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The search for an end to the complex Naga conflict



The Centre must note that most armed insurgencies find resolution in a grey zone called 'compromise'

Despite having huge strategic significance, India's northeastern frontier has largely remained marginal in the country's popular imagination as well as mainstream politics. The region has witnessed multiple crises including bloody insurgencies, but still lacks the emotional resonance of the Kashmir conflict due to geographical, cultural, and ethnic factors.

Rooted in the politics of sub-nationalism, complexities of regional geopolitics and the evolving dynamics of counterinsurgency tactics, the Naga insurgency has defied a lasting solution; it is an extraordinarily complicated conflict whose management has involved a mix of violent response and bargaining.

The absence of R.N. Ravi, the Nagaland Governor and the Centre's interlocutor for Naga peace talks, in the recently-held meeting of the Naga peace process in New Delhi and the subsequent involvement of the Intelligence Bureau to carry the talks further only testifies the intractable nature of the conflict. But it is not negotiating table alone where various issues pertaining to the Naga problem are being discussed and addressed. The politics of its 'resolution' is taking place at multiple sites.

'Ceasefires' and factions

The Naga insurgency has come a long way, and so has the politics to contain it. In the early phase, the Naga insurgents were provided with what has come to be known as 'safe haven' in Myanmar. India's adversaries (China and Pakistan) also provided them with vital external support at one point of time. A major accommodative tactic in the form of statehood to Nagaland in 1963 was not successful. Thereafter, the constant pressure from security forces coerced the Naga National Council (NNC) to sign the Shillong Accord of 1975, whose offspring was the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN). When the NSCN split into several factions, the Centre responded with entering into peace negotiations with almost each of them. But the undesirable outcome of these 'ceasefires' has been the creation and existence of unspoken 'spheres of influence'. It is these spheres that have come under increasing scrutiny and attack from the Centre through the Nagaland Governor.

The Modi government and the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah), or the NSCN-IM, the most powerful of the Naga insurgent groups which has been in peace talks with the Centre since the 1997 ceasefire, had signed a framework agreement in August 2015 which was claimed a historic achievement at that time. But a final accord has remained elusive since. When the Centre realised that privileging one insurgent group could eventually distort the contours of the final peace accord, it subsequently enlarged the peace process by roping in seven other Naga insurgent groups under the umbrella of Naga National Political Groups (NNPG). But another important group, the NSCN-Khaplang, whose cadres are reported to be inside Myanmar, is still outside the formal process.

Culture of extortion

Given this complex backdrop, Mr. Ravi's recent letter to Nagaland's Chief Minister Neiphu Rio seems to have opened a Pandora's box. In his widely-circulated letter, Mr. Ravi had expressed his anguish over the culture of extortion and the collapse of general law and order situation in Nagaland, where organised armed gangs run their own parallel 'tax collection' regimes. Extortions in the name of taxes have been a thorny facet of the Naga issue. The 'taxes' levied by insurgent groups are so intricately intertwined in almost all developmental activities in Nagaland that any serious discussion of the issue has been conveniently avoided. One of the major aims of the NSCN-IM has been to acquire formal recognition to this informal practice through negotiations.

As the Governor has crossed the proverbial Rubicon, the NSCN-IM cannot be happy for the simple reason that it is loath to being branded as an 'armed gang' and is vehemently opposed to the treatment of the Naga issue as a 'law and order' problem. Offended by military actions initiated against its cadres in recent months, the NSCN-IM is equally unnerved over a recent directive by the Nagaland government asking its employees to self-declare the membership of any of their close relatives with underground groups.

Unease over interpretations

There has already been much debate and controversy about the interpretation of 'sovereignty', as reflected in the latest "Naga Independence Day" speech by NSCN-IM chief Thuingaleng Muivah. Demand for a separate flag and a 'constitution' has been a key hindrance in building trust among the parties. Some Indian States contiguous to Nagaland have been affected through the mobilisation of the Naga population in these States. That is why they are apprehensive of the demand for 'Greater Nagalim', which would imply a ceding of their Naga-inhabited territories. Another significant issue is how the weapons in the NSCN-IM camps are going to be managed. As a 'ceasefire' group, its cadres are supposed to retain their weapons inside the designated camps for self-defence only, but more often than not, many influential cadres are seen moving with weapons in civilian localities, leading to many problems. It would be an uphill task for the Centre to ensure that all weapons are surrendered at the time of the final accord.

The last word

The NSCN-IM has demanded the removal of Mr. Ravi as the Centre's interlocutor in the peace process, asking for affirmation of the 2015 framework agreement as being "alive in its original form". What has further widened the trust deficit is the allegation by the NSCN-IM that the interlocutor has subtly manipulated the framework agreement. Was it a case of over-promise and under delivery on the part of Mr. Ravi? Nevertheless, the Centre must keep in mind that most of the armed insurgencies across the world do not end in either total victory or comprehensive defeat, but in a grey zone called 'compromise'. It has become even more urgent in view of China's unusually aggressive behaviour in Ladakh. One need not forget that some high-profile NSCN-IM commanders are reported to have fled last year to China's Yunnan province to seek Beijing's support.

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