



# Manipur Ambush: Look East is Good, But Where is the Action?

RS Pandey

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Manipur is in the news again for the tragic ambush in which 18 precious lives of our security personnel were lost and many more injured. Important as it was, within hours of the incident, it became a top trend on Twitter. But why do we wake up only after the incident? The Northeast region is often in the news only when violence has occurred .

The NSCN (K) along with some more insurgent groups has taken responsibility for the attack on the Army. Why did it not make news headlines when the ceasefire between the Government of India and the NSCN (K) was not renewed last year? The reason for the non-renewal notwithstanding, it was a major event and should have been taken note of as such. And taking note means preparing for the kind of attack that they have indulged in.

The NSCN (K) have already attacked two times in the last three months - first in Arunachal Pradesh, followed by a more significant incident in Nagaland and now the Manipur ambush, bringing the count to three in total. The post-attack reaction and rhetoric includes talks of sealing the international borders with Myanmar, securing the cooperation of the Myanmar Army, launching operations in militant hideouts and strengthening intelligence networks besides entrusting the investigations to the National Investigation Agency or NIA.

These reactions are routine and publicizing them is often counterproductive. All these measures which are being talked about now should have been pressed into action immediately after the non-renewal of the ceasefire agreement without any announcement. Doing rather than talking was the need of the hour. Reality, sadly, has been the other way around.

Moreover, "the talk" has not even reached its logical conclusion in a reasonable time-frame. Naga Peace Talks have been going on for a decade and a half. Such prolonged talk is bound to cause restiveness among those who are involved and to those as well who are outside but have a stake in the peace process. It also casts aspersions on the sincerity of the parties involved. NSCN (K) had a point when it resented renewing the ceasefire agreement endlessly without being included in the talks. The Government of India could not afford to annoy the NSCN (IM), which would have happened, if fresh talks with the K faction began without concluding talks with the IM faction. The way out was concluding talks with the NSCN-IM within a set time frame, followed up with other groups and the Naga people in general, to further announce a settlement.

The catastrophe of the kind we witnessed in Manipur could have been avoided as long as the ceasefire with all factions was in place. In fact, it was an opportunity lost when in 2012-13, the settlement was almost reached but could not be sealed. The Manipur ambush should now be taken as a glaring reminder to reappraise the policy framework and sincerely pursue the peace process.

The Naga insurgency was the first secessionist insurgency in the country, but the people of Nagaland have demonstrated time and again since that they desire to live in India and prosper. Many of the militant leaders of various factions do privately express the same desire. At this hour, any future policy-framework needs a sincere appreciation of the historical perspective, the prevailing psychological ambience and the socio-economic realities. Some political bigwigs in the region who keep repeating that the insurgency is a law and order issue are either chasing a mirage or are cleverly pursuing their vested interest of getting funds from the Centre and merrily squandering it away.

The Naga insurgency can certainly end. This will pave the way for sorting out problems associated with other insurgencies in the region, which have come about in the last 20-25 years. Unless this is tackled, 'Look East' or 'Act East' will face a major roadblock to materializing in ground realities. In Parliamentary democracy, numbers count; unfortunately, the hills of the Northeast region do not have the numbers in Parliament to muster significant attention. Having said that, the country's stakes in making 'Act East' a success are indeed very high and the people of the Northeast certainly deserve better from their governments.

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