



Strategic Stalemate: State of the Internal Security Environment in the North-east

1 May, 2015 [Brig Gurmeet Kanwal](#) [View1269](#) [Comments 0](#)

Paresh Baruah's United Liberation Front of Assam-Independent and S S Khaplang's National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K) have seven other militant organisations active in India's north-east to form the United National Liberation Front of West South-east Asia. reports, the meeting took place in the Sagaing region of Myanmar where Chinese intelligence personnel are known to be active.

Several of India's north-eastern states have been in a state of turmoil for many decades. The primary cause of strife is an unstable environment that has been compounded by political and economic neglect. While the militant movements in the north-eastern state have grown, some of these have developed links with Pakistan's ISI and international terrorist organisations like the LeT and HuJI.

Due to porous borders, the militants found it worthwhile to seek shelter in India's neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and governments of the two countries joined hands with India to fight these extremists, they have been operating from bases in Myanmar and China.

Various Indian insurgent groups have found it convenient to operate out of bases in the weakly controlled areas in Myanmar, but Myanmar does not encourage or support them. In April-May 1995, Operation Golden Bird was launched as a joint operation. Approximately 1000 were killed and a huge cache of arms was recovered. Since then the two armies have been cooperating with each other for mutual benefit. In 2001, the Myanmar army had raided several bases of Manipuri rebels and had rounded up almost 200 rebels and recovered 1,500 guns.

The intensity of instability varies from state to state. In Nagaland, peace had prevailed till recently due to the cease-fire that had been in place. However, it was only a tenuous peace and various Naga and Manipuri factions remained engaged in a fierce internecine struggle for power. Political negotiations with the Naga leaders for a final settlement were proceeding extremely slowly. In early-April 2015, the NSCN abrogated the cease-fire.

In Tripura, violent incidents tend to break out at regular intervals and invariably lead to demands for the deployment of the Army and in Mizoram, which has seen many years of relative calm, subterranean tensions have been simmering for some time and may again flare up if these are not addressed satisfactorily.

In Assam, the situation has improved a great deal over the last five to six years. The ULFA leadership that was safely ensconced in Bangladesh has been targeted only in conjunction with the government of Bangladesh. The government of Sheikh Hasina and the Bangladesh security forces have provided the cooperation that was necessary for the launch of joint operations to apprehend the ULFA terrorists active against India.

The government of Bangladesh dismantled the infrastructure of the terrorists, including commercial organisations like hotels that ULFA used to operate openly, and stopped the flow of arms and ammunition across the border. In case such cooperation had not been forthcoming, India would have had to explore other options including covert operations to address the remaining roots of terrorism.

The counter-insurgency campaign against the remnants of the Paresh Baruah-led separatist ULFA cadres has made substantial headway. The ULFA have now taken shelter in Myanmar. The Bodo (NDFB) extremists have lost several senior cadres in recent encounters with the army. The NDFB organisation too appears to have reached a discernible level of strategic fatigue. The NDFB may soon opt for negotiations with the government for resuscitation.

The traditional narrative in the north-east has been that illegal migration from Bangladesh into lower Assam has altered the demographic composition of affected districts and added a sectarian dimension to the internal security challenge. Though the Muslim population of the state has grown from 18 per cent in the 1950s and 1960s to above 30 per cent now, the insurgency in Assam has never been driven by religious fundamentalism.

The government claims that it has instituted various measures like border fencing, reduction of distance between one border outpost and another, in the strength of the riverine police and the provision of floodlights to detect and prevent infiltration. However, the measures had remained ineffective. The government of Bangladesh stepped in pro-actively to deny sanctuary to Indian militants.

The vibrant culture of the beautiful Brahmaputra basin, which gave birth to an ancient civilisation and was once a flourishing centre of trade, has been laid to waste by militancy and terrorism that are now several decades old. Sporadic acts of violence, a gun culture, extortion and kidnapping

life, even though the security forces have succeeded in maintaining a semblance of normalcy.

Unless a political solution is found to solve the underlying socio-economic problems and to ameliorate the "hearts and minds" challenge the national mainstream, full blown-militancy could again bounce back without warning in Assam.

The funds earmarked by the Central Government for development must trickle down to the people in a transparent and accountable manner. Worth thousands of crores of rupees must not disappear without a trace as has happened in the past.

Over a period of more than half a century, the Indian army has successfully conducted a difficult counter-insurgency campaign in the north-east despite adverse terrain and weather conditions, logistics difficulties and political flip-flops. Military operations against the terrorists who continue unfettered.

However, the mistakes made in the early 1990s must not be repeated. When the situation had deteriorated, Operation Bajrang was launched but called off as it became inconvenient for the newly elected government to have the army deployed in the state; six months later Operation Bluebird was launched and was again inexplicably slowed down when limited success had been achieved.

The proclivity of successive state governments to scale down army operations for political reasons as soon as the situation improves is a major setback for the conduct of sustained counter-insurgency operations. The security forces need time to become effective and to clear the insurgency grid, including humint networks to gain actionable intelligence. 'On-off' deployment policies hamper operations and reduce the ability of security forces to deliver effective results.

Policymakers and those who are responsible for governance must introspect and try to understand why the Indian state has repeatedly failed to counter the long-festering militancy in Assam and other north-eastern states and address the root causes, which are mainly socio-economic in nature.

The nation cannot sustain a high growth rate over a long period if a major region is not part of the success story and, in fact, acts as a drain. Opportunity costs are imposed on the national economy due to unrealised revenues and taxes and the cost of maintaining internal security. 'Act east' and enhance its trade with ASEAN countries through the land route will also remain a non-starter unless durable peace is achieved in the north-eastern region.

Finally, the re-emergence of Chinese support for militant movements inimical to India's interests after almost 30 years of non-interference is a major development. In case the Chinese succeed in getting the nine extremist organisation that they have helped bring together to coordinate their efforts, it will pose a fresh challenge for India's counter-insurgency campaign.

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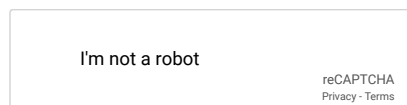
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