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NE Insurgency: Need to Recalibrate



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The northeast of India which connects with five countries by a 4,500-kilometre international border and to mainland India through a mere 22 kilometres narrow and tenuous land corridor, has earned the dubious distinction of persistent insurgency. This insurgency concomitantly thrives with parallel authority of insurgents in the form of unabated extortion, illegal tax collection, rampant abductions and killings. Consequently, an air of fear and uncertainty has pervaded the region with all initiatives including the socio-economic ones getting increasingly crippled. Though in recent years, the Indian government, using varying tactics from negotiations to military operations, has had some success, but there seems to be a requirement of a Dunkirk for reposing peace and stability which is still eluding this region.

NE Region: Still a Potential Tinderbox?

Historically, dialogue with the MNF remains the only example of the culmination of a successful peace process that ended militancy in Mizoram in 1986. Despite Union government having ongoing ceasefire agreements with six-seven militant groups in different states, such experiences however, have not

Key Points

1. Is NE Region still a potential tinderbox?
2. Despite Union government having ongoing ceasefire agreements, the success of Mizoram has not been replicated.
3. It is a misconception to assume that NE is approaching the “light of normalcy” at the “end of the tunnel.”
4. There is a noteworthy decline in insurgency but contrarily insurgents have evidently maintained their writ.
5. There is stark decline in insurgent activities, however, the inclusion of Arunachal Pradesh in the “terror zone” is disturbing.
6. Army understandably seems “worried” over the rising casualty figures, especially in Manipur, as well as a marked slowdown in the intensity of its operations against insurgents in the state.
7. The UNLFW has tied up with another deadly terror network—the Coordination Committee—and become the largest terror alliance in South Asia.
8. Paresh Baruah, trying to revive insurgency, has engineered a coup in the NSCN (K) by helping Yung Aung, a Burmese Naga, to seize the command by impeaching Khango Konyak, who is a Naga of Indian origin.
9. Northeast currently seems amidst tumultuous times with fresh recruitment drive by the insurgent groups and adoption of newer strategies by them.
10. Increase in insurgency related activities in earlier peaceful Arunachal Pradesh is posing a fresh challenge.
11. There is dire need for a recalibrated approach for achieving a lasting and permanent solution in NE.

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NE Insurgency ...

been replicated.¹ Nebulous peace accords with no substantial or worthwhile changes in ground sit are further convoluting the perplexing situation. There seems to be an atmosphere of uncertainty. It gives a feeling that insurgency has reached a “Comfort Zone” wherein Indian government seems to be ostensibly satisfied in engaging a few groups for fallacious sense of peace, while the insurgent groups who are against the ceasefire and negotiations are using this time to consolidate and keep the issue alive. So, how can we describe this prevailing situation? With lowering of insurgency related incidents in the last couple of years, can we say with assurance that the insurgency in NE is at its lowest ebb? Or is it petering out with time? Or is it just the simmering underbelly, which might explode in future? Notwithstanding, one can say with certitude that the present situation surely is at a defining phase and can tilt either way. Whatever may be the appreciation of the present situation, it would be a misconception to assume that NE is approaching the “light of normalcy” at the “end of the tunnel.”

On June 17, 2018, three men from Assam Rifles were killed and three others wounded in an armed encounter with ethnic Naga and perhaps also Assamese insurgents, in Mon town in Nagaland. The ambush occurred at a time when other Naga factions are poised to enter into a peace agreement with the Indian government. In October 2018, a small explosion rocked a scrapyard in Guwahati’s Pan Bazaar area, injuring four people. Minutes after the blast, Paresh Baruah, of the banned United Liberation Front of Assam (Independent) telephoned a local television channel and claimed that his group had set off the explosion to oppose India’s attempt “to settle Bengali immigrants in Assam” through the revision of National Register of Citizens.²

As a continuum of violence, barely three weeks later, in November 2018, six insurgents in battle fatigues rode into Bisonimukh village in Tinsukia district and each of them seized a Bengali-speaking villager. The insurgents lined them up along a canal, made them kneel down, and fired. Five died; one fell, unconscious, into the water and survived.³

These incidents, though, appear routine and run-of-the-mill in the “oldest insurgency,” but they showcase that the rebels are still capable of launching deadly assaults at will and any peace deal without incorporating all stakeholders is unlikely to bring a total end to violence in this long-volatile region.

Interestingly, as per intelligence agencies, these were “well-coordinated” attacks and a handy work of “terror consortium” and not by a single terror outfit. Sources have also revealed that all these attacks might have been carried out by the United Liberation Front of Western Southeast Asia (UNLFW), formed in 2015 as an umbrella organisation of banned insurgent groups with National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang), the National Democratic Front of Boroland, the People’s Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak, the Kangleipak Communist Party and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation, as its main constituents.⁴

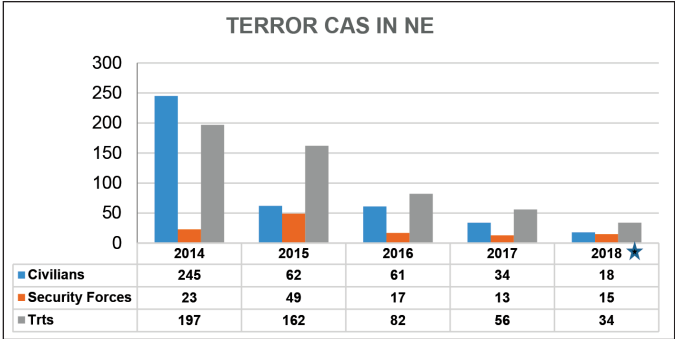
It is learnt that Paresh Baruah played a key role in envisaging and forming the UNLFW. According to his latest interview given to *The Week*, the UNLFW front has two clear-cut objectives; one, to build an alliance of militant organisations that, together, could effectively take on the Indian Army.⁵ (On June 4, 2015, within weeks of its formation, the front ambushed a military convoy in Manipur’s Chandel district, killing 18 soldiers of the Dogra Regiment. India carried out a surgical strike on terror camps in Myanmar five days later.)

The front’s second objective is to “internationalise the struggles for sovereignty in the northeast.” The organisation is also reaching out to various countries and international bodies like the United Nations. Baruah, who divides his time between China and Myanmar, cited the example of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. “So long as the LTTE enjoyed international support, it succeeded, when it lost that support, it lost the battle as well,” he said.⁶

Though ceasefire agreements with different groups have led to a reduction in the militancy-related fatalities in their respective states, but the Union government has not been able to carve out a roadmap

towards a situation of permanent agreement. In many cases, the process of dialogue is yet to formally start with the outfits. Militant groups, on the other hand, have taken advantage of the protracted peace processes and continued with their activities with impunity.

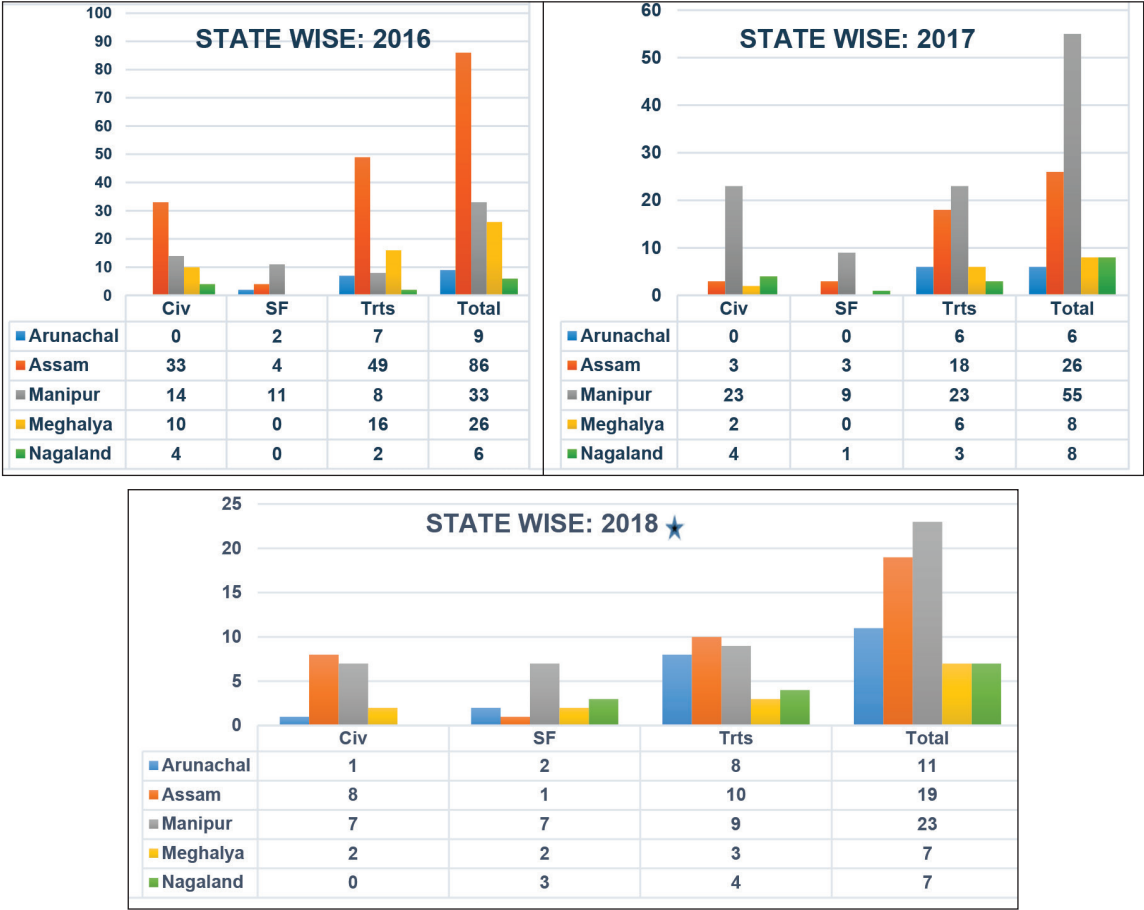
Statistically, in the year 2017, a total of eight army men were killed and 26 injured in anti-insurgency operations while the number of insurgents gunned down was three. Till December 2018, 34 insurgents have been eliminated whereas 15 soldiers were killed and 17 injured in military-led operations. According to official figures, a total of 1,889 soldiers have been martyred and 3,168 have suffered serious injuries in action in the North East since 1997 while the number of insurgents killed during the period was 4,974.⁷



(Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal) (★ Data till December 23, 2018)

State-wise data of insurgency related incidents of the last three years adduce that, on one hand, there is a noteworthy decline in insurgency activities but contrarily insurgents have evidently maintained their writ through sustained and regular violent incidents in the entire NE.⁸

State Wise Casualty Figures in the Last Three Years (2016-2018)



(Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal) (★Data till December 23, 2018) (Tripura and Mizoram have not been included due to no casualty in last three yrs)

Although there is stark decline in insurgent activities, however, inclusion of Arunachal Pradesh in the “terror zone” is disturbing. The above data also adduces the fact that Manipur remains the most volatile and turbulent state followed by Assam.

Addressing the inaugural session of the Conference of Director Generals and Inspector_Generals of Police on December 13, 2018, Home Minister said, “Security scenario in the North-East region has witnessed steady improvement in recent years. The incidents of violence have come down and the situation has further improved in 2018. There is a 17 percent decline in total incidents and 38 percent reduction in the casualties of civilians.” He also said that Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) was selectively relaxed in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, inviting a positive public response.⁹

Meanwhile, on the other hand, Army understandably seems “worried” over the rising casualty figures, especially in Manipur, as well as a marked slowdown in the intensity of its operations against insurgents in the state. There appears to be a “manifested caution” being exercised because of the directives of the court on AFSPA-related cases.¹⁰

Is It “All Quiet” Or Resurrection of Insurgents?

Recent transfer of a few top-ranking police officers in Assam, perhaps because of a police failure to anticipate ULFA (I)’s revival and coordinated attacks by UNLFW, is indicative of anticipated turbulent future.

According to Assam DGP Bhattacharya, it is worrying that the UNLFW has tied up with another deadly terror network—the Coordination Committee—and become the largest terror alliance in South Asia. The Coordination Committee, better known as CorCom mainly operates in Manipur and also has links with CPI (Maoist) in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. It has six militant outfits as its members with its leaders living in Myanmar-Thailand border region.¹¹

UNLFW, headed by NSCN (K) chairman S. S. Khaplang since its inception, was succeeded on his death by his long-time second-in-command, Khango Konyak.¹² With Konyak being an Indian Naga, the hope of Indian government to bring NSCN (K) back to the talking

table got an impetus. However, in August this year, Baruah engineered a coup in the NSCN (K) by helping Yung Aung, a Burmese Naga, 45 years of age, impeach Konyak and seize command of the organisation. Konyak, subsequently was given safe passage from Myanmar to India.¹³ In October, Myanmar based NSCN (K) led by Yung Aung has appealed to the Nagas not to support the Khango Konyak faction that has been expelled in August.¹⁴

Apparently in past too, at Baruah’s instance, Khaplang, a Myanmar-born Heimi Naga, had unilaterally ended ceasefire agreement with the Indian government in 2015. Baruah seems to be orchestrating and reviving the insurgency and has achieved the title of de facto head of UNLFW.¹⁵ According to Srivastava, the former DGP, it is surprising that the organisation which was almost dead is now heavily recruiting and is exploiting the volatile political situation in Assam, due to NRC, which has left 40 lakh people anxious and vulnerable because of their names missing from it. Pankaj Pratim Dutta, vice president of the All Assam Students Union (AASU) in Golaghat district, left his home in August, and joined ULFA (I) in October by confirming on social media through a video of himself in battle fatigues and holding a Kalashnikov rifle. It is perhaps the first time in 15 years that an AASU leader has joined ULFA.¹⁶

To revive the cadres and terror, the insurgents are allegedly trying to raise funds through kidnapping and extortion. On November 10, a tea estate manager in Namsai district in Arunachal Pradesh was abducted, allegedly by ULFA (I) members. The estate is owned by the wife of the Deputy Chief Minister. The kidnappers have demanded Rs 3 crore as ransom.¹⁷

In January 2017, Assam’s Assistant Director General of Police stated that up to 2,500 insurgents from Northeast groups were residing across the border, with up to 1,000 of these being from NSCN (K) and around 150 youths from Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland have joined ULFA (I).¹⁸ Karishma Mech, a Class 10 student of Jagun village in Tinsukia, joined ULFA in October which triggered seven girls

from adjoining areas following suit. In November, Paresh Baruah's nephew, Munna Baruah, an electrical engineer at Indian Oil Corporation in Dibrugarh, went missing. The police believe Munna and several of his friends too have joined ULFA (I).¹⁹

The areas of India in proximity to Myanmar, such as Tirap, Changlang and Longding districts of Arunachal Pradesh, Tinsukia district of Assam, Chandel district of Manipur and Mon district of Nagaland, appear to have assumed newfound importance as insurgents attempt to retain operational relevance in India.²⁰

Newer Strategies of Insurgents.²¹ Changing with time, insurgents have started adopting fresh strategies to regain the lost ground of relevance.

- **Coordinated Attacks.** Many existing outfits of late have demonstrated a tendency to operate jointly and coordinate their activities. The ULFA (I), CorCom and the NSCN (K) are part of a broader alliance of non-ceasefire signatory insurgent groups in the region that have increasingly conducted joint operations and exploited the porous border with Myanmar. Both ULFA and CorCom continue to coordinate their operations and have resolved to carry out joint operations against the security forces. In 2017, both had carried out "Operation Barak," a moderately publicised joint operation. The UNLFW has been responsible for a number of attacks on the security forces including the killing of 18 army personnel in Manipur's Chandel district in June 2015.
- **Trans-border Operations.** The conduct of cross-border strikes in areas adjacent to the international border has become the norm. Declining support base within their respective states and increasing domination exercised by the security forces has forced insurgents to adopt this strategy.
- **Extensive Use of IED.** To minimise cadre losses, use of IEDs has become preponderant by insurgents against the security forces. Though these IEDs till now (barring the one which was used on February 18, 2018 in Meghalaya) have remained crude, however IEDs have the potential of becoming more potent in future.

- **Renewed Recruitment Drive.** Cadre recruitment drive, especially in Manipur and Nagaland, is a dangerous trend needing immediate attention.

North East: Amidst Tumultuous Times

Indian Government while dealing with groups can only achieve conflict reduction, but not conflict resolution. There seems to be a dire need for policymakers in India to introspect—if major insurgent groups of NE have come together and have managed to launch coordinated strikes, rather successfully, what has been the impact of all the peace processes launched over the years by the Indian government? Are New Delhi's peace initiatives a mere attempt at achieving a temporary lull in insurgent activities rather than an honest effort in finding lasting long-term solutions?

On the negotiating table are the NSCN (IM), the biggest insurgent group in Northeast and the conglomerate of five organisations, NSCN (U), NSCN (KK), NSCN (R), NSCN (NNPG) and NSCN (KN). Both are running parallel talks with interlocutor R. N. Ravi. On the other hand, former NSCN (K) chairman, Khango Konyak, arrived at Yongkhao village in Tobu subdivision of Mon district in Nagaland on October 16²² and his olive branch to join the peace process has been accepted. There were also reports that Khango Konyak is planning to join the NSCN (IM). What course of action the Konyak faction now assumes and how perspicacious is India in manoeuvring it to its advantage has decisive ramifications which remains to be seen.

However, the Achilles Heel of Indian government would still remain the non-ceasefire signatory groups such as ULFA (I), NSCN (K) and the CorCom umbrella group. Paresh Barua, with his strong support base in Assam and Aung with sympathisers in eastern Nagaland, could become a thorn in India's search for a permanent solution. Baruah, the man behind Aung, has long enjoyed the patronage of China and Pakistan. "We have very cordial relations" and "our friendship is unparalleled," he told The Week about China. Interestingly, on October 21, 2018, Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh met China's minister of public security, Zhao Kezhi in

Delhi and demanded that Baruah be extradited to India. Zhao rejected the demand, apparently because the cases against Baruah in India could result in a death sentence.

Barua gaining prominence and trying to resuscitate the insurgency implies that the politics of militancy in the northeast will remain complicated with festering sores continuing albeit on a sim burn.

Rise of insurgency in formerly peaceful, Arunachal Pradesh seems another disturbing development. The parliamentary standing committee on home affairs, in its latest report on security situation in the north-eastern states of India said, "The committee is constrained to express its concern that unlike the overall north-eastern region, which shows a declining trend of insurgency-related incidents and an improvement in the security scenario, Arunachal Pradesh has seen a rise in the number of such incidents." The committee was alarmed to observe that in 2012, Arunachal Pradesh accounted for just 5 percent of the incidents in the entire region. But in 2017, it accounted for almost 20 percent of the incidents in the region.²³

Prognosis of Present Situation

In the current scenario, for achieving their goals insurgents are willing to align their "nationalist" ambitions with the anti-India policies of neighbouring countries. This modus operandi is further being propelled by hostile geography, short-sighted policies of the government, absence of governance, and lack of adequate cooperation from neighbouring countries. Alienation among the population and ethnic divide further fuels their cause. The present insurgency, with its reducing clout amongst the locals and being weak operationally, is desperately trying to remain relevant and pose a serious challenge to New Delhi. Resultantly, the response strategy for NE demands responsive governance, inclusive development, and participation of the marginalised as its main tenets rather than relying solely on protracted negotiations and use of force.

Need for a Recalibrated Approach

So, what are the plausible options? Pragmatically, central government would never accept grant of a

special Naga state, curving out all Naga-dominated areas in northeast, which remains the main demand of all Naga groups, as it would lead to potential unrest in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh. Does this predicament leave the government with only one option of enforcing a Mizoram type of solution, wherein major Naga customs would be part of the legislative law in the state, recognising the history of the community having 16 tribes.²⁴ There is also a need to factor-in that the NSCN (IM), the biggest stakeholder in talks with Union government, is led by Muivah, who is 85 years of age, with no credible second/third-rung leader to replace him. The credibility of this group amongst the Indian Nagas, after its present leadership is questionable. Thus, we need a recalibrated and concerted approach for a lasting solution. Following steps are suggested for future:

- **Change in Approach.** The focus of fighting insurgency has shifted from merely arming the state machinery to a strategy of agreements and negotiations alongside improved counter-insurgency measures.
 - **Inclusiveness.** There is a need to up the ante in engaging all key stakeholders as no permanent solution seems tenable with the present fragmented approach and past attempts of bringing peace have fallen apart due to lack of inclusiveness.
 - **Unified Centre-State Mechanism.** Non-involvement of affected states in ceasefire framework is creating dysfunctional structures of law enforcement. Besides, multiple layers of decision-making and ceasefire initiatives by interlocutors, mostly chosen from the All India level bureaucracies and not the state bureaucracies, is further complexing the response.
 - **Respect for Naga Nationalism.** In case of Naga insurgency, adept understanding of Naga nationalism is an imperative. It began in 1918 after Naga's submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission asking not to be

included in India when the British leave as they were not Indians. This aspect of Naga nationalism which manifested itself in extreme form of violence and resistance necessitates considerate understanding and not merely dealt with as a secessionist movement.

- **“Act East” Initiatives.** Proactive approach to expedite initiatives like Kaladan Multimodal transport project and Trilateral Highway are a prerequisite to arrest further alienation of the region.
- **Proactive Diplomacy.** No comprehensive solution can be achieved without the assistance of neighbouring nations.
 - India and Myanmar can formulate a forum to address inter-state and security-related issues, including boundary disputes, narcotics and arms trafficking, and common approaches for tackling terrorism and militancy in the region.
 - India to fervently engage Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan and China to impede growing aspirations of UNLFW.
- **Politico-Military Initiatives.**
 - Transparency in NRC issue would curb the trend of disillusioned youth being swayed into militancy.
 - Astute engagement of the NSCN (K) split would give inducement to the talks. The Konyak group, having support of Indian Nagas, to be fully incorporated in the ongoing peace talks while the Aung group, with its influence on Myanmar Nagas to be engaged either through negotiations or military action.
 - Comprehensive mapping of the areas where NSCN (IM) was operating before the Naga

Accord to be taken up to avoid exploitation of voids by the non-signatory groups.

- Rehabilitation offer to NSCN (K) insurgents of Indian origin, announced a day after Khaplang’s death, seems inconclusive.²⁵ The policy should give confidence and be aimed at integrating them socially and economically back into the society.
- “Hard Military Options” like cross-border raids—as done in June 2015—when Myanmar authorities refused to act, should always be judiciously kept open.

Conclusion

The internal security situation in the north-eastern states is complex. There is a need to understand the “Insurgency space,” occupied by five drivers, namely, society, insurgents, administration, politicians and security forces. The key to success is to increase the space of society and reduce that of insurgents by proactive engagement of the other three. The northeast insurgency, “doyen of all insurgencies,” continues to endure perhaps on account of failure to manage. There is need for a democratic, decentralised, and transparent approach involving all stakeholders. Bertil Lintner, a Swedish journalist and author who has widely written on Asian affairs, was probably underlining this when he said in his book, “Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for Asia’s Most Volatile Frontier”, that a proper understanding of the complex histories of the north-eastern peoples and the evolution of their fractious rebel movements and fragile alliances is needed to achieve progress towards peace in the region. The Government therefore must emergently focus on concluding final peace agreements with the groups that are part of the peace process, so that all the energies could then be applied in tackling the groups that remain intransigent.

... Need to Recalibrate

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