
Naga Peace Accord: A Glass Half Full

Narender Kumar

The Naga tribes of northeast India are at a crossroads where they have to choose between the instability and continued uncertainty that stems from conflict and stalemate; and a secure future that will follow peace and development. Over time, the people's cause has been forgotten and self-serving individuals have taken centre-stage. This is not a conflict between the people and the government, but between self-proclaimed Naga leaders and the government. It is ironical that in this entire scenario, the people have been forgotten and their aspirations neglected. The "Framework Agreement" has opened a window of opportunity, but only if the peace accord is placed in the right context, with the consensus of all stakeholders. Till then, this initiative will remain a glass half full.

Introduction

Close to 8,000 treaties have been signed globally between 1500 BC and 1892 AD for resolving major disputes between warring nations and factions. If these treaties had succeeded there would have been no wars. A study by Russian sociologist Jacques Novicow undertaken in 1894 concluded that the peace treaties remained in vogue for an average period of not more than two years.¹ In spite of the failure of most of the treaties in history, the global community has relied heavily on the process of dialogue and the hammering out of accords to resolve complex

Brigadier Narender Kumar (Retd) is Senior Fellow, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi.

The ideological support for the Naga cause is declining and the ethnic communities feel that the stalemate is largely due to the resistance of the self-serving leadership.

disputes. The significance of treaties is that they have prevented and deferred wars and given peace a chance. One hopes that the “Naga Peace Accord” or “Framework for Agreement” will bring peace and stability to the Naga inhabited areas of the northeast.

The framework agreement affects four states and approximately 35 Naga and other ethnic tribes inhabiting the traditional Naga areas, including the settlers from Bengal and Bihar. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah) (NSCN-IM) separated from the Naga National Council (NNC) post the Shillong Accord, because the Shillong Accord was considered to be an attempt by the government to divide the Nagas on ethnic and tribal lines. This led to the creation of the NSCN that was formed by the hardliners among the Nagas. In 1988, the NSCN split into the NSCN (IM) and National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Khaplang) [NSCN (K)] after a violent clash. While the NNC began to fade away, and Phizo died in London in 1991, the NSCN (IM) came to be seen as the “mother of all insurgencies” in the region.²

The NSCN (IM) aspired to a sovereign Nagalim made up of parts of four states (Nagaland, Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh) and the Naga inhabited areas of Myanmar. The NSCN (IM) structured itself on the lines of a state. It is fascinating that the NSCN (IM) is a parallel government with 11 sub-divisions and has two separate wings (political and military), to control parts of Nagaland and Manipur. It has four ministries: defence, home, finance and foreign affairs. The NSCN (IM) interacts with formal and non-formal world bodies and the media to garner support for its cause. The Government of the People’s Republic of Nagaland (GPRN) sends emissaries abroad to garner support, and

raise funds, for the Naga cause.³ The outfit has also opened up contacts with UN Human Rights Organisation in Geneva, the Unrepresented Nations People's Organisation (UNPO) at the Hague and the UN Working Group on Indigenous People (UNWGIP).⁴

Is NSCN (IM) Running Out of Time to Reach an Accord?

Accords and agreements can only become a reality if the circumstances are ripe for conflict resolution. The most important factor in a peace agreement is consensus among the stakeholders to put an end to the violence. The second factor is the cadres losing faith in the cause and the leadership, that could lead to desertions and a split in the organisation; and the last factor is the high cost of the struggle. Though the concerned interlocutor had worked hard to build consensus among the stakeholders, the views of the Naga fraternity remain fragmented. The situation is definitely ripe for peace because the cadres and people want resolution and an end to uncertainty. The ideological support for the Naga cause is declining and the ethnic communities feel that the stalemate is largely due to the resistance of the self-serving leadership. The NSCN (IM) is facing a crisis in terms of its eroding ideological stand, the moral conduct of its cadres, and desertions from, and disillusionment with, the movement. It is predicted that post-Isak and Muivah, the NSCN (IM) is likely to witness a bitter succession struggle among the second and third rung leaders – which is why they do not wish to leave a fragmented legacy behind.

It is predicted that post-Isak and Muivah, the NSCN (IM) is likely to witness a bitter succession struggle among the second and third rung leaders – which is why they do not wish to leave a fragmented legacy behind.

Existence of NSCN (IM) Detrimental For Peace

It is widely accepted that the NSCN (IM) is mainly responsible for the

The Naga Accord is more due to the rapidly changing circumstances rather than any sincere efforts on the part of the NSCN (IM) leadership, or else why should the hardline Naga leadership dilute its stand on sovereignty and Greater Nagalim?

continued insurgency in the northeastern states of the Indian Republic,⁵ because it has also been supporting other smaller insurgent groups to establish their networks. According to RS Jassal, a Manipuri columnist, if the NSCN (IM) organisation was dismantled, half the issues related to the northeast insurgency would be resolved. The NSCN (IM) has forged a deep nexus between drug traffickers and the arms cartels of South Asia through the Myanmar border. In the backdrop of the above, a breakthrough

framework agreement was long overdue. Yet one should be cautious about predicting the final outcome and the stakeholders should be neither sceptical nor over-optimistic. The positive take-away from this agreement at this stage is that the stalemate has been broken and there is a forward movement. The accord could lay the foundations for lasting peace if the stakeholders are sincere about implementing it.

Accord Offers the NSCN (IM) an Honourable Exit

The framework agreement is the result of hard negotiations over 18 long years. The NSCN (IM) hierarchy realised that over a period of time their organisation had changed and the cadres were no longer as ideologically motivated and disciplined as they had been way back in 1997. Isak and Muivah are conscious that they do not have much time at their disposal since both leaders are 80 plus and in failing health. A Tankhul Naga ideologue from Ukhrul confessed to the author that the “NSCN (IM) has a bleak future post Isak and Muivah, if the resolution is not found during the lifetime of the two iconic Naga leaders”. He claimed, “The predicament being faced by NSCN (IM) leadership is of how do they

honourably put an end to the armed struggle”? He went on to say, “The NSCN (IM) leadership is looking for face saving or else how do they justify the continuation of maintaining a private army and parallel government?” Thus, it appears that the Naga accord is more due to the rapidly changing circumstances rather than any sincere efforts on the part of the NSCN (IM) leadership, or else why should the hardline Naga leadership dilute its stand on sovereignty and Greater Nagalim? Public pressure, opposition to the high-handed approach of the NSCN (IM) cadres, the burden of taxes on the population and resistance of village committees against interference by the NSCN (IM) in development activities have also acted as catalysts for the signing of this framework agreement.

The Arduous Journey Ahead

The signing of the framework agreement was simple but to make this treaty successful and binding will be an arduous task for both the Government of India and the Naga leadership. It may be a fallacy to assume that the NSCN (IM) is the custodian of the aspirations of the Naga tribes, and to believe that Isak and Muivah will be able to unite all the Naga insurgent groups will be delusional. Though the details of the framework agreement are yet not in the public domain, the government has clarified more than once that state boundaries are sacrosanct and a Greater Nagalim is unacceptable. In this backdrop, the NSCN (IM), the Naga community leaders, the states and the central government will all have to work as a team to implement this accord. The bottlenecks and pitfalls that can derail the accord and the peace process are:

- *The Conflict in India’s Northeastern States is Complex* It is related to geography, demography, the ethnic distribution of population, inter-state boundary disputes and inter- and intra-tribal conflicts. If the government fails to bring all the stakeholders to the negotiation table, it will be a road to nowhere. The biggest worry for the government

Will the NSCN (IM) hand over its weapons and relinquish control over the illegal trade and a parallel economy worth thousands of crores of rupees? How does the Naga community protect its interests against those of the rival groups? Unless these questions are resolved, a violent and bloody battle for control of the space vacated by the NSCN (IM) is likely to erupt.

would be to prevent this accord going down in history as the second abortive Shillong Accord. It was post the first Shillong Accord that the NSCN – a breakaway faction of the Naga National Council (NNC) – came into being and altered the nature of the conflict in the northeast. A wave of violence erupted across the Naga inhabited areas and, subsequently, the NSCN (IM) became the mother organisation for training, mobilising and equipping the Kuki and Meitei insurgent groups of Manipur. The NSCN (IM) later extended its support to the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and almost paralysed the entire northeast.

- Extortion, trafficking of drugs, weapons and timber are the main reasons for inter-tribal and inter-insurgent group clashes. The space and influence, abdicated by one group is taken over either by a splinter group, or by a rival insurgent group. The Naga-Kuki clashes in 1993 in Manipur were triggered by a fight for control over the smuggling of drugs and the illegal border trade between India and Myanmar through Tamu-More. It led to ethnic clashes in Manipur and gave birth to Kuki insurgent groups, initially as a counter to the Naga insurgent groups. They later developed political aspirations for a separate Kuki state within Manipur state. The question is: will the NSCN (IM) hand over its weapons and relinquish control over the illegal trade and a parallel economy worth thousands of crores of rupees? How does the Naga community protect its interests against those of the rival groups? Unless these questions are resolved, a violent

and bloody battle for control of the space vacated by the NSCN (IM) is likely to erupt.

- Can peace be ensured if the ethnic tribes continue to maintain private armies? As long as there are weapons in the hands of the insurgents/mercenaries, a lasting and stable peace is unlikely in the northeast. The armed outlaws pose a threat and, more often than not, will be used for physical or psychological violence. Disarming one group will make the other groups stronger, therefore, such a strategy will be disastrous in the long term.
- Rehabilitation of cadres is also not easy because the majority of the cadres are semi-literate, unskilled and cannot be accommodated in the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs), the Para-Military Forces (PMFs) or the Army. Even if some are accommodated, the rest will go back to the jungle and form another organisation over which the present leadership will have no control. Thus, the accord may give rise to many splinter groups that will be difficult to control since they are unlikely to be based on any ideology, and will lack centralised control. The fear is that some of them may even join the NSCN (K). The Tankhul Naga cadres from Ukhrul also have the option of joining the Manipur Naga Revolutionary Front (MNRF), a breakaway faction of the NSCN (IM). Such realignments may take place for ensuring the security and survival of the cadres and their families.
- If amnesty is granted across the board, it will set a precedent and all other insurgents and terror organisations may demand the same if they too decide to surrender or sign peace accords.
- If the fear of violence is reduced, some of the political parties, that till now have depended on the support of the NSCN (IM), will look for alternative pressure groups for coercion and support to remain in power. The political set-up is such that hardly any party in the northeast can survive without the overt and covert support of the insurgent groups. Some of these groups were literally the private

China's relationship with the NSCN (IM) dates back to the Fifties when it trained the first batch of Naga insurgents who included Khaplang, Muivah and Isak. The relationship was further strengthened in 2008 when it agreed to host Anthony Shimray, who was not only their permanent emissary, but also a major conduit for weapons trafficking.

armies of the political parties, for a price. They served the political parties as well as the insurgent groups.

- Drugs and small arms cartels have flourished in the northeast primarily because of the instability in the region and because the insurgent groups exercised control over the grey territories. It is not easy to completely eliminate the drug networks and the weapon cartels. If one door closes, they are capable of opening another. If one insurgent group is brought into the mainstream, another will come up or there will be support for another to ensure that business runs as usual. It is an industry which is cyclic in nature,

and there are many levers attached to it.

- China's relationship with the NSCN (IM) dates back to the Fifties when it trained the first batch of Naga insurgents who included Khaplang, Muivah and Isak. The relationship was further strengthened in 2008 when it agreed to host Anthony Shimray, who was not only their permanent emissary but also a major conduit for weapons trafficking, when he was arrested on September 25, 2010. All external links come at a price and, in this case, the price was to "give information on the movement and activities of the Dalai Lama in India and the movement and facilities of the Indian Army in Arunachal Pradesh and enjoy our support."⁶ At the same time, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has been making concerted efforts to establish links with the NSCN (IM). In 2008, an ISI agent, stationed in Bangladesh, offered "financial help as

well as military training” if the Naga insurgent group broke the ceasefire with India.⁷ Myanmar and Bangladesh may not be actively supporting the insurgent groups, but the use of their territories for weapons trafficking, and as safe havens for clandestine operations keeps the pot boiling. The apprehension is that the Chinese intelligence agencies would attempt to create a wedge between the government and Naga insurgent groups in order to derail the accord because they would like the established links to be snapped.

Myanmar and Bangladesh may not be actively supporting the insurgent groups, but the use of their territories for weapons trafficking, and as safe havens for clandestine operations keeps the pot boiling.

The Way Ahead

The accord has ended the stalemate and is definitely a move in the right direction. What is important now is to build the capacity to give peace a chance. The way ahead is to exploit this window of opportunity and make a new beginning in the northeast.

- *Comprehensive Peace Would Need a Comprehensive Agreement*
Piecemeal efforts will fail and create further mistrust between the people and the government. Though insurgency-related incidents have come down, the ceasefire and Suspension of Operations (SOO) have enabled the insurgents to indulge in extortion, drug trafficking, timber smuggling, kidnapping and coercion of the population. The agreement should lead to social and political harmony, economic prosperity and protection of the life and property of all tribes and citizens of the states. Therefore, not only the seven Naga insurgent groups, but even the other political entities should be brought to the negotiating table to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive peace.

- *Setting the Perceptions Right* The conflict in the northeast is a by-product of differences in perception. It is important that the prevailing sense of insecurity among the various tribes is removed and a commitment made for the protection of their respective interests, without impacting the supremacy of the state. It is vital for the government to use both formal and informal platforms to articulate that it is sincere about finding a comprehensive solution to the problem and that the opinions of all the stakeholders would be given due consideration while implementing the framework agreement signed with the NSCN (I-M).⁸ It is important that the interlocutor continues to hold talks with representatives of all communities to remove their apprehensions with regard to the safeguarding of their collective interests.
- *Khaplang Factor* According to government estimates, Khaplang commands an armed cadre of 400⁹ hardened insurgents. To underestimate his influence, especially in the three districts of Nagaland that border Myanmar, and the two districts of Arunachal Pradesh, will be a miscalculation. His biggest strength is that he is a Myanmar Naga with an adequate support base on both sides of the border. This gives him the leverage to support anti-India factions, including the Paresh Barua faction of ULFA. There are two ways of dealing with the Khaplang faction: joint military operations with Myanmar; or negotiating with him. The role of Myanmar in both these options is vital.
- *Rehabilitation Package* It is important that the rehabilitation of armed cadres is done in a manner that facilitates their economic and social reintegration into civil society.¹⁰ Their family members and children should not face discrimination on account of the social stigma or because they are economically weak. Therefore, the rehabilitation of surrendered cadres should be monitored by the central government and be left to the state governments.
- *Building Confidence* The cadres that cannot be accommodated in the security forces should be deployed in their own areas as part of

Village Defence Committees (VDCs) along with the central forces. This will reassure their families and build confidence even among the ethnic clans, especially in the regions where there is a mixed ethnic population.

- *Amnesty an Incentive Rather Than a Right* Amnesty should be accorded as an incentive for insurgency related issues for the period prior to the ceasefire. But to grant blanket amnesty for all criminal cases pre and post ceasefire will set a bad precedent. Amnesty should be conditional and include the provision that if the cadres at any stage indulge in insurgency and unlawful acts, the amnesty would stand withdrawn.
- *Education* The education system in the northeast is in an appalling state. The central government can open Central and Navodya Schools in the tribal areas. The central government could also sponsor Army/PMF schools so that the tribal children can get free education and hostel facilities. Parents do not want their children to become insurgents. There are several instances of tribals having sold their land to pay for the education of their children. But the cost of education is so high that these poor tribals cannot afford it. As a result, the tribals not only lose out on their land but even the future careers of their children.
- *Security of Vulnerable Population and Cadres* If the vulnerable sections of the population are not provided security, there are chances of the agreement collapsing and the cadres being forced to go back to the jungles for another round of violence. The government should ensure that other groups are not allowed to take control of the areas vacated by the NSCN (IM). Possession of arms by insurgent groups, whether under SOO or during negotiations, should be deemed as a violation of the peace accord and an act of insurgency.
- *Imposition of Rule of Law* There is no fear of the law, especially in cases of drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, acts of insurgency,

extortion and kidnapping for ransom. Getting caught in such cases normally results in stoppage of activity for six months and thereafter it is business as usual. It is a known fact that delivery of justice in an unstable environment is fraught with inherent dangers. Once the accord is finalised, the government should give a maximum six-month window to all the groups that are not part of the agreement to either sign the accord or be prepared for withdrawal of the ceasefire and resumption of operations. There cannot be different parameters for different groups.

- *Empower Youth and Eliminate Instability* The situation has come to such a pass that the last option for the unemployed youth is joining insurgent groups. This is a sorry state of affairs for any state or nation. If other options are available, the cadres will desert the insurgent groups in hordes. One needs to consider what the people of the northeast are good at? They are good at innovations, art, sports, music, hospitality, and even farming comes naturally to the people of the northeast. In this backdrop, skill development and education comprise the only way to empower the youth.
- *The Northeast Has the Potential to Become the Netherlands of India* Nagaland, Mizoram, the hills of Manipur, the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya are climatically most suitable for agriculture, horticulture and cultivation of flowers and herbs. The northeast has the potential to become the Netherlands of India and instead of importing cut flowers from Thailand, Malaysia and Europe, India can export flowers globally from these four northeastern states. The northeast is the only region in India where orchid farming can be undertaken on a commercial scale. It will change the economic and socio-political landscape of the region. But for this, the government will have to provide market access and put a supply chain in place. An institute of excellence for the promotion of farming of fruits, flowers, vegetables, herbs and paddy will change the fortunes of the people.

Even the cultivation of teak, poplar, and rubber plants has huge potential. Encouragement to use farmland for the right crops will reduce the dependence of people on the farming of “poppy and ganja”.

Conclusion

The success of this accord or framework agreement is imperative for setting a benchmark for other insurgent groups to follow suit. As of today, Naga insurgent groups have neither accepted nor rejected the accord in its entirety. This agreement should not end up as a glass half full. The NSCN (K), NSCN (KK) (Khole Kitovi), NSCN (R) (Reformists) and MNRF have opted to stay out of the framework agreement. There is a desire within the Naga community, the Naga HoHo (Naga civil society), the church and the Forum for Reconciliation for a solution that is acceptable to all – the people, the government and the insurgent groups. On August 25, Sumi HoHo who represents the Sema tribe (a powerful Naga tribe of Nagaland) boycotted the consultative meeting because there was no resolution of the long standing demand for the integration of all the Naga areas spread over four states, and shared sovereignty. As a result, Muivah was forced to state that the demand for sovereignty is still on the agenda. Clearly, the nitty-gritty of the Naga framework agreement has still not been finalised and, therefore, people have already started writing obituaries of this peace accord.

Unresolved conflicts and private armies have the potential to destabilise the region all over again. Peace in the northeast is imperative in order to dry up the supply of weapons and war equipment for other insurgents groups in mainland India. The current peace initiative is described as being “mid-way for the settlement so that the Nagas understand Indian

Clearly, the nitty-gritty of the Naga framework agreement has still not been finalised and therefore, the obituary of this peace accord is already beginning to emerge.

compulsions and India understands the compulsions of the Naga rebel leaders”.¹¹ The government has come this far, and it must walk the extra mile to prevent the failure of this accord. It will be a landmark event for the current government if the accord is implemented in the true spirit of the nation building process. More than the NSCN (IM), it is the people who need this accord to be a success.

Notes

1. S Brian Wilson, *The Failure of Peace Treaties*, May 15, 2014, available at <http://www.brianwillson.com/the-failure-of-peace-treaties>
2. Samudra Gupta Kashyap, “Towards the Govt-Naga Peace Accord: Everything You Need to Know”, *The Indian Express*, August 04, 2015.
3. MR Biju, “The Naga Peace Accord 2015: A Step In The Right Direction”, *Mainstream*, Vol. 53, No. 36, August 29, 2015.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Saikat Datta, “The Great Claw of China”, *Outlook*, February 07, 2011.
7. Ibid.
8. R Dutta Choudhury, “Naga Accord: Assam Will Not Be Affected: Ravi”, *The Assam Tribune*, September 14, 2015.
9. Radhika Ramaseshan, “Finger at China Link with Rebels”, *The Telegraph*, June 13, 2015.
10. For more details, see Chris Alden, Imogen Parsons and João Gomes Porto, *From Soldiers to Citizens: Demilitarization of Conflict and Society* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), p. 18.
11. Subir Bhaumik, “Naga Peace Accord: The Test Lies in Making it Work”, *Hindustan Times*, August 05, 2015.