
The Naga Imbroglia: A Grassroots Perspective

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Statement for the Case

Ceasefires with underground (UG) groups, over prolonged periods, have resulted in altered equations between the Government of India (GOI) and these factions, invariably to the detriment of the GOI. The increased influence of Naga UG groups within Nagaland and specifically that of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isaac-Muivah) [NSCN (IM)] has adversely impacted the state and further complicated efforts at resolution of the Naga issue. Recent political activity is suggestive of acceleration in the process of negotiations. It has heightened expectations amongst the people for what is being termed the “political solution” to the Naga problem. The case here is to highlight the ground realities in Nagaland, to state that institutions and systems stand so compromised that any political agreement with the UG groups in itself will have little positive effect on the people. The process of implementation of the agreement, to include considerable preparatory measures, will be the key to its success rather than the agreement itself.

The Nagas constitute a disparate tribal society that has been embroiled in internecine conflict through the ages. British influence, after their entry into the northeast in the early 19th century and American Evangelism from the middle of the century, were the first external influences on an otherwise isolated society. It was the spread of Christianity that provided the Nagas a semblance of a common identity. The prevailing political environment in the build-up to Indian independence from Britain was exploited by motivated external interest groups to influence the Naga National Council (NNC) to demand for, and subsequently declare, unilateral independence on August 14, 1947. Easy availability of residual

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weapons from World War II abetted the outbreak of conflict between the GOI and the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN)/NNC.

The conflict that commenced in the mid-1950s grew in intensity till the signing of a clearly unsustainable ceasefire in 1964. Intensified operations of the security forces after the 1971 Indo-Pak conflict contributed to the signing of the Shillong Accord in 1975. Characteristic divisions within the NNC, in this instance, led by Isaac, Muivah and Khaplang, who were returning after training in China, resulted in a split in the NNC. Proponents of an

independent “Maoist” entity fell out with the Shillong Accordists.

The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was formed by the trio in 1980. Mutual suspicion and apprehensions resulted in a further split of the NSCN in 1988, with the formation of the NSCN Isaac-Muivah (IM) and NSCN Khaplang (K). Ceasefires were signed by the GOI with both factions in 1997 and 2001 respectively. The NSCN (K) subsequently split in June 2011 to form the NSCN (K) and Government of the People’s Republic of Nagaland (GPRN)/NSCN. While the NSCN (IM) is in an indefinite ceasefire with the GOI, ceasefires with the NSCN (K) and GPRN/NSCN are renewed annually. The FGN/NNC, the original protagonists of the Naga cause, have diminished in size and influence but remain relevant in limited areas of the south and east of the state. They are split between the Accordist and Non-Accordist factions. Neither faction is involved in violent activity presently. There is, therefore, no ceasefire with these factions.

Close to 60 years of turmoil and conflict have exacerbated tribal divisions and fractured Naga society as a whole. UG groups are essentially based on tribal affiliations. The present stand-off with the GOI, in the form of the unending negotiations with the NSCN (IM), can be seen as the leadership’s desire for self-preservation and the inability of the GOI to impose its authority for the larger good. Naga society is today held hostage by the various UG groups.

Demands of the Nagas

The demand for independence in 1947 and its subsequent pursuit through insurgency has at its heart, recognition of the Naga identity. The departure of the British from India sparked fears amongst the Nagas of being swamped by a Hindu India. The disparate nature of Naga society and absence of capacities in developmental terms were the most plausible reasons for lack of recognition

of this ideal. The perpetual state of conflict and increased interference of UG groups in governance issues has ensured that these core aspects have witnessed insignificant change over all these years. The situation in the country as a whole has transformed from what it was in 1947. The aspect of Naga identity has to be viewed in this context. It is pertinent to state that the exclusivity of the Naga identity has been preserved from the earliest days of the British to the present Indian Constitution.

The prolonged conflict with the Indian Army and the changed circumstances have morphed the original demand for independence into (an ambiguous) sovereignty and integration of all Naga areas into one administrative entity called Greater Nagaland / Nagalim. The impracticality of both these demands has been explicitly conveyed to the leadership of the NSCN (IM), although some individuals and groups continue to espouse the cause of total independence. The NSCN (IM) has recognised this reality, even if not having publicly stated the same as yet. The continued proponents of independence are those who find themselves marginalised and attempt to gain relevance through statements harking back to the past. The reality of the demand for integration can be gauged from the piquant situation obtaining in this regard. While the NSCN (IM) leadership demands integration of the Naga areas of Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh into Nagaland, the eastern districts of Nagaland represented by the Eastern Naga People's Organisation (ENPO) have demanded separation from Nagaland to form a new state called Frontier Nagaland. The present resolution being considered by the GOI, therefore, relates to greater devolution of powers for the state of Nagaland and provisions for what is being termed an "Alternate Arrangement" for the Naga areas outside Nagaland. Key to the demand for influence in other Naga areas outside Nagaland is to accommodate Muivah and much of the leadership of the NSCN (IM) who are from the Tangkhul tribe of Manipur and lack acceptability within the state of Nagaland.

The present situation is that the leadership of the NSCN (IM) is vying for an administrative arrangement that preserves their future, whereas the vast majority of the people aspire for betterment in their lives. There is a clear disconnect between the aspirations of the UG leadership and those of the people. The other

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factions are not burdened with the dilemma facing the Tangkhul leadership of the NSCN (IM). They do bear great resentment at being out of consideration during the deliberations, which are with the NSCN (IM) only. It can be a serious impediment to gaining acceptability of the majority for whatever agreement may be formulated.

The Main Protagonists

FGN/NNC: This is the original grouping of the Naga Federal Government under A Z Phizo which was formed in March 1955 and waged a bloody insurgency for independence from India, till the signing of the Shillong Accord in 1975. The group was marginalised after the breakaway of the hardline NSCN as a consequence of the Shillong Accord. The present president of the faction is Adino Phizo who remains based in London. They have a limited presence in the eastern districts of Nagaland and are committed to non-violence in pursuit of the Naga cause. They no longer wield the influence and authority to take an independent stance. The group is split into two factions in India, with the Accordist faction headed by Veyalie Metha as president and the Non-Accordist faction headed by SS Shingnya as president and Zophra Vero as vice-president.

NSCN (IM): This was formed on January 31, 1980, as the original NSCN. It consisted of approximately 150 cadres who, on completing training in China, were indoctrinated enough to denounce the Shillong Accord of 1975. They initially established bases in northern Burma and espoused the cause of an independent Nagaland. The NSCN split in 1988 with the NSCN(IM) as one of the offshoots. The split was on tribal lines, with the NSCN (IM) being Tangkhul dominated. The chairman of the group remains Isaac Swu, a Sema from Zunheboto District of Nagaland and the general secretary, Th Muivah, a Tangkhul from Ukhrul District of Manipur. The NSCN (IM) has recognised reality and is in talks with the GOI for greater devolution of powers for Nagaland and some form of tribal and cultural unity for all Nagas, without altering the state boundaries.

NSCN (K): This is the other offshoot of the split of the NSCN in 1988. It is a Konyak dominated faction, with SS Khaplang, a Heimi Naga from Myanmar, as chairman and Khitovi Zhimomi, a Sema from Zunheboto as general secretary. Khole Konyak was the commander-in-chief (C-in-C) of the faction. The NSCN (K) split in 2011 with Khitovi Zhimomi and Khole Konyak breaking away from the group. They no longer recognise the leadership of SS Khaplang. The present NSCN (K) has signed a ceasefire agreement with the Government of Myanmar in April 2012 and is in ceasefire with the GOI. It is apparent recognition of the need for

separate administrative arrangements for Nagas in Myanmar and those domiciled in India.

GPRN/NSCN: This was formed by Khitovi Zhimomi and Khole Konyak in June 2011 after reportedly expelling SS Khaplang. The purported motive for the split was for Nagas domiciled in India to separate from Nagas domiciled in Myanmar who were perceived as an impediment to a solution with the GOI. Despite the presence of Khole Konyak as a stellar personality, the group is Sema dominated. The GPRN/NSCN has publicly stated its desire for an agreement with the GOI for the Nagas within the geographic boundaries of Nagaland only.

Present Situation in Nagaland

The defining element in the situation obtaining in Nagaland today is the ceasefire of 1997 with the NSCN (IM). An unresolved dispute and fallout of a ceasefire that has been in effect for more than 15 years has adversely impacted the state of Nagaland in such a manner that the effect of the power of the gun has permeated every aspect of Naga society. The original cause of Naga identity has given way to parochial and selfish interests that bind factions together. Levels of motivations can be gauged from the frequency with which cadres desert one faction to team up with another. A mercenary culture prevails. In more specific terms, the open-ended ceasefire has enabled the writ of the UG groups to challenge that of the elected government, to great effect. Government recognised camps for armed cadres of each faction are spread all over Nagaland and into Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, with little control over their activities. These camps are a cancerous presence that spread their effect into their respective areas of influence. The primary effect is extortion. The state government, which was not party to the Ceasefire Agreement in 1997 views the UG presence as a creation of the Centre. Responsibility for controlling the factions and monitoring of the ceasefire is considered an obligation of the Centre, with no involvement of the state. The situation can well be termed catastrophic.

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increased manifold, thus, creating a comfort level in them that is a disincentive to change the status quo. Extortion by UG groups has reached loathsome levels, with an adverse effect on businesses and all developmental projects. Individual incomes are similarly not spared and resentment amongst the public is only tempered by the gun. The increasing assertiveness of the UG groups has made them a law unto themselves. Governance and law enforcement have been rendered ineffective. The people, in fact, feel they are governed by many governments (to include the UG groups). All institutions of the state, to

include the government, the administration, police and the judiciary at lower levels have been compromised and, hence, rendered ineffective. The security forces (Assam Rifles and Central Reserve Police Force) remain constrained by the ceasefire.

Absence of governance has led to the proliferation of a large number of non-elected bodies, some manipulated by the UG groups. Most of these groups have become militant in their response to perceived grievances. It has resulted in a state of near anarchy. The diktats of the UG groups are carried prominently in the print media and never questioned. Dissent with the state government, on the other hand, easily takes the form of large scale agitations. Heavy demand on businesses and agencies executing developmental works has resulted in extremely poor infrastructure in the state and an unviable business climate. Industry has been killed and sick public sector units continue to be a drain on the central exchequer. A very telling statement of conditions in Nagaland is that in a nation where dissent is seemingly part of the DNA and the highest and mightiest can be the target of open and public dissent, the people in Nagaland live in absolute fear of the UG groups. Nobody dares to speak out against any of them.

In sum, Nagaland functions in a state of anarchy where the state government has abdicated its authority. UG groups and non-elected bodies occupy this void. Elected representatives and some key functionaries are either fearful or remain obligated to different UG groups. There exists an all pervasive fear of the UG groups. The inability of the security forces to enforce the ceasefire has compounded the adverse law and order situation. The UG groups are exploiting the situation with greater belligerence and a dangerous freedom for resort to violence. Incidents of the groups arbitrating public disputes are on the increase. This prolonged process of deterioration has adversely affected generations of Nagas and does not bode well for the future of the state and the country. The credibility of the GOI has been

eroded to the extent that gaining the acceptability of the Naga population for any political agreement has been rendered a great challenge. A lingering perception of manipulation in dealing with the Nagas has resulted in the GOI being viewed with suspicion.

Status of the Talks

Talks between the GOI and the NSCN (IM) commenced soon after the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement in 1997. One of the conditions has been that the GOI would hold talks with the NSCN (IM) only, as representatives of all Nagas. The GOI has been represented by an interlocutor in the talks. The first interlocutor was Swaraj Kaushal, an eminent lawyer who had represented the Mizo National Front (MNF) in their negotiations with the GOI. He was succeeded by K Padmanabhaiah and subsequently by RS Pandey, the present interlocutor. The latter two were retired bureaucrats, with RS Pandey having retired as chief secretary, Nagaland.

The ceasefire with the NSCN (IM) was renewed annually till 2007 when the NSCN (IM) agreed to withdraw the demand for independence. In recognition of this withdrawal, the ceasefire was renewed indefinitely. Unrealistic demands by the NSCN (IM) and lack of authority by the GOI have ensured that the dispute has remained unresolved. The situation suited the organisation in that the NSCN (IM) which was in a crisis in 1997, grew in strength and influence with time. The GOI, as is evident from other similar agreements in the northeast, has taken comfort in the fact that it has brokered a relative peace. The downward slide in the law and order situation and quality of governance, at high cost to the central exchequer, has sadly gone unrecognised.

The irony of the situation lies in the fact that the NSCN(IM) leadership has projected a charter of demands (unknown) to the GOI which is clearly with the intent to perpetuate the leadership of the NSCN(IM). It is logical to surmise that any reasonable demand addressing the aspirations of the people would have found favour with the GOI. While claiming to represent all Nagas, they retain little credibility with the people, particularly within Nagaland. It is in this context that neglect of the state government and the other UG factions in the deliberations is fraught with the danger of loss of legitimacy. The fractious nature of Naga

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society dictates that the success of any agreement in Nagaland is dependent not so much on its contents as on the ability to win maximum acceptability for it. The term of the present Nagaland Assembly ends in March 2013 and a general election is due in 2014. Holding of elections and formation of a new government in the state will, therefore, imply status quo for another few years. Status quo will result in further deterioration in the state and there is an existential risk of further splits in the various factions, complicating the process of conflict resolution even more.

A Way Ahead

The process of degeneration in every aspect of life and functioning in Nagaland can only be reversed with the neutralisation of the UG groups. It must be noted that Nagaland is awash with weapons. Automatic and other weapons with people connected to the insurgency in some way, in the past or present, are a risk to society and progress. The most basic requirement for any forward movement will, therefore, be to demobilise and disarm the armed cadres. Any political agreement must contain this crucial aspect as a precondition.

Nagas naturally make good soldiers. The endeavour should be to absorb suitable personnel from the UG groups into the security forces. The best of the young cadres should be absorbed into the army's special forces, into units deployed for the northeast. There will be a challenge of accommodating the hierarchy of the factions. The option is to create units / sub-units in the para-military forces, to absorb entire groups of cadres. There is also the issue of security of the leadership of the groups. People like Muivah have Naga blood on their hands and will continue to remain insecure for the rest of their lives. Ideally, they should resettle outside the country, as was the practice in the past. In the event of residence within the country, they may be provided a reasonable strength of their choice cadres for personal protection, who must be absorbed into the local police force, to be able to retain control over them. Those unsuitable for service in the security forces must be absorbed into the rural economy for sustenance. Village bodies have a unique status and authority in Naga society. This institution must be exploited to provide for their reintegration, with funding for agriculture, floriculture, animal husbandry and such projects that retain tremendous potential in Nagaland.

Disarming the UG groups will be a massive challenge that must be executed with the backing of the army, for effect. The reality relating to weapons with UG groups is that there is no accurate record of the weapon holding of each of the groups. Any official claim can always be disputed. There will be a need to enforce the law of the land with regard to banning of automatic weapons and licensing of non-prohibited bore weapons. The institutions of the state stand severely compromised. There will be a need to reenergise them. The Nagas are an industrious and capable people who have been corrupted by a system that has bought peace for a price. The bounty has permeated the lowest levels. Government service has been the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Nagaland today has the highest proportion of government servants to population, with little in terms of results to show for it. Implementation of the agreement should be the time to review and optimise staffing in the secretariat, in a phased manner. Outside expertise and talent need to be inducted selectively into the police and judiciary, to reenergise them. It is a sensitive but imperative issue that needs to be handled delicately. Many in the police force and government, being locals, and because of the ceasefire, have grown roots and linkages with the UG groups as a natural process. To others, the fear of reprisal will be a reality till the existing situation can be altered with a semblance of normalcy.

The impracticality of integrating Naga inhabited areas in Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh into Nagaland has already been made known. The compromise solution of providing for a pan-Naga agency, with responsibility for Naga cultural and traditional affairs, which is reportedly under consideration, is practical. It is pertinent to state that the vast majority of the people of Nagaland do not want other Naga areas to form part of Nagaland and, similarly, Nagas outside Nagaland do not want to integrate with Nagaland. The issue is two-fold: there is a real divide between the Meiteis and Nagas in Manipur, which needs to be addressed, with some form of direct funding to the Naga districts, to facilitate development which has been neglected. The second aspect is to make Muivah relevant because he has no place in Nagaland.

Any solution will include a financial package. Local expertise to execute large scale projects is grossly inadequate. The system of awarding contracts is severely corrupted. The financial package must cater for execution by proven agencies from across the globe, with provision for some sub-contracting locally, to ensure training for the future. Close monitoring of projects by the funding department / agency is absolutely essential. The political and administrative element of the agreement will involve some devolution of additional powers. This will not form part of the paper.

Why has the situation in Nagaland come to such a pass? It is essential to analyse the causes that have led to the present imbroglio, to ensure we never have to repeat it. Other lesser insurgencies in the northeast are in a state of drift and need to be addressed early. A realistic end to the Naga imbroglio could set the trend for resolving other festering insurgencies in the northeast.

The Ceasefire of 1997: The NSCN (IM) in 1997 was in a situation where the majority of its functionaries were in custody. The organisation was on the ropes. In such a situation, motivated intermediaries brokered a ceasefire directly with the GOI. Initial contact was made with the then prime minister in Geneva. A ceasefire was then announced from Delhi, where the state government and the security forces conducting operations, were left out of the loop. The main issue, therefore, is the non-involvement of key stakeholders in a major national security decision. The consequence has been cumulative, with a ripple effect in the rest of the northeast. Non-involvement of stakeholders could well be the cause of other major flaws that never should be repeated.

A ceasefire is signed with an adversary recognised as an equal. This is implied in the recognition that was accorded to the NSCN (IM), particularly with the provision whereby the faction was allowed to retain its weapons when still a secessionist organisation. Equating the insurgent group with the GOI was the cardinal flaw that compromised the government's position and, hence, its authority. The equation of the NSCN (IM) with the GOI has to be a major cause of the government's inability to push through a formal agreement with the group. Military experience says that an extended ceasefire, especially one with little or no monitoring capability, can only benefit the insurgent group. The end result is that the NSCN (IM) that was on the defensive at the time of signing of the ceasefire, is today a monster that is dictating terms to the GOI.

The ceasefire ground rules (CFGR) were evidently formulated without the involvement of the security forces. The document, with its considerable ambiguity, dilutes ceasefire monitoring to the extent that it renders it ineffective. Perusal of the ground rules will suggest that these have been seemingly formulated to rein in the security forces rather than the UG group. One specific glaring example of ambiguity is the authorisation of weapons for personal protection of key functionaries of UG groups, who are issued identity cards. The weapon, being for personal protection, is required to be "concealed". The accepted interpretation over time is that it can be a fully automatic weapon that should not be visible. Placing it in a vehicle or in a house is an accepted interpretation of "concealed". Automatic weapons, with no record of procurement or ownership can now be easily found in Nagaland.

Indefinite ceasefires and more recently, suspension of operations (SOO) agreements with Kuki groups in Manipur have turned out to be a bonanza for the factions. They gain legitimacy, to subsequently seek to talk to the GOI only, while continuing with illegal activities. SOO groups earn a stipend for good measure. It is a major reason for the proliferation in the number of insurgent groups in the northeast. Governmental apathy in this regard is to an extent complemented by the army's motivated enthusiasm in bringing UG groups into such agreements, without attention to a final resolution. The immediate gain of a ceasefire agreement obfuscates the establishment's obligation to finally resolve the problem. Ceasefires and SOO agreements have been made an end in themselves when they should be a means to achieving conflict resolution.

Concluding Observations

The Naga insurgency that commenced in the 1950s can literally be termed the mother of all of India's insurgencies. The fact that it still remains unresolved is a tragic reflection of the capacity of governance and the national security establishment. The birth of myriad other insurgencies only serves to compound the magnitude of the failure. The past cannot be undone but the future beckons. The original sin of abdicating authority in the face of a belligerent insurgent group is what must be washed away, albeit progressively. No resolution of the Naga issue, with national interest to the fore, can be achieved without establishing the primacy of the GOI. Enforcement is the key. It is all the more important because Nagaland today is in the grip of the UG groups. The elected government is only a bystander, which is the fallout of being sidelined at the time of the Centre's direct dealing with the NSCN (IM), which continues to this day. There is urgent need to reestablish the rule of law and the state government must be made part of the solution. It is a grassroots exercise that will require central assistance, to reenergise the institutions of state.

Any agreement without neutralising the UG groups and outlawing weapons will only play into the hands of an UG leadership that is living the past, at the cost of the youth of Nagaland who should be leading the state out of the present morass. The challenge for diplomacy is to establish that no political agreement is final. It is a process that can be refined by the next generation more in tune with the future. Isaac and Muivah do not have the luxury of time in their favour, the Nagas do. Initiation of the process of change that will benefit the majority cannot be held hostage by individuals living the past.