

Northeast India: The Emerging Scenarios

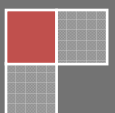
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- Ensuring support from neighboring countries in dealing with the armed ethnic conflicts in Northeast region is vital.
- Bilateral agreements with neighboring countries on areas of cooperation will prove useful in capacity building to deal with cross border armed conflicts.
- India has to work with the Myanmar government directly to address the issues in Myanmar's borderlands, which have direct impact on India's own ability to deal with the multiple armed conflicts in the Northeast.
- Ethnic conflicts in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland can escalate due to the presence of conflicting intra-ethnic violence, multiple armed groups, issues of land grab and illegal migration into ethnic homelands.
- Successful resolution of conflicts will have positive effects on the Northeast boosting investment, tourism and international connectivity.



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Of late, the Northeast India has emerged as one of the most strategic regions in this part of the world. In today's age of globalization and trans-border connectivity, the Northeast is fast emerging as the potential gateway for India to Southeast and East Asia through Myanmar. There is increased focus on it through mechanisms such as the Delhi Dialogue involving the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Countries such as Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, etc, have shown increasing interests in investing on the infrastructure development in the Northeast. The political reform process under way in Myanmar with greater focus on democratization has brought in the US as an important stakeholder right up to Northeast India's doorsteps.¹ China's presence in Myanmar and its territorial claim over Arunachal Pradesh too has brought this region to a larger geo-political chessboard. How the dynamic of this region will emerge in the next few decades will have major strategic implications for India and the Southeast Asia at large.

In analyzing the emerging scenarios for Northeast India, four drivers play important role -- of its history; ethnic conflicts; how the Indian state manages/resolves these conflicts; and finally, the external dimension of the armed ethnic conflicts.

Let us assess each one of these drivers separately.

History of Northeast India: Historically, the most dominant kingdom in Northeast India was the Ahoms, who migrated to Assam in 1228 A.D. from Thailand. This kingdom lasted till 1826 A.D after which the British took over Assam. Other smaller kingdoms like those of the Dimasas, Kacharis, the Bodos, the Nagas, the Kukis, and the Meiteis governed their own territories and paid tribute to the Ahoms. Tributes were also paid by smaller tribes to the larger more dominating ones in a given area in order to preserve space and independence of their own villages.²

One of the most critical inferences that can be drawn from this history is that the Northeast India resisted dynasties/empires from the rest of India when attempts were made to penetrate into their lands. The example that stands out in this regard is the Battle of Saraighat in 1671 when the Ahom kingdom led by Lachit Borphukan defeated the Mughal Empire led by Raja Ram Singh I.³ This battle is commemorated in Assam as a

¹ Sophie Song, "US to Increase Military Engagement With Myanmar's Military With Focus on Humanitarian Issues", International Business Times, August 01, 2013 at <http://www.ibtimes.com/us-increase-military-engagement-myanmar-military-focus-humanitarian-issues-1368137> (Accessed on March 20, 2014).

² See "Ahom Kingdom (1228-1826)" at <http://www.assamchronicle.com/node/6> (Accessed on March 12, 2014).

³ Edward Gait, History of Assam (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink, 1963), pp. 155-159.

show of independence and as witness to the political disconnect between Assam and the rest of India. Similar violent resistances were witnessed against the entry of the British into the Northeast. Amongst the most remembered is also the Battle of Khonoma in 1879 when the Angamis resisted valiantly the entry of the British into the Naga hills, but could not succeed in stopping the British entirely.⁴ With the British came such laws as the Inner Line Regulation of 1873 and the Excluded Areas Act of 1880, further creating mechanisms of distance between the ethnic communities of Northeast India and the rest of India.⁵

Hence, when India became independent in 1947 ethnic communities like the Nagas demanded the right to secede from India on the ground that there existed minimum or no connection between them and India. A Z Phizo, one of the main leaders of the Naga National Council (NNC) formed in 1946, stated that while Nagas harbored no animosity towards India, to suggest that Naga areas should form part of India was based neither on historical facts nor on cultural or political connections.⁶ These historical narratives of difference have continued to influence the political discourse of Northeast India till date.

Ethnic Conflicts: Armed ethnic conflicts have affected Northeast India since the independence. Most dominant amongst these conflicts have been that of the Nagas led from the 1940s to the 1970s by the NNC, later by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and at present by the NSCN led by Isak Chisi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah (NSCN-IM). The NSCN-IM demands independence of Naga areas from India. Manipur, adjoining Nagaland, suffers from multiple armed conflicts led by the United Liberation Front of Manipur (UNLF), the People's Liberation Army of Manipur (PLA), the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF), the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup (KYKL), etc, all demanding secession of Manipur from India. Assam also witnessed armed conflict waged by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA).⁷ The common theme cutting across these armed conflicts is their demand for political independence from India on grounds of ethnicity, identity, safeguard from resource exploitation, lack of historical and cultural connections, their absence from the larger Indian political imagination, and the inability

⁴ A. S. Shimray, *Let Freedom Ring: Story of Naga Nationalism* (Delhi: Promilla and Co., 2005). Also, see Namrata Goswami, "The Naga Narrative of Conflict: Envisioning a Resolution Roadmap", *Strategic Analysis*, 31/2, 2007, pp. 287-313.

⁵ Jonathan Glancey, *Nagaland: A Journey to India's Forgotten Frontier* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), pp. 99-105.

⁶ "Phizo's Plebiscite Speech", May 16, 1951" at http://npnbr.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=98:phizos-plebiscite-speech&catid=18:npnbr (Accessed on February 21, 2014).

⁷ For more, see M. Horam, *Naga Insurgency—The Last Thirty Years* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1988), p. 51. Also Sanjib Baruah, *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

of the Indian mainstream political discourse to state that the region matters to India in a vital way.⁸

These attributes have got further amplified by limited representation from Northeast India in India's central administrative services, the military and the diplomatic *corp*. The armed ethnic conflicts have been protracted, bloody and have complicated the development potential of the region, obstructing smooth economic growth and investment.

Indian State Response to Ethnic Conflicts: The Indian state, since independence, has had to deal with armed ethnic conflicts in Northeast India. The first concrete resolution mechanism to deal with assertions of ethnic difference by the Nagas was the Akbar Hydari agreement signed between the NNC and the then Governor of Assam, Sir Akbar Hydari, on June 29, 1947. This agreement offered a great deal of autonomy to the NNC to deal with Naga affairs. However, the phrase in the agreement, "The Governor of Assam as the agent of the Government of India will have a special responsibility for a period of ten years to ensure that due observance of this agreement; at the end of this period the Naga National Council will be asked whether they require the above agreement to be extended for a further period, or a new agreement regarding the future of the Naga people arrived at,"⁹ created a political contradiction with the NNC interpreting it as amounting to secession after 10 years whereas the Government of India interpreted it as formulating a new agreement which would continue to legally include Naga areas as an integral part of India.

The NNC took to arms in the 1950s led by Phizo. It led to the imposition of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act in the Naga hills. With the deployment of the Indian military on a counter-insurgency mode, life in the Naga hills became difficult. In the 1960s, a Naga Peace Mission was established and in 1963 Nagaland was declared as a state within the Union of India. Similar constitutional mechanisms were utilized with the 1972 re-organization of states establishing Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura as full-fledged states. Mizoram, after going through a 20-year violent conflict since 1966, was established as a

⁸ Namrata Goswami, "Escalation and De-escalation of Violence in Insurgencies: Insights from Northeast India", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 24/1, 2013 at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2013.740308#.UyrzoqhdV1A> (Accessed on March 13, 2014).

⁹ "The Nine Point Agreement" June 29, 1947 at http://www.npmhr.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=58:the-nine-point-agreement&catid=18:npmhr (Accessed on March 18, 2014).

state within India in 1987.¹⁰ With regard to the ongoing NSCN (IM)-led Naga conflict and the ULFA in Assam, the Indian state has utilized the mechanism of negotiations. However, the UNLF and the PLA of Manipur are yet to respond to the state's offer of peaceful resolution of the armed conflicts.

External Dimension of the Armed Ethnic Conflicts: The ethnic conflicts in Northeast India have sustained for long due to availability of bases, arms and resources from across the international borders of Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar.¹¹ ULFA had base camps in Bhutan from 1979 until 2003 when a joint counter-insurgency operation by the Indian military and the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) flushed out the camps and arrested several top ULFA leaders, including Bhimakanta Burhagohain, the ULFA ideologue. Bangladesh also provided a safe haven for the armed groups until 2008-2009 after which the Sheikh Hasina government in collaboration with India successfully arrested top ULFA leaders like Arabinda Rajkhowa and Raju Baruah. Myanmar has now emerged as the most likely place for establishing external base for these armed groups. ULFA's Paresh Barua has already set up a camp in that country along with the NSCN (Khaplang group), the UNLF and the PLA.

Ethnic armed groups in Myanmar, like the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the Shan State Army (SSA) etc., charge rent in terms of space provided to northeastern armed groups for their base camps. The UWSA is one of the largest producers and sellers of illegal small arms of whom the northeast armed groups are the biggest consumers.¹² The KIO has also acted as middlemen for sale of arms and ammunition. The route from Myanmar via Cox Bazar in Bangladesh into India is a very lucrative illegal trade route serving the interests of both the Myanmar armed groups for sale of their arms and weapons, and the northeastern armed groups for their demand for arms in order to sustain their armed campaigns back home. Chinese illegal armed factories from Yunnan have also set up shops in Wa territory, especially on the Myanmar-Thai border. Infamous amongst them is Norinco followed by others. The

¹⁰ R.K. Satapathy, 'Mediating Peace: The Role of Insider Partials in Conflict Resolution in Mizoram', at <http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/publication/faultlines/volume15/Article3.htm> (Accessed January 6, 2008); R.N. Prasad (ed.), *Autonomy Movements in Mizoram* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1994), p. 62; R.N. Prasad and A.K. Agarwal, *Political and Economic Development of Mizoram* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1991); Namrata Goswami, "The Indian Experience of Conflict Resolution in Mizoram", *Strategic Analysis*, 33/4, 2009, pp. 579-89.

¹¹ Renaud Egreteau, *Instability at the Gate: India's Troubled Northeast and its External Connections*, New Delhi: Centre de Sciences Humaines, January 2006 at <file:///C:/Users/Guest/Downloads/op16.pdf> (Accessed on March 12, 2014).

¹² Namrata Goswami, "Tracking the Source of "Weapons Providers" for NE Rebels", IDSA Strategic Comment, at http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/TrackingthesourceofWeaponProvidersforNERebels_ngoswami_071113 (Accessed on March 13, 2014).

UWSA, numbering nearly 30,000 armed personnel, is the group to watch closely in the interlocking chain of small arms, drugs, ethnic conflicts, and trans-border crime.

Emerging Scenarios: Based on an interactive assessment of the history of northeast India, armed conflicts, the Indian state's response and the external dimension, three significant and important scenarios can be considered.

Scenario I: Myanmar holds the key

Given the centrality of Myanmar, not only for opening up Northeast India to Southeast Asia, but also due to the support provided by the Myanmar armed groups to Northeast conflicts, changes within the institutional structure of Myanmar could potentially change the game plan in Northeast. Once groups like the KIO and the UWSA are made to pay heavily for their illegal activities and their energy and attention can be diverted to more legal trade, the arms flow to the northeast groups will reduce.

China is a major player and the main influencer in this ethnic drama. Collaboration between India, Myanmar and China will prove instrumental in dealing with the Myanmar ethnic armed groups. However, getting China's support will depend on how much the Communist Party of China stands to gain from such cooperation. After all, leveraging its influence on the ethnic conflicts ensures its influence over the border areas of Myanmar. With the Myanmar government wanting to cut an independent path for itself and with the re-entry of the United States into Myanmar as an important actor, such cooperation from China may be hard to come by. India will, therefore, have to work with the Myanmar government directly to address the issues in Myanmar's borderlands, which have direct impact on India's own ability to deal with the multiple armed conflicts in the Northeast.

Scenario II: Peace Negotiations Succeed

Another likely scenario is that the ongoing peace negotiations with the NSCN (IM) and the Government of India since 1997 finally succeeds in addressing issues of historicity, ethnic self-worth, political representation and cultural preservation of the Nagas. Non-territorial resolution mechanisms like an overarching Naga Development Council that addresses the development of Nagas beyond territory emerges. This kind of resolution mechanism succeeds in doing two significant things: it recognizes the historical rupture between Northeast India and the rest of India, and successfully establishes a mechanism to maintain and preserve cultural uniqueness, while at the same time addressing the sovereignty concerns of India by finding a resolution within constitutional parameters. Success with the Nagas could be replicated with the other armed groups like the UNLF,

the PLA and the ULFA. Successful resolution of conflicts will have positive effects on the Northeast boosting investment, tourism and international connectivity.

Scenario III: Ethnic Conflicts Escalate

The third likely scenario is that instead of gearing towards resolution, ethnic conflicts especially in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland escalate due to a weak state structure, absence of creative and realistic resolution mechanisms or just simple short-sightedness both on the part of the Indian policy-makers and the leaders of armed groups. Ethnic conflicts in these states can escalate due to the presence of conflicting intra-ethnic violence, multiple armed groups as in the case of Manipur, issues of land grab and illegal migration into ethnic homelands. These conflicting issues could be fueled by an exclusionary political discourse that is propagated by both the armed groups and the ethnic bases they represent. Example is the Meitei or the Naga exclusivist discourse that is propagated by the UNLF and the NSCN (IM) and the ethnic social bases that they represent. This kind of “othering” of someone with a different ethnicity could result in violent conflict escalation in areas inhabited by several ethnic communities further buttressed by absence of inclusive state institutions.

In conclusion, all the three scenarios are plausible, but the two most likely ones are peace negotiations succeeding or the failure of it resulting in conflict escalation. Ensuring support from neighboring countries in dealing with the armed ethnic conflicts is vital as is seen from the case of Bangladesh and Bhutan. Bilateral agreements with specific focus on areas of cooperation will prove useful in capacity building to deal with cross border armed conflicts. It is also critical that there is recognition of the historical dimension of the Northeast armed conflicts, the importance of ethnicity and the political aspirations of these groups. The desire for cultural preservation and recognition of self-worth is not mere slogans raised by the armed groups, but are felt deeply by the ethnic communities that they represent. An attitude of fair-play based on a level-playing field will hold the day if resolution of northeast armed conflict is a priority for the Indian state.

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