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Militancy in the North-east

Time to Fast-track the Naga Peace Process

Along Longkumer

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This picture handed out by the Army after the Myanmar operation shows commandoes of the 21 Para Regiment (Special Forces) of the Army. A release said that they were air-dropped in helicopters at the Myanmar border around midnight on June 9, 2015, to carry out a counter-strike on insurgent camps across the border. Two Special Forces teams of 20-25 commandoes each were dropped near Nagaland (Nocklook) and Manipur (Gunziya) borders. They broke up into teams of five and attacked insurgent camps believed to be 5-7 km deep inside. Later, the Army acknowledged that it was a file photo.

The latest attack on the Indian Security Forces at Chandel, Manipur caught the Indian intelligence community completely off-guard thereby pointing to a security failure. At least 20 soldiers ¹ of the army's 6 Dogra Regiment were killed in an ambush carried out by a combined force of the newly formed SS Khaplang-led United National

Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFW). The breakdown of the ceasefire agreement between the Government of India (GoI) and the Khaplang-led National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K), although a major setback for peace in the northeast region, was, in fact, a very quiet affair with little media attention and did not draw much concern from the security and political establishment in India, it would seem.

Renewed armed confrontation between security forces and ethnic armed groups in the Northeast and beyond negatively affects peace and stability in the region. This violence also comes at a time when the central government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is giving a much needed stimulus to the 'Act East Policy'. The negative image of the Northeast projected as a 'disturbed' area will get further accentuated as the region plunges into more violence and uncertainty. As expected, this is already happening in the wake of the latest surgical strikes by the Indian Army on rebel outfits. Though the mainstream media in India is currently obsessed with 'hot pursuit' and 'Special Forces Operation' to neutralise enemies, ground reports from local media outlets have started to depict the brutality deployed by those in uniform under the protection of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) on innocent civilians ². Military strikes should not lead to an assault on the dignity and lives of innocent people.

A disturbed situation in the region is not good for trade, commerce and development — the centre point of India's economic diplomacy in the region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been making great strides on the foreign policy front with his focus on good neighbourly relations in South and South East Asia. Modi also wants to project India as a force for peace, stability and prosperity in the larger South Asian region. The return to arms by the NSCN-K will have a bearing on the security environment, especially along the borders with Myanmar, and has the potential to derail India's security interests in the region.

The formation of the UNLFW has brought together armed groups belonging to different ethnicities — the Meiteis, the Nagas, the Ahoms, the Bodos and a few others ³. This is an achievement of sorts for these outfits as they are building a pan-Northeast identity with an expression of solidarity for a common cause. What should worry the security establishment is that the alliance partners of the UNLFW have a presence across the expanse of the Northeast — Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam — and the group is, therefore, capable of striking in all of these places.

Media attention is currently focused on the so called Naga 'insurgency' because the attack on June 4 exacted a high death toll for the army. However, public discourse on issues affecting the Northeast Region is mostly one-track or sourced from official reports emanating from Delhi. As expected, some media reports now suggest China's hand in the emerging situation, including the claim quoting a senior government official that the NSCN (K) may have unilaterally ended its ceasefire with the Indian security agencies at the behest of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) ⁴. Could this be really the case?

By all indications, the latest abrogation of the ceasefire by the NSCN (K) and the failure of Delhi to manage this fallout, including at the political level, points to a flaw in India's policy. It also shows the complete lack of communication between the mandarins who run the security establishment and the political leadership in India on how to deal with the ceasefire and peace process involving the various Naga groups. The fact of the matter is that the Government of India and its agencies never did make the effort to reach out to Mr. Khaplang. The last five years saw a calibrated effort to push the NSCN (K) into the jungles of Myanmar and obliterate its presence in India. Therefore, merely suspecting China for the breakdown of the ceasefire with Mr. Khaplang is somewhat naïve and an out-of-date argument aimed at shifting the blame to an external variable.

According to RS Pandey, a former interlocutor involved in peace talks with the other Naga group — the Isak- and Muivah-led National Socialist Council of Nagalim or NSCN (IM) — the catastrophe of the kind witnessed in Manipur could have been avoided as long as the ceasefire with all the factions was in place ⁵. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), which looks after the ceasefire agreements with the different Naga outfits, has always seen the NSCN-K as a fringe entity and has largely ignored the group. As things unfolded, it would seem that there was no official attempt from Delhi's side to persuade Mr. Khaplang to continue the ceasefire. Instead, the security establishment seized on the occasion to sign another ceasefire deal and recognise the NSCN (Reformation) — a new breakaway group of the NSCN (K) ⁶. At the time of the writing of this piece, the number of NSCN factions has risen to four. This perhaps explains New Delhi's comfort in dealing with a divided Naga polity.

To give credence to this above argument, the recent statement of India's Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, where he asserts that "terrorists have to be neutralised only through terrorists" ⁷, is probably going to be part of the new security blueprint of the Modi government as announced recently ⁸. The prospect of more 'divide and rule' in the Naga situation cannot be ruled out if Indian security forces use the Naga armed groups against each other.

True, surgical strikes on terror camps through air power and ground forces may boost the morale of the Indian state and showcase Prime Minister Modi as bold and decisive. While such a response is justified in the wake of the mindless attack by insurgents, Mr Modi should now demonstrate the same urgency as he did in ordering the surgical strikes to work out a political settlement with the Nagas. And in the words of Mr Pandey, "the Manipur ambush should now be taken as a glaring reminder to reappraise the policy framework and sincerely pursue the peace process".

To substantiate this point, Mr. Pandey, a former Chief Secretary of Nagaland and someone who has had first-hand knowledge and experience of dealing with the Naga peace process as the Government of India's Interlocutor (2010-2013), points to how the decade and a half-long ceasefire and peace talks are causing "restiveness among those who are involved and have a stake in the peace process". Mr. Pandey, in an article titled "Manipur Ambush: Look East is Good, But Where is the Action?" ⁹ says that the "NSCN (K) had a point when it resented renewing the ceasefire agreement endlessly without being included in the talks".

The endless ceasefire, over seventeen years now and still counting, is taking its toll on the goodwill and patience of those involved, whether the armed groups or the Naga people. Except for the fact that more factions have been created, there has been no tangible outcome so far. The status quo and the absence of a political breakthrough in the Naga peace process is probably going to suit the hardliners in the Indian security set up as it will wear down and further divide the various Naga outfits thereby abrogating the desire of the people for lasting peace.

It is more than a coincidence that K. Padmanabhaiah, a former Home Secretary and perhaps the longest serving interlocutor for talks with the Naga group NSCN (IM), has a similar point of view with as that of Mr. Pandey. According to an article written by Mr. Padmanabhaiah in the *Hindustan Times*, "as regards the negotiations with Naga groups, with whom negotiations are going on or are to be commenced, the groups must feel convinced that the government is serious about finding a mutually acceptable solution" ¹⁰. And as stated by Mr. Pandey, the way forward is for 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".

Indian policy makers, including the present National Security Advisor (NSA), will be well aware that the Indian Army had realised the futility of an armed conflict with the Naga armed groups and, as a result, the ceasefire and subsequent peace process started, which has seen continuity through different party governments and Prime

Ministers, thereby indicating popular support for the Naga peace process. Prime Minister Modi would probably have taken only a few minutes to order the strike on the 'terror camps' sheltering armed cadres. The Naga people, on the other hand, have been waiting for more than 15 years to see a peaceful resolution of the Indo-Naga talks. Mr Modi has the best opportunity to fast-track the lingering Naga peace process through a time-bound political execution.

References:

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