the ASEAN, and particularly with the people of Myanmar. Investments in the region are required for the economic advancement of the people. These would require the creation of a peaceful environment in the North-eastern states. Finally, instead of letting turf wars decide the outcome, Assam Rifles must continue to be responsible for guarding the India-Myanmar border.