

# Policy Brief#31

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## **Nagaland: Conflict Fragility, Intractability, and Resolution**



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## **Abstract**

*More than four years after it signed the framework agreement with the NSCN-IM in 2015, New Delhi appears distant from signing a final peace deal in the restive state of Nagaland. Conducted under the close of watch of the Prime Minister's Office, the inability to reach a final solution underlines a number of unique challenges: some historic and some which have roots in the government's new-found template for ending conflicts.*

## **Introduction**

Setting up of unrealistic deadlines, subtle threats to its adversaries, over ambitious communication exercises, and hopes against heavy odds have not worked for New Delhi to bring a meaningful end to the Naga insurgency. The NSCN-IM continues to insist on a separate flag and a constitution. To be able to sign an agreement, New Delhi may have to accede to some of these demands. Recent developments in Kashmir have raised concerns that the government prefers opting for radical measures to resolve long-standing conflicts. However, the NSCN-IM is proving to be different. It is certain that to end the Naga conflict, a solution will have to be evolved from within, not externally imposed.

## **Array of Tactics**

Ancient Indian writings on strategy refer to a range of means to overpower the adversary. A look at the Indian government's approach towards the Naga conflict includes them all: cajoling, enticing, punishing, and splitting the enemy. In the last couple of years, processes that have run parallel to the peace efforts have been able to split the Khaplang faction of the NSCN (NSCN-K), create pro-India factions among the insurgencies, and unify a number of otherwise warring factions among the armed outfits. Enormous pressure has also been mounted on the NSCN-IM making it agree to remain engaged with a peace process with the government.

Till the 1990s, support for the Indian state within Nagaland was limited to few politicians, security force personnel, and bureaucrats. However, over the years and coinciding with the opening of the Indian economy that created a range of opportunities for the Naga youth in many Indian cities, support for insurgency has been on the wane. With regard to the peace negotiations, today the government has a section within the Naga civil society whose views are similar to that of New Delhi. Position of the seven-member Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs) on a range of issues such as integration of the Naga inhabited areas, on a separate Naga flag and constitution are closer to that propounded by New Delhi. This has raised hopes of a solution to the conflict even if the NSCN-IM is not on board. The government's negotiator has even suggested that the Government of India (GoI) will go ahead with signing the agreement with or without the NSCN-IM.<sup>1</sup> That, however, is easier said than done.

## **A formidable adversary**

Authors have referred to the 7000 cadres of the NSCN-IM to underline its undecimated fighting potential. Since 1997, when the NSCN-IM agreed to a suspension of operations agreement with a cadre strength of 2500-3000, the group has steadily increased its members. New recruits as well as cadres from other insurgencies have flocked the group, which is largely considered to be the upholder

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<sup>1</sup> Manoj Anand, "Naga talks deadline will not be extended: RN Ravi", *Asian Age*, 30 October 2019, <https://www.asianage.com/india/all-india/301019/naga-talks-deadline-will-not-be-extended-rn-ravi.html>. Accessed on 11 November 2019.

of the dream for an independent Nagaland or Nagalim. As a result, the group's influence stretches over much of Nagaland and the Naga inhabited areas of neighbouring states. As pointed out by an earlier Mantraya publication<sup>2</sup>, the group's access to financial resources vide its wide 'tax collection' activities remain formidable. As a keen Naga watcher opines, "In a conflict mode, the NSCN(I-M) is capable of stretching the Indian security apparatus to its limits."<sup>3</sup>

The NSCN-IM has lost some of its cadres to other groups in the recent past. For instance, in the last week of October, 22 of its cadres joined the NSCN-U.<sup>4</sup> The latter had been formed in 2007 as a result of a truce between factions of the NSCN-IM and the NSCN-K. Such setbacks notwithstanding, the IM faction is considered to be the foremost organisation capable of negotiating on behalf of the Naga population. It continues to receive the backing of the Naga Hoho, the apex tribal body within Nagaland. The NSCN-IM terms the NNFGs as "Opportunists, deserters, opponents and detractors who have never fought for the cause"<sup>5</sup>. Given the wide mandate the NSCN-IM enjoys all across the state, restarting a war with the Indian state, in the event of being left out of an agreement with the GoI, could be the last of the outfit's options. A sulking NSCN-IM outside the ambit of the agreement presents a much larger headache to the government machinery than a fighting one. New Delhi would risk such an outcome at its own peril.

### **Idea of Nagalim**

A sneeze in Nagaland produces a cold in Manipur. The NSCN-IM's demand for 'nagalim' or 'greater Nagaland'- an administrative arrangement to unite 1.2 million Nagas- has been a constant source of anxiety among Nagaland's neighbouring states. These states, especially Manipur, fear dismemberment, given a number of its districts have sizeable Naga population. The government's chief negotiator and Nagaland governor R N Ravi incidentally told a parliamentary panel in July 2018 that the NSCN-IM has agreed to a formula which will make special arrangement for the Nagas living in Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, without 'touching the boundaries of these states'<sup>6</sup>. Several assurances by the Union Home Ministry, however, has had minimal impact on these states. On 6 November, Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu said his government will not part with any territory of his state as demanded by the NSCN-IM.<sup>7</sup> One reason for the continuing insecurity is the non-representation of these states in the ongoing negotiations with the NNPGs. It is difficult to see

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<sup>2</sup> Bibhu Prasad Routray, "'Negative Peace': Conflict Economy of Naga Insurgency", Mantraya Analysis No. 38, 10 July 2019, <http://mantraya.org/analysis-negative-peace-conflict-economy-of-naga-insurgency/>. Accessed on 12 October 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Subir Bhaumik, "Naga deal: There is a glimmer of hope", *Telegraph*, 08 November 2019, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/naga-deal-there-is-a-glimmer-of-hope/cid/1717602>. Accessed on 11 November 2019.

<sup>4</sup> "22 NSCN-IM Cadres Join NSCN-U Ahead of 'Final Solution' to Naga Issue", *Inside NE*, 30 October 2019, <https://insidene.com/2019/10/30/22-nscn-im-cadres-join-nscn-u-ahead-of-final-solution-to-naga-issue/>. Accessed on 11 November 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Bikas Singh, "Nagas will not merge into the Union of India, but they will coexist with the Union of India as two entities: NSCN-IM", *Economic Times*, 11 September 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/nagas-will-not-merge-into-the-union-of-india-but-they-will-coexist-with-the-union-of-india-as-two-entities-nscn-im/articleshow/71084305.cms>. Accessed on 12 October 2019.

<sup>6</sup> The Hindu, in a report on 19 July 2018, published what it referred to details of the framework agreement with the NSCN-IM. See Vijaita Singh, "Details of 2015 Naga agreement emerge", *The Hindu*, 19 July 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/details-of-2015-naga-agreement-emerge/article24464239.ece>. Accessed on 11 November 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Prabin Kalita, "Khandu: Will not part with any territory for Nagalim", *Times of India*, 7 November 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/khandu-will-not-part-with-any-territory-for-nagalim/articleshow/71951792.cms>. Accessed on 12 November 2019.

how a solution to the Naga conflict can be found without a transparent process that not only respects the territorial integrity of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam; but where representatives of these states are involved.

### ***Shifting goalposts***

Negotiations are being carried out in secrecy. Even the ‘framework agreement’ signed in 2015 is not in public domain. No one except the government and the parties in negotiation have an inkling to the intricacies of demands and tradeoffs. However, what is believed to have halted the progress is the NSCN-IM’s demand for a separate flag and a constitution. Conceptually, fulfilment of these demands would recognize the unique history of the Nagas and grant them a special place within the Indian federation.

Bringing peace and stability to Nagaland being the end goal, fulfilling these symbolic demands should not have been a problem for New Delhi. After all, the framework agreement had been reached after the NSCN-IM had reportedly agreed to a settlement within the Indian federation with a ‘special status’ for Nagaland.<sup>8</sup> However, a lot has changed since then. The current government with its emphasis on nationalism and steadfast conformity to a template that de-incentivizes according special status to any state, especially in the light of the developments in Kashmir, will find it hard to sell such tradeoffs to its constituency. For the NSCN-IM, which seems to have given up on a large number of its demands including the unification of the Naga-inhabited areas, forsaking the remaining demands would mean a complete surrender and not a honourable agreement that it seeks to extract.

### ***Sustainable and meaningful closure***

Success in peace negotiations is never derived by vanquishing and humiliating one’s opponent, but by according it a degree of honour and inclusiveness. Mutually beneficial tradeoffs rather than forceful extraction of submission can go a long way to make the deal permanent. The successful Mizo accord, which has led to the establishment of permanent peace in Mizoram since 1986 is instructive. The protracted Naga conflict stands at the important crossroads. An imaginative leadership on part of New Delhi taking cognizance of the local sensitivities can bring it to a permanent closure. The NSCN-IM not only must be a part of any final peace agreement, but its demand for a flag and constitution should be favourably considered, to bring peace to Nagaland.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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