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The Naga Conflict

Can an Accord End an Insurgency?

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Map Courtesy: Namrata Goswami, Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis

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Will the new framework agreement between the Indian government and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) in Nagaland bring lasting peace in Nagaland? Vasundhara Sirmate argues that given the factionalised nature of the insurgency in Nagaland, peace is going to be fragile. She argues that privileging one insurgent group over other similar groups for negotiations usually creates a set of asymmetric incentives that tend to keep those excluded from negotiations firmly set on the insurgent path.

I

How should we think about the current peace talks that have culminated in a framework agreement between the National Socialist Council of Nagalim [Isak-Muivah] (NSCN-IM) and the Indian government? In this piece, I argue that the effectiveness of an accord with one insurgent group in Nagaland, while welcome, needs to be rethought. This is because the multiplicity of conflict actors in Nagaland has led to a situation where any deal, ceasefire or treaty has often worked to send a series of signals to other conflict actors and has created new incentives and disincentives that have further complicated the road to peace.

However, before I discuss Nagaland, I wish to draw attention to a case where a peace deal *did* work. I will briefly discuss the Mizoram issue and why the deal worked and why such an outcome may not be immediately seen in Nagaland.

II

On October 31, 1984, Indira Gandhi's final appointment of the day on her itinerary was a meeting with the chief of the Mizo National Front (MNF), Pu Laldenga. Undoubtedly, the meeting would have covered an impending settlement to the Mizo insurgency against the Indian state. This would have been the latest in a series of talks with the Mizo leadership; talks that had belaboured the point that the MNF must cease all hostilities and hold talks within the framework of the Indian constitution. However, Indira Gandhi never made it to the meeting as she was assassinated that morning. Two years later, in 1986, her son Rajiv Gandhi, initiated an accord with the MNF, asked the ruling Chief Minister of the State of Mizoram to step down and make way for Pu Laldenga to be the new Chief Minister.

The [Mizoram Accord](#) was historic because it is highly rare for a state (any state) to negotiate a peace treaty with an armed group that clearly wants secession. Even more importantly, it was in the state's best interests to come across as tough while dealing with insurgent threats. Pu Laldenga was a hard act to follow. On March 2, 1966, he had declared himself the head of the rebel government in Mizoram and his troops had overrun three Assam Rifles posts in Aizawl, Champhai and Lunglei districts. This was called Operation Jericho. In the Lok Sabha, Gurzari Lal Nanda, then Home Minister, asked for "stern action", which commenced on March 7, 1966, in the form of a two-column assault of Indian army troops on Aizawl. A week later, following the aerial bombing of Aizawl, "order" was re-established.

Since 1966, the Indian government had been trying to make peace with the Mizo leadership. Talks failed in 1966 because Laldenga would not agree to an unconditional surrender. In 1978 the peace process broke down after a period of President's Rule because Laldenga did not win the State elections that year. He was defeated by Brig. T Sailo, an Indian army man who floated the Mizoram People's Conference. Following Laldenga's electoral loss, the MNF stepped up its activities again. However, in 1986 the sitting Chief Minister Lal Thanhwala from the Indian National Congress stepped down to pave the way for Laldenga and accepted the post of deputy chief minister. This was not technically written down in the Mizoram Accord. Making Laldenga the Chief Minister was strategic and done outside the bounds of the Accord.

I have traced here a brief history of the Mizo Accord to be able to adequately reflect on the current framework agreement the Indian government has initiated with the NSCN-IM. The Mizo case gives us a comparative context. First, the Mizo Accord worked because strong sub-tribal identities amongst the Mizos were effectively diminished during colonial times. ¹ So the Mizo's were a more cohesive group. Second, there were no competing insurgent groups in Mizoram. Therefore, the signal to the Indian state was clear. They knew exactly who to sign the pact with. Third, the counterinsurgency campaign in Mizoram was extremely destructive and had led to the strategic exhaustion of the insurgent group. Finally, Laldenga never backed down on all his demands. He only scaled them down from outright secession to accepting autonomy within the bounds of the Indian Union.

III

All of these points have immense bearing when we set out to think about the current Naga peace process. In Nagaland sub-tribal loyalties are strong and these have been reflected time and again in the manner in which several insurgent groups have emerged. The NSCN-IM is a Tangkhul Naga dominated group. Tangkhul Nagas are mostly concentrated in the hill districts of Manipur, hence not technically in Nagaland.

I want to focus here on the complexities of peace making in Nagaland. This is not to draw away from the optimism that Modi's framework agreement is generating. The purpose here is to add a note of caution and make an argument that unless all Naga insurgent groups are reckoned with as equals by the Indian government, a peace process may allow for a limited peace with only one group, but will not ensure peace for all of Nagaland. As the Mizo case has revealed, the state needs a clear leadership to pact with. While the NSCN-IM does provide this, it has also been increasingly seen as having rolled back on its promise of a united Nagalim.

My research demonstrates that in Nagaland, almost every time the Indian state has negotiated with one insurgent group, a faction within that group has broken off and become a separate insurgent group. Let me demonstrate this more adequately.

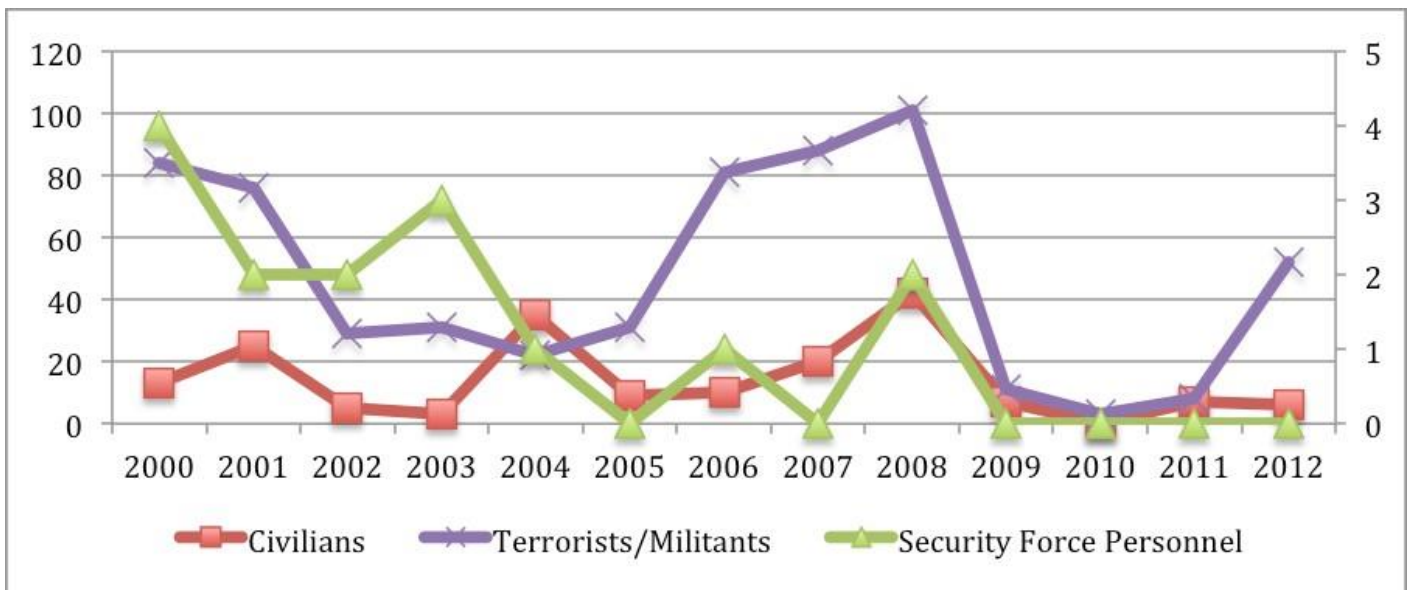
The National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) emerged from a factional split in the Naga National Council (NNC) in 1975 when the NNC signed the Shillong Accord and was accused of having "sold out" to the Indian government. In 1980, Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chisi Swu formally announced the establishment of the NSCN.² In 1988, the NSCN split once more with the Khaplang faction emerging leading to two competing groups – NSCN-IM and NSCN-K. During an interview I conducted with an army officer, a former negotiator with the NSCN revealed that the split in the NSCN was engineered by Indian intelligence so that Muivah and Swu would have an effective counterweight.³

However, the two factions signed a ceasefire in 1999.⁴ In 2011, the NSCN-Khaplang split into the NSCN-Khole-Kitovi (NSCN-KK), following differences on the issue of Naga reconciliation. Still later, the NSCN (K) has further split into the NSCN Reformation following differences over whether to abrogate the ceasefire with the Indian state. If we trace the splits in the NSCN-IM we notice that with every round of negotiation with the Indian state at least one splinter group has emerged. Many of these groups have now been able to limit the NSCN-IM's sphere of influence and have carved out their own. Also, factional infighting is on the rise with a competition for territorial supremacy between all the Naga factions—whether IM, K, KK, Reformation and also the NNC groups, which are also divided into several splinter groups.

The splits in the Naga resistance have worked in two broad ways. First, because the two other groups (NSCN-K and NSCN-KK) are smaller in number, the NSCN-IM with a substantial presence in Manipuri hill districts has been able to dominate the negotiations with the Indian government. However, because there are two other factions, the state does not possess a proper assessment of who should be negotiated with for ultimate peace since each group has its own unique support base. In the absence of clarity, the state has been signing ceasefires with the NSCN-IM and has encouraged a ceasefire between the NSCN-IM and the NSCN-K.

The first ceasefire was signed between the Indian government and the NSCN-IM in 1997. Following this, fatalities involving the military personnel declined. Figure 1 gives an account of this.

Fig 1: Annual Fatalities in Nagaland, 2000-2012



Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal Data sheet. Note - For civilians and terrorists, I use the primary axis (0 – 120), whereas secondary axis for security force (0-5).

From the figure it is clear that what the ceasefires have managed to accomplish is merely a decline in the number of security force personnel killed. Civilian casualties peaked in 2008 after the ceasefire was extended indefinitely. Looking at the figures of insurgent deaths we can be reasonably certain that these were not caused by security force operations since the ceasefires indicate a cessation of hostilities. The insurgent deaths can be explained, however, by factional infighting between different NSCN groups. Following the rise of these splinter groups we also see a correlated rise in insurgent deaths in 2007, 2008 and 2012. Reports do indicate that the NSCN-IM did frequently kill members of the NSCN-K and we also know through local newspaper reports that battles between the NSCN-KK and NSCN-K are being fought regularly. The drop in killings in 2009 and 2010 was due to the Covenant of Reconciliation signed by the NSCN-K and the NSCN-IM and the NNC in June 2009.⁵ The killings rose once more in 2011 as rivalries over leadership, which were also internecine in nature, asserted themselves.

The ceasefire agreements had originally placed an intense burden on the NSCN-IM. It was no longer allowed to fight the Indian state in Nagaland. Yet, as Kolas notes, the talks do allow Muivah and Swu to earn a place in aboveground politics as natural heirs to the peace process.⁶ This is being seen in the talks surrounding the current Naga framework agreement, of which the full text is not yet publicly available.

However, there are several issues that have not been considered in this process of framing peace. First, by negotiating with only the NSCN-IM for peace, other stakeholders have been pointedly ignored in this process and the claims of the NSCN-IM as political frontrunners is being legitimised. The sitting Naga parliament and its members were not party to the deal. Neither were any of the other insurgent groups. This presents a very specific problem as today's conflicts rarely involve the two traditional actors - the state and its adversary. In fact, as the Nagaland case demonstrates, the multiplicity of conflict actors changes the possible trajectories that the peace process can take. It is premature to sue for peace with one conflict actor while ignoring the local history of all other conflict actors and how they are embedded in the mechanism of conflict.

Second, the onus of bringing everyone on board with the agreement now lies with the NSCN-IM. This is a herculean task since at the core issue of the Naga resistance is the idea of Nagalim. Greater Nagalim is a territorial concept that includes hill districts of Manipur, bordering areas of Myanmar and also a small part of Arunachal Pradesh.

If the NSCN-IM is agreeing to a settlement, it probably has had to back down on the demand for Greater Nagalim since under no circumstances would the Indian state be able to guarantee its fulfilment. It cannot grant parts of Manipur to Nagaland as Nagalim because there are other non-Naga tribes that inhabit the hills and have been resisting the Tangkhul domination of the hills for at least two decades. It also cannot seize territories of other countries and turn them into Nagalim. So this demand remains unmet. Can the NSCN-IM similarly convince the other insurgent groups, especially those that operate in Myanmar to give up the idea of Nagalim? The possibility seems far-fetched unless considerable political incentives are thrown into the mix to bring them into the electoral fold and award them some power above-ground.

Third, the issue that needs to be considered most seriously is what impact this Accord will have on Manipur. Manipur is another complicated ballgame where the insurgencies in the hill districts amongst the Kukis have risen specifically in opposition to the NSCN-IM and Tangkhul domination. Any sign that the Indian state favours the NSCN-IM is typically interpreted by these groups as going against their interests. Simply speaking, being friendly with the NSCN-IM in particular, sends a negative signal to resistance groups in Manipur's hill districts, especially since the Indian state has not been able to effectively protect non-Naga tribes in Manipur from the NSCN-IM.

IV

The Indian government's intentions may be positive, but it is prudent to think of other possible political outcomes that may affect lasting peace in Nagaland. A way forward would be to think of negotiating with all insurgent groups as equals, instead of privileging one. It would also be a good idea to keep the sitting elected representatives of the Naga parliament within this process. The Indian state also needs to ensure that internecine wars between the different groups cease by convincing them to follow through with arms and ammunition surrenders and needs to build a proper framework of integration for all groups, their leaders and cadres. Essentially, the state needs to ensure that peace is not signed on paper, but is in fact, institutionalised.

** This piece is based on the author's PhD research work for her dissertation titled, "Countering Insurgency: Strategies of the Indian State", to be submitted to the University of California, Berkeley.*

References:

1. [^] See M. Sajjad Hassan (2008), "[Building Legitimacy: Exploring State-Society Relations in Northeast India](#)", OUP.
2. [^] See [South Asia Terrorism Portal briefing on the NSCN-IM](#).
3. [^] Interview conducted on conditions of anonymity.
4. [^] See Kolås, Åshild. 2011. "[Naga Militancy and Violent Politics in the Shadow of Ceasefire](#)." Journal of Peace Research, 48: 781-92.
5. [^] See [South Asia Terrorism Portal](#)
6. [^] See Kolås, Åshild. 2011. "[Naga Militancy and Violent Politics in the Shadow of Ceasefire](#)." Journal of Peace Research, 48: 781-92.

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