



NIAS-IPRI Brief

Ceasefire trails in Naga conflict Space for peace parleys and violent politics

Sourina Bej

Doctoral candidate, University of Bonn

The 1997 ceasefire agreement declared by the National Socialist Council of Nagaland is the longest truce that has neither ceased the fire nor ceased to exist. Rather it has come to represent an alternate space where the non-state actors coexist and negotiate with the formal state order, in turn redefining the conflict dynamics. The paper analyses the strings of ceasefires since 1997 in the Naga conflict and sets to understand the trend of participating in peace talks while maintaining intra group cohesion and continuing violent politics.

Introduction

On 3 August 2015 when the Indian government signed the Framework Agreement with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (IM) (hence forth the NSCN-IM)¹ it ushered hope to end the longest armed conflict in the Northeast of India, The NSCN-IM and the Indian government have had a ceasefire agreement since 1997 as the two sides² engaged in a protracted negotiation for a political solution to the Naga conflict. In 2007, the ceasefire with the NSCN-IM was extended indefinitely instead of being renewed annually.”

On 25 July 1997, the ceasefire declaration by the NSCN (IM) read:

“For securing a peaceful political solution, discussion has been held between the Government of India and the NSCN leadership. It has been mutually decided to cease fire for a period of three (3) months with effect from the 1st of August 1997 and embark

¹ Alice Yhoshu, "Ball in Centre's court: NSCN-IM on the eve of anniversary of the Framework Agreement" 03 August, 2021.
URL: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ball-in-centre-s-court-nscn-im-on-eve-of-anniversary-of-framework-agreement-101627933828170-amp.html>

² Arunabh Saikia, "Decoding the Naga ceasefire: Where is it really applicable?" Scroll. 02 June, 2019
URL: <https://scroll.in/article/925052/decoding-the-naga-ceasefire-where-is-it-really-applicable>

upon political level discussions."

This was the first such ceasefire announced by an armed insurgent group mobilising an ethno-nationalist demand for homeland that started in 1918. With the formation of the Naga Club by 20 Naga members of the French Labour Corps, who had served in World War-I in Europe, the wartime knowledge motivated the few to politically organise themselves as a distinct ethnic entity. It also aroused in them a feeling of Naga nationalism, which shaped the idea of a 'Naga nation'³ in colonial time. In 1946, Naga National Council (NNC), a successor to the Naga Club, was formed under the leadership of A Z Phizo, who in collaboration with eight other Nagas, declared Naga independence on 14 August, 1947⁴. In a 1951 speech, Phizo argued: "in the name of the Naga National Council and on behalf of the people and citizens of Nagaland, I wish to make our stand and our national position clear. We are a democratic people, and as such, we have been struggling for a Separate Sovereign State of Nagaland in a democratic way through constitutional means as it is so called. We shall continue to do so."⁵

The NNC took to arms in 1955. The Indian security forces responded with counter-insurgency operations, which resulted in the imposition of the Assam Disturbed Areas Act on the Naga Hills which later became the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958⁶, further amended in 1972. In 1963, as a mechanism for conflict resolution, the Nagaland State was established. Yet, the insurgency continued, as most Naga inhabited areas were left outside the purview of the new State. In 1964, a Nagaland Peace Mission was created and a ceasefire agreement was signed that lasted till 1968⁷. In another effort at ceasing the violence, the Shillong Accord in 1975 did little to thaw the discontent and factional armed groups arose with Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chishi Swu, then members of the NNC going on to form the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM)⁸. In 1988, further factions led to S S Khaplang forming his own group, the

³ It is important to note that several efforts were made to resolve the Naga issue. On June 27-28, 1947, the Akbar Hydari Agreement was signed between the then Governor of Assam, Sir Akbar Hydari and the NNC, in which the Nagas' right to freely develop themselves was respected. However, Clause 9 of the Hydari Agreement created divisions as it stated, "The Governor of Assam as the Agent of the Government of the Indian Union will have a special responsibility for a period of 10 years to ensure the observance of the agreement, at the end of this period the Naga Council will be asked whether they require the above agreement to be extended for a further period or a new agreement regarding the future of Naga people arrived at". This was interpreted by the NNC as terminating in sovereignty. For full report, see: The Hindu (2015) <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/nagaland-a-long-road-to-peace/article7504003.ece>

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

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NSCN (K).

Since then, the conflict has continued with these two groups majorly dominating the space for negotiation with the state in reaching a political solution to their long standing demand for a recognised collective homeland. In this the ceasefire declared in 1997 by the NSCN(IM) has created the necessary space for the conflict actors to engage consequently redefining the terms of the ceasefire or the Standard Procedure of Operations, once in 2001 and then extending the terms in 2007 which ultimately received a new momentum in 2015 with the signing of the Framework Agreement⁹. While the NSCN(IM) has been in ceasefire, the Khaplang faction entered into a ceasefire in 2001 (this was unilaterally revoked by that faction in 27 March 2015).

Against this backdrop of a protracted peace talks and making and remaking of the terms of the ceasefire, this working paper aims to understand the conflict parameters significant in the Naga conflict. It aims to question: how in keeping with the ceasefire a channel of state-insurgent group negotiation has been formed? Are these formal channels of negotiations only restricted to the peace table? Why has the ceasefire never ceased the violence or doused the fire?

Beyond the ceasefire: Understanding the contours within Naga conflict

Contested homeland and the application of the ceasefire

The question of who and where the ceasefire applied has time and again coincided with the contested construction of the homeland of the Naga ethnicity. As Sanjib Baruah puts it, there are no precise official figures¹⁰ documenting the 'Naga' as one collective tribe, not only because there is no good census data, but also because the Indian census data do not correspond with the category 'Naga.'¹¹ Hence the question arise: how does one demand for the Nagalim represent a collective demand for a homeland?

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⁹ Sanjib Baruah. *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 2020.

¹⁰ Shimray, Ungshungmi A, 'Ethnicity and Socio-Political Assertion', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2001. 36(39): 3674-3677.

¹¹ Sanjib Baruah. "Confronting Constructionism: Ending India's Naga War." *Journal of Peace Research*. 2003. vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 321-338, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3648334>

In an effort to territorialise the demand for Nagalim, NSCN(IM) released in its 2002 press document which stated: "Nagalim has always been a sovereign nation occupying a compact area of 120,000 sq. km of the Patkai Range in between the longitude 93°E and 97°E and the latitude 23.5°N and 28.3°N. It lies at the tri- junction of China, India and Burma. Nagalim, without the knowledge and consent of the Naga people, was apportioned between India and Burma after their respective declaration of independence. The part, which India illegally claims, is subdivided and placed under four different administrative units, viz., Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland states. The eastern part, which Burma unlawfully claims, is placed under two administrative units, viz., Kachin State and Sagaing Division (formerly known as the Naga Hills). Nagalim, however, transcends all these arbitrary demarcations of boundary."

All Nagas may not fully share this view of territoriality. Yet there is little doubt that in the decades¹² of the conflict, the Nagas have developed a strong sense of themselves as a collective. The demand for recognition of a homeland has evolved through fragmentation and contestations through great loss of life from the armed violence. The question today is not merely whether the Tangkhuls and 15 other communities of Manipur that consider themselves Naga should be recognized as Naga¹³; rather whether a single political unit out of all Naga-inhabited areas indeed resonates with many and does it puts the Naga project of nationhood in conflict with parallel ethnic identity assertions?¹⁴ The Naga desire for a homeland that would bring together all Nagas into one political unit can come into being only in consolidation of land and identities attached to it from Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh¹⁵.

In this course of competing identity assertions, the role that the 1997 ceasefire agreement has played is that of defining where the pockets of armed conflict could exist and set up boundaries for identity assertion. In 2001 when the interlocutor served a statement recognising the application of the SOPs in all areas where the NSCN(IM)'s influence and active involvement exists, it resulted in a conflict in Manipur. "It is obvious that the ceasefire extends to all Naga

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Shimray, Ungshungmi A, 'Ethnicity and Socio-Political Assertion', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2001. 36(39): 3674-3677.

¹⁴ Sanjib Baruah. "Confronting Constructionism: Ending India's Naga War." *Journal of Peace Research*. 2003. vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 321-338, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3648334>

¹⁵ Luis Moreno. "Crafting State-nations. *India and Other Multinational Democracies*" *Regional & Federal Studies*. 2013. 23:3, 384-386 URL: <https://www.researchgate.net/deref/http%3A%2F%2Fdx.doi.org%2F10.1080%2F13597566.2013.797711>

areas, including Manipur. It is a non-issue.” said Gaidon Kamei of the United Naga Council, Manipur’s apex body for the Nagas, which enjoys the patronage of the NSCN (IM)¹⁶. The 2001 ceasefire extension agreement incorporated a fresh clause: “without any territorial limits”. The Metei groups in Imphal saw it as legitimising the Naga demand of territorial integration of Naga areas – the proposed map of Nagalim covers almost two-thirds of what is now the state of Manipur¹⁷. Even though the Centre rolled back the territorial clause, the declaration of SOPs became the tool for negotiating the terms of the sovereign territorialisation and invariably what constitutes of homeland.

Response by the state: spirit vs the letter

Since 2001, the NSCN (IM) have maintained that: “the spirit never changes till now because once agreement is signed it remains official.” But the SOPs was too crucial a detail at the time, forcing Prime Minister IK Gujral to clarify on the floor of the Parliament that it was indeed restricted only to Nagaland¹⁸. This was one such instance where the spirit of the ceasefire ran in contestation with the applicability within the geographically designated disturbed zones of operation of the armed groups. Most importantly, the ceasefire that had opened a channel for dialogue was time and again threatened when NSCN (IM) claimed its cadres being targeted and killed by security forces in other areas¹⁹. This in turn gave rise to a non-formal and tacit agreement between the Indian security forces and the Naga militants off a military status quo. Depended on the political bargaining in the peace table, the ceasefire served as the tool for status quo in which low casualties meant better progress in talks.

Still in the context of continued insurgent activity, some patterns of violence formally governed by the ceasefire ground rules still became more acceptable than others. “According to a ceasefire or a Suspension of Operations agreement, rebel groups are typically housed in what are called Designated Camps.” This is meant as a halfway house for rebel combatants, in theory, individuals are not supposed to leave the camps. They are allowed to retain their weapons supposedly for their self-protection, and the rules in some camps require that the weapons are securely stored. The status of being an armed group under ceasefire allowed the NSCN-IM to

¹⁶ Rita Manchanda And Tapan Bose, “Expanding the Middle Space in the Naga Peace Process.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 December, 2011, Vol. 46, No. 53 pp. 51-60

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *ibid*

display its military prowess.²⁰

The ceasefire presented opportunities to expand local insurgent influence and forge informal rules of acceptable insurgent activity within the ceasefire. By the time the central government revised its ceasefire guidelines to more explicitly incorporate efforts to protect the civilian population, patterns of extortion, kidnappings and inter-factional clashes had become entrenched, routinized components of the local ceasefire order in Nagaland. The NSCN–IM engaged in extensive organization-building. It expanded its cadre base from 800 in 1997 to roughly 5000 in 2006, established a sprawling tax apparatus that in 2008 reportedly surpassed the Nagaland government’s annual economic plan by over 40 per cent and continued to procure sophisticated weapons.

Under the fold of the peace talks

In being in negotiation with the Indian government, the NSCN (IM) exercised a formal screen of clout—giving it substantial advantage over its rivals²¹ armed groups- all demanding a political share through the peace talks. A seat at the negotiating table empowers the actors who are invited to negotiate peace at the expense of those who are excluded²². It enables them to “forge alliances with other ‘overground’ actors and stakeholders, including politicians, civil servants, and law enforcement agencies.”²³ At the same time, the ceasefire provides the group to formally breakaway from this alliance when the incentives aren’t favourable, for example the breaking of the ceasefire by the NSCN(K) in 2015. What has also emerged within the peace talks is a multiple groups in dialogue posing one to be the ruling elite and another the rebellious counter-elite.

Continuing violence

Just 12 days after the ceasefire was declared, the Nagaland Council of Ministers protested the emergence of a ‘vacuum of law enforcement’, citing an array of ceasefire violations including kidnappings, illegal taxation and violence between competing factions. These patterns of violence long predated the ceasefire of 1997. However, keen not to destabilize the emergent

²⁰ Arunabh Saikia, “Decoding the Naga ceasefire: Where is it really applicable?” Scroll. 02 June, 2019

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²¹ ibid

²² Sanjib Baruah. *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*. Stanford. CA: Stanford University Press. 2020.

²³ Sanjib Baruah. *In the Name of the Nation: India and Its Northeast*. Stanford. CA: Stanford University Press. 2020.

ceasefire, the central government then reined in central forces such as the Army and Assam Rifles, while the capacities of the Nagaland State police were comparatively limited. This comparatively maintained the outlook of the ceasefire while the informal violence has continued since. Secondly, the intensity of violence and when the truce breaks also depends on benefit one could reap from the peace talks. In 2015, when the NSCN(K) saw his position weakening from the larger hold of the Naga nationalism in Indian territory. He rather nurtured his turf in Myanmar, where he signed a ceasefire deal with the junta in 2012.

Impact of the ceasefire

Negotiating space for order

The years of peace talks preceding the 1997 ceasefire between the central government and the NSCN-IM saw intensified violence as both parties sought to create terms of order that would follow such an agreement. The government documentation for example noted a 'spurt in the strength of NSCN (I) cadres' during 1994-1995. The group extended its operations into urban areas of Nagaland and neighbouring Assam, training and arming local armed groups in a bid to consolidate its bargaining position as part of its demand for 'Greater Nagalim'. During 1994-1996, Army operations sought to create their own order through counter insurgency tactical measures by bringing the group to the negotiating table as quickly as possible. By 1996, these operations had destabilized the NSCN-IM's mid-level hierarchy, playing a critical role in bringing the group to the negotiating table. And a ceasefire was declared.

Again, as the renewal of the ceasefire agreement loomed in August 2000, the NSCN-IM demanded that the government publicly commit to extending the ceasefire across the contiguous Naga areas. By this point, the central government had established clear red lines in its negotiations with other armed groups; the first clause of the ceasefire signed between Delhi and the NSCN-K in April 2001 unambiguously referred to its restriction to Nagaland alone. This paved the way for the Bangkok Agreement in June 2001, which stated that the ceasefire was 'without territorial limits.'

Thus, what has emerged out of the presence of the ceasefire is a continuous marking and demarking of geographical territory of operation as points of conflict escalation and de-escalation. In this the peace talks continues parallelly.

Peace talks and peace parleys

The NSCN-IM has long maintained that two of its demands—Naga sovereignty and the integration of the Naga inhabited areas—are non-negotiable²⁴. In 2015 even after the Framework Agreement was signed, a lot was not detailed out, yet Muivah announced that the Indian government and the Nagas would share “sovereign powers,” thereby raising the stakes in the peace table. Constructive ambiguity is, of course, a familiar technique in negotiations²⁵. This could also be seen during the signing of the 2002 Joint Communique when symbolic concessions, such as meeting outside the country, would allow the NSCN-IM to credibly remain in negotiations with the central government.²⁶

Intra group cohesion and violent politics

What the ceasefire also gave is a momentary space for mushrooming of armed groups. The environment became congested and sharpened by factional competition leading to violent intra group clashes. What also occurred is state actors increasingly leaving the task of reining in both inter-factional violence and violence against civilians to Naga civil society. Having grown in confidence and standing since the ceasefire’s conclusion, the communities represented in these civil society bodies had acutely felt the impacts of factional violence, while commanding the popular legitimacy to pressure insurgent groups and broker de-escalation deals.

The local Sumi Hohos (tribal representative bodies) for example played a crucial role in bringing an end to the October 2006 battle at Amiphoto, Zunheboto district, while irate civilians have on several occasions intervened to prevent or stop armed clashes in areas such as Phek in November 2006 and Dimapur during 2008.²⁷ The intense clashes following the NSCN-U split from the NSCN-IM in 2007–2008 provoked a particularly significant public backlash when the Naga Hoho mobilized mass rallies of up to 10,000 people and, together with the Joint Forum of Gaonburahs (village heads) and Doaibashis (customary authorities), organized successful reconciliation efforts to pressure the armed groups into reducing factional violence.

²⁴ Arunabh Saikia, “Decoding the Naga ceasefire: Where is it really applicable?” Scroll. 02 June, 2019
URL: <https://scroll.in/article/925052/decoding-the-naga-ceasefire-where-is-it-really-applicable>

²⁵ ibid

²⁶ ibid

Conclusion

In analysing the ceasefire in lieu with the conflict, one could observe that the space for order was renegotiated in two key ways. First, disagreements over the ceasefire's territorial extent within the Indian state leads to spurt of more ethnic clashes. Which in turn led to forging of spatially-defined local orders, carefully constructing its applicability.

While the ceasefire ground rules were drawn up and later revised, the rules governing the state-NSCN-IM relationship were renegotiated and reconstituted both before and after the ceasefire was signed. This meant that accepted local realities differed largely from the formal ceasefire rules just within days of signing.

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