



NIAS-IPRI Brief

## **Another Peace Accord in India's Northeast: A review of the new agreement between New Delhi, the Assam government and Adivasi insurgent groups**

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The tripartite agreement between New Delhi, the Assam government, and eight Adivasi insurgent groups will only perpetuate negative peace in the region, leaving little space for positive peace.

On 15 September, a tripartite agreement between the Assam government, the Central government and eight Adivasi insurgent groups was signed at North Block, New Delhi, the seat of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA).<sup>1</sup> Over 1100 cadres belonging to eight insurgent groups surrendered, after a decade-long wait since the signing of a ceasefire agreement, in 2012. These include cadres belonging to five primary groups—the All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA), the Adivasi Cobra Militant of Assam (ACMA), the Birsa Commando Force (BCF), the Santhal Tiger Force (STF), and the Adivasi People's Army (APA); and three breakaway/splinter factions of the BCF, AANLA, and ACMA. The Accord has been hailed as historic and also, a major step towards establishing durable peace in the northeast, by the Union Home Minister and the Chief Minister of Assam.

On the face of it, signing of a peace agreement, more so after a ceasefire and negotiations that lasted nearly a decade, is a welcome step. However, whether the accord is indeed a 'historic' one and has the capacity to become the harbinger of peace in the state, let alone the northeastern region, is debatable. While politicians and government of the day are fully entitled to have their views and overemphasize significance of the event, security analysts and academicians have the liberty of taking a step back and use an analytical framework to assess the projected success of standalone peace agreements such as this one.

### **I**

#### **Peace process: A framework of analysis**

In theatres marked by multiple conflicts, success of peace processes with individual outfits or a group of outfits professing rather similar objectives, needs to be judged by two factors. Firstly, it needs to be assessed if a particular peace process can indeed contribute to achieving comprehensive peace in the entire region. Here, the term 'entire region' denotes the 'direct impact zone' comprising areas where these outfits were active and also, the 'extended spillover zones,' where the message of peace will eventually reverberate.

Secondly, it needs to be examined if the said peace process fulfills three essential conditions: durability; transformability from negative to positive peace; and the possible impact on the

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<sup>1</sup> "Centre signs tripartite peace deal with 8 tribal outfits, Shah says important day for Assam", *Hindustan Times*, 15 September 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/centre-signs-peace-accord-with-tribal-outfits-shah-says-important-day-for-assam-101663243705575.html>.

other continuing or unresolved conflicts in the region. Unless one or more of these conditions are fulfilled, it is difficult to hail the peace process as a significant success.

The following analysis would demonstrate that the recently concluded peace accord with the Adivasi insurgent groups fails to fulfil any of these factors and conditions.

## **II**

### **A Minor Insurgency Ends**

Assam, in the past four decades, has witnessed insurgency of the most violent kind. Groups like the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) represented major insurgent formations accounting for widespread violence and fatalities. In addition, a large number of smaller groups, numbering close to 50, mushroomed and operated for several years in the state. Some of them perished on their own or under pressure from COIN operations, and others opted for peace agreements with the government. Spillover insurgencies from neighbouring states like Nagaland and Manipur, and also, Islamist terrorism with roots in Bangladesh added to the specter of violence in the state. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, between 1992 and 2021, at least 8368 civilians, security force personnel and insurgents were killed in the state.

The five Adivasi insurgent groups, whose 1182 cadres had moved to the designated camps, following the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 2012, represented a very minor strand of insurgency in the overall insurgent violence raging in the state around demands ranging from independence to autonomy. All of these Adivasi groups had originated between late 1990s and 2006. Their sparse violence and extortion activities were limited to upper and lower Assam districts including Sivasagar, Golaghat, Karbi Anglong, Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Bongaigaon and Dhubri. Not only were their violence potential extremely limited with only a minute fraction having access to weapons, their demands too pertained only to seeking development packages for the plantation workers of the tea gardens in Assam, whose ancestors were relocated from northern India by the Britishers. Their primary demand was to seek Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for the Adivasis in Assam and rehabilitation of the displaced members of the community. Unlike other Indian states, Adivasis do not enjoy ST status within Assam, which is reserved for the indigenous tribes of the state. Following the ceasefire agreement, all five groups constituted a committee known as Adivasi Ceasefire Coordination Organisation (ACCO) to pursue their demands.<sup>2</sup>

The known cadre strength of these five groups was never more than 600, although it had dramatically swelled to 1182 during the 2012 surrender, probably to take advantage of the financial assistance of INR 3000 per month provided to each of them while being stationed in the designated camps. It is also surprising that the numbers remained constant even after three breakaway factions emerged in the last 10 years. Till August 2022, preparations were on for signing the accord with the original five groups and not the breakaway groups whose origin is somewhat shrouded in mystery. However, eight groups opting for peace makes better news than five groups and that seems to have been the factor why the little known three splinter groups too were included in the final accord.

Politics behind surrender of insurgents and peace accord is not unique to Assam. It has a very interesting and protracted history in Kashmir as well as the states impacted by left-wing

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<sup>2</sup> Statement of Mullappally Ramachandran, Minister of State for Home Affairs, Government of India in the Rajya Sabha, 19 February 2014.

extremism. Notwithstanding the rather impressive number of outfits and their nearly 1200 cadres who gave up arms and are now part of the 'mainstream', it is undeniable that the peace per se did not get a fillip on 15 September. It was, at best, the culmination of political negotiations between the ACCO and the government. Hence to imagine that the Accord would contribute to the government's vision of an insurgency-free northeast could be an exaggeration of the actual state of affairs.

### III Durability and Transformability

According to the Home Ministry, the Accord on 15 September provides for rehabilitation and re-settlement of armed cadres and measures for the welfare of the tea garden workers. Over a period of next five years, a special development package of INR 1000 crore—INR 500 crore each by Government of India and Government of Assam—will be provided for the development of infrastructure in Adivasi inhabited villages/areas. The Accord also provides for the setting up of an Adivasi Welfare and Development Council (AWDC) by the Government of Assam. The AWDC will have the mandate of fulfilling the political, economic and educational aspirations of Adivasis. It will also protect, preserve and promote their social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities.

While these promises appear to have satisfied the eight insurgent groups/ACCO, the Accord does not mention anything on the primary demand—ST status for the Adivasis. The government can flag conclusion of the Accord as an outcome of tough negotiations, without even appointing an interlocutor. However, fears that the ACCO is being forced to climb down from its original demand had already been expressed by leading Adivasi organisations like the All Adivasi Students' Association in Assam (AASAA) and Adivasi National Conference (ANC).<sup>3</sup> In August 2021, both organisations, with sizeable following among the Adivasis, had reiterated three core demands of the Adivasis – 'ST status, fair wages for tea garden workers and an autonomous satellite council'. They had further underlined that the insurgent outfits alone do not subsume the development demands of the Adivasis.

Details regarding setting up of the AWDC have not yet been made available. The mentioned mandate for AWDC is also a source of confusion. Assam already has an Adivasi Development Council (ADC).<sup>4</sup> Whether the ADC would be abolished and make way for the AWDC or will be merely refurbished to placate the sense of achievement of the Adivasi insurgencies is unclear. In any event, performance of most of Assam's 33 Autonomous Development Councils, created in response to the demands of various communities has been below par. State governments—the present and its predecessors—had found setting up such Councils a convenient way of deflating larger demands of aggrieved communities. However, due to the intricacies of local politics and lack of regular provision of funds, such councils remain largely dysfunctional, incapable of serving the interests of their constituencies.

It is clear, therefore, that the 15 September Accord does little to put to rest the sense of marginalization among the Adivasis, who constitute a significant 20 percent of Assam's population. After the dust settles, the Adivasis are bound to figure out that they have been left

<sup>3</sup> Kangkan Kalita, "Govt forcing ceasefire adivasi rebel groups to drop ST status demand: All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam", *Times of India*, 28 August 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/govt-forcing-ceasefire-ativasi-rebel-groups-to-drop-st-status-demand-all-ativasi-students-association-of-assam/articleshow/85722081.cms>.

<sup>4</sup> "Development Councils", Department of Tribal Affairs (Plain), Government of Assam, 6 August 2022, <https://directorwptbc.assam.gov.in/frontimpotentdata/development-councils>.

in the lurch, once again. In August 2021, AASAA and ANC had threatened to launch movements seeking ‘alternatives within the constitutional framework’ if their core demands are not fulfilled by the Accord.<sup>5</sup> Irrespective of whether the threat would translate into new bouts of agitation or not, it is almost certain that the Accord will not pacify a very large community of people of the state. That would remain a potentially source of instability in the future.

On the scale of durability prospects, therefore, the 15 September Accord does not fare well.

Johan Galtung distinguishes<sup>6</sup> between negative peace, which merely indicate the absence of violence, like a ceasefire, and positive peace, which builds on the absence of violence to progress towards harmony. If peace is to be understood as “a relation between two or more parties,” in negative peace, relations between the affected communities and the dominant communities are not only indifferent, but disharmonious. Positive peace, on the other hand, denotes presence of harmony. It is unlikely that the INR 1000 crore package alone would transform the prevalent negative peace among the Adivasis into a state of positive peace.

With regard to transformability prospects, the 15 September Accord does not fare well either.

#### **IV Over the Horizon Impact**

As argued before, success of a peace process needs to be judged not just by its capacity to bring positive peace to the ‘direct impact zone’, but also to the ‘extended spillover zones’. In other words, peace accords must have the capacity to reduce violence in the areas where the outfit was active. In addition, it should contribute to resolving other continuing conflicts in the broader region. Not surprisingly, therefore, politicians and government functionaries speak of the ramifications of one peace process on the prospects of peace in the entire northeast. Does the Accord with the Adivasi groups any such potency? Unlikely so.

The Home Minister used the occasion to rightly flag that with the conclusion of the Accord with the Adivasi groups, only two insurgent groups —the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) and the ‘Independent’ faction of the ULFA—are active in Assam. The KLO is a much smaller outfit and is operationally irrelevant. The Myanmar-based Paresh Baruah-led ULFA-I, on the other hand, still retains significant nuisance value. In the past years, backchannel processes to bring Baruah to the negotiating table have failed. He continues to insist that ‘sovereignty of Assam’ must figure in any negotiation with the government.<sup>7</sup> This is unacceptable to the government in Dispur as well as in New Delhi. Hence, there is little possibility of ULFA-I joining the peace process in the near future, even after the ‘historic’ Accord with the Adivasi groups. ULFA-I’s intransigence coupled with its diminished, yet significant, potency to carry out violence as well as recruit cadres in select Assam districts do not augur well for the stability project in Assam and the northeast.

The government’s inability to conclude yet another long-standing peace process, i.e. with the oldest outfit in the northeast, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-

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<sup>5</sup> Kangkan Kalita, “Govt forcing ceasefire adivasi rebel groups”, op.cit.

<sup>6</sup> Johan Galtung, “A Mini Theory of Peace”, Galtung Institute, <https://www.galtung-institut.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Mini-Theory-of-Peace.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Karishma Hasnat, “‘Truth about ULFA, my childhood & why I’ll keep fighting’: rebel Paresh Baruah on his memoir”, The Print, 11 April 2021, <https://theprint.in/india/truth-about-ulfa-my-childhood-why-ill-keep-fighting-rebel-paresh-baruah-on-his-memoir/637059/>.

IM) is far more vexatious. Ceasefire agreement with the group dates back to 1997. However, like Baruah, Thuingaleng Muivah, the last remaining patriarch of the NSCN-IM, remains defiant and is unwilling to give up the demand for a separate flag and constitution for Nagaland. These demands fly in the face of the government in New Delhi, which insists on complete and unequivocal integration of all Indian states into the Indian union. However, to implement a la-Kashmir project in Nagaland has been unsuccessful so far. Since the 2015 signing of the framework agreement with the NSCN-IM, New Delhi has been trying to project that the Naga conflict is on the verge of a final resolution. Range of measures to weaken the NSCN-IM and make it fall in line include orchestrating splits in the outfit, creating a group of rival pro-agreement Naga outfits called the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs), and also threatening to sign a final agreement without the group. And yet, the ‘mother of all insurgencies’ remains unperturbed and keeps on harping on its disinclination to compromise on key demands. Thus, while the MHA flags the Adivasi Accord as a stupendous success, its seven-year-old effort to bring peace to Nagaland remains an unfinished project and is unlikely to be impacted by developments in Assam.

## V Way Forward

The Northeast today is a far more peaceful region compared to the past years. At the same time, in most states where insurgencies have either been resolved or guns have fallen silent, discontent and disenchantment remain. Negative, rather than positive peace, prevails. This is perhaps to do with India’s imperfect and resource starved governance architecture in general, which in the past decades, have failed to fulfil the basic needs and growing aspirations of its people. Complexities around contests over limited resources have further inhibited the official policies and their implementation. These faultlines are far starker in insurgency-affected states. It is, therefore, important that peace accords stay clear of quick fixes and politicization. The agreements must fulfil the immediate as well as broader objectives of moving towards positive peace. Galtung wrote, ‘Peace is not a property of one party alone, but a property of the relation between parties.’<sup>8</sup> A hasty and largely bureaucratic Accord with the Adivasis falls short of establishing durable peace.

Peace and stability in the northeast remain critical requirements for India’s Act East Policy. Festering of unresolved conflicts and discontent can be exploited by external powers to try push the region again into an abyss of violence. They may find active accomplices in the active insurgencies as well as discontented groups. The Government of Assam and New Delhi can still exhibit a sense of victory after the Adivasi Accord, owing primarily to the low violence potential of the insurgencies. However, sufficient care should be taken to avoid the repeat of the same in the future, in the event of peace agreements either with the NSCN-IM and/or the ULFA-I.

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<sup>8</sup> Johan Galtung, “A Mini Theory of Peace”, op.cit.

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