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Integration and Unification**

ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-95



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The Naga Peace Process Is Lost Between Integration and Unification



The current stalemate is rooted in the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) NSCN-IM's decision not to use the framework agreement as a point of departure to build consensus over the final agreement. More importantly, instead of using the framework agreement as a point of departure to engage other Naga stakeholders and build consensus over the final agreement, NSCN-IM chose to press ahead with the partisan goal of *integration* rather than *unification*.

‘Integration’ in Naga parlance applies to their territory divided by “artificial” colonial and post-colonial borders between Myanmar and India and within India between Nagaland and its neighbouring states. The goal of integration is to create a unified Naga realm variously known as Nagalim, Greater Nagaland and Naga Lands.

On the other hand, ‘unification’ applies to factions of insurgent groups, even though it is also used to refer to territory. In fact, there is even a faction called NSCN-Unification, which as the name suggests, was ostensibly launched to achieve unification among factions.

The NSCN-IM prioritises integration over unification, while the people of Nagaland treat unification as a logical precursor to integration (and, eventually, sovereignty), a means to avoid further bloodshed and an opportunity to reinsert themselves into the peace process. For nearly a decade, this has been the central contradiction of the peace process in Nagaland that is structured around the NSCN-IM dominated by Tangkhuls of Ukhrul district of Manipur.

The factors thwarting unification

Unification is thwarted by several factors.

First, the gross asymmetry between factions in terms of firepower and visibility in the world beyond the Naga realm makes for unequal bargaining power. The NSCN-IM is far ahead of other factions in terms of access to arms and finance and has secured the membership of international organisations such as the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO).

Second, the asymmetry in power has also meant that NSCN-IM has been accused of inflicting greater harm on others. Unification would, therefore, require forgiveness but that will level the playing field by pulling the NSCN-IM *qua* recipient of forgiveness a few notches down.

Third, the smaller factions with roots in Nagaland did not need the mediation of the NSCN-IM to join the peace process. They had to simply wait for their respective communities or New Delhi to put them on the negotiation table, which is what

happened eventually in 2017, much to the chagrin of NSCN-IM.

Fourth, the Naga civil society, which has been the main driver of unification along with the Church, has itself fractured over the past decade due to the NSCN-IM's ethnic politics.

Fifth, the competition to control Dimapur is another obstacle. Bertil Lintner suggests that a similar competition drove a wedge between the leading tribes of the Naga National Council in the 1960s. Dimapur was a very small transport hub at that time. Since then, it has emerged as perhaps the most important commercial town east of Guwahati and the stakes have grown enormously. The problem of integration is even more complex because it cannot be settled within the Naga family and requires outreach to other states as well.

First, Nagaland is represented by one MP each in the Rajya Sabha and the Lok Sabha. Nagaland's neighbouring states – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur – are represented by 9 and 18 MPs,

respectively. Of these, Assam alone accounts for 7 and 14 MPs, respectively.

Second, the ruling party at the Centre has not been in power in Nagaland since 1995. However, through most of this period, national parties have been in power in Nagaland's neighbouring states. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was a junior coalition partner in Nagaland government during 2003-08, while it had a token presence in the ruling coalition in the next decade. The BJP emerged as a major coalition partner in 2018 but its stakes are larger in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur, where it is the main ruling party and which are also more important to its ideological mentor the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

In short, national parties do not have any incentive to support a constitutional amendment to redraw borders. So, whether by accident or design, by electing national parties to rule their states, Nagaland's neighbours have insured themselves against Naga irredentism.

Third, there is a lack of clarity about the extent of Naga Lands and the identification of Naga tribes outside Nagaland. Moreover, many territories claimed by the partisans of integration have substantial non-Naga populations. Given its past record, the NSCN-IM is a liability in any Naga attempt to engage non-Naga neighbours.

Different priorities

Fourth, Nagas have lived separately under different political and administrative setups for decades. Integration threatens entrenched interest groups in these areas. This logic operates at two levels. At one level, Nagas of Nagaland want to protect their resources from other Nagas. At another, different groups within Nagaland have different priorities vis-à-vis integration. For example, Sumis attach the highest priority to the disputed belt around Dimapur, while Konyaks prefer the adjoining districts of Arunachal Pradesh. For Sumis and Konyaks, northern Manipur, the priority for the NSCN-IM's Tangkhuls, is a far off place whose integration

will severely erode their bargaining power within an expanded Nagaland. In fact, there are disagreements over integration even within close groups of tribes such as the Eastern Nagas.

Fifth, the NSCN-IM's "Greater Nagaland" project has not yet come to terms with 'lesser Nagalands' such as "Frontier Nagaland" proposed as a separate state for six "backward" Naga tribes of Nagaland. Not coincidentally, these Eastern Nagaland tribes have been closer to the NSCN-Khaplang, the main rival of the NSCN-IM until the demise of Khaplang. Likewise, the sporadic Zeliangrong project for unifying Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei tribes at the tri-junction of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland presents an entirely different set of challenges.

Sixth, pan-Naga civil society organisations that were key to building internal consensus on integration have become dysfunctional as they are seen to be dominated by the NSCN-IM and "entirely lopsided and helplessly drifting southward" toward Manipur. The Eastern Nagaland tribes were the first to withdraw from

pan-Naga organisations. After that, the Central Nagaland tribes and, finally, the Southern Nagaland tribes too left as they felt marginalised in platforms dominated by non-Nagaland tribes.

Over the last three decades, the NSCN-IM won most of its battles. Yet it stares at losing the war because of its self-serving obsession with integration, even if it is non-territorial in character. This is not acceptable to Nagas of Nagaland, which makes peace elusive. In the end, S.C. Jamir, one of the last surviving architects of the state of Nagaland and the NSCN-IM's *bête noire*, might have the last laugh because after all, the much-maligned state of Nagaland, which was formed by combining the Naga Hills district of Assam and the Tuensang Frontier Division of the North East Frontier Agency, remains the only instance of successful integration of Naga territories.