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by

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Armed Ethnic Conflicts in Northeast India and the Indian State's Response: Use of force and the 'notion' of proportionality¹

Namrata Goswami²

Keywords: armed ethnic conflict, northeast, proportionality, Indian state, conflict resolution, negotiation

ABSTRACT:

This paper locates armed ethnic conflicts in Northeast India across four interactive qualitative variables: ethnic exclusivity and colonial isolation; strategy of the armed groups; the use of violence; and external connections. The Indian state's response to these armed ethnic conflicts is located within three conceptual parameters: proportionate use of force; dialogue and negotiations; and structural changes in the affected areas. Cases of armed ethnic conflicts utilized for empirical illustration includes the Dima Haram Daogah (DHD) and the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in Assam, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim led by Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chisi Swu-NSCN (IM) based in Manipur and Nagaland, and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) based in Manipur. A few policy recommendations are also offered to better address armed ethnic conflicts in India's Northeastern landscape.

The two main research questions the paper addresses are the following:

- 1. Why does Northeast India suffer from multiple armed ethnic conflicts since 1947?*
- 2. What has been the Indian state's response to the multiple armed conflicts in the Northeast?*

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

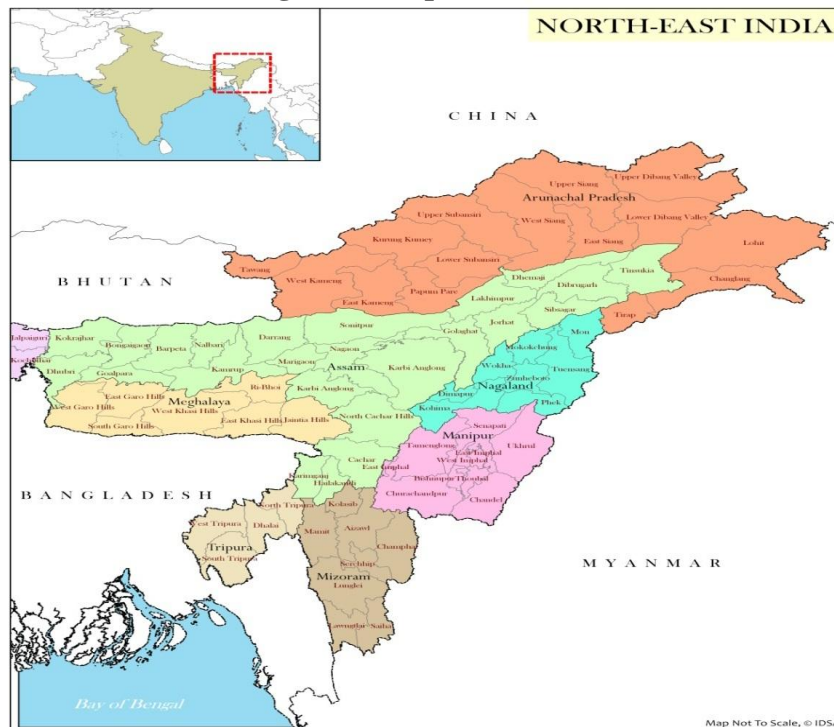
Northeast India is a rugged territory of 225,000 km of hills and plains located between four neighbouring countries of India, namely, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Myanmar (See Figure I). With an international border stretching up to 4, 500 kms, the region has been affected by armed ethnic conflicts since Indian independence in 1947. Oldest amongst the ethnic conflicts is the Naga conflict starting as far back as 1918 with the formation of the Naga Club. In 1946, the Naga

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National Council (NNC) was formed and it declared Naga independence on August 14, 1947, a day before India declared its own independence. The Naga movement turned violent since the 1950s and is active till date under the leadership of the NSCN (IM). Manipur has also been grossly disturbed by armed violence with the formation of the UNLF on November 24, 1964. Another significant Manipuri separatist armed group known as the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) and its armed wing, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been engaging in armed struggle for a sovereign Meitei state since 1976. Assam has also been affected by ethnic violence since 1979 with the formation of the ULFA and later on the DHD in the 1990s. Most of these armed groups have been able to sustain themselves over a long period of time due to external support. Countries like China in the 1960s and the 1970s and later on Bangladesh and Myanmar have supported either directly or indirectly most of these armed groups by making available arms, training and base areas for underground camps (Bhaumik 1996: 1-16). The UNLF, the ULFA and the NSCN (IM) procure small arms through the Cox Bazar area in Bangladesh and had underground camps in the Chittagong and Mymensingh areas. Things have changed with Bangladesh in recent years with regard to closure of these camps after Sheikh Hasina came to power in 2008.

Figure I: Map of Northeast India



Source: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, 2011

The stated political objective of the UNLF, the ULFA and the NSCN (IM) is a sovereign ethnic homeland for each. Only the DHD demand a separate state for the Dimasas population within India. This paper argues that in order to understand the nature of armed conflicts in Northeast India, the study must be methodologically placed within the three levels of analyses conceptualized by J. David Singer (Singer 1961: 77-92). While understanding local context (unit level) is critical to ascertain the root causes of the armed conflicts, it is equally important to analyze the external linkages (regional level) of the armed groups instrumental in providing the hardware of violence (small arms and illegal money). The role of the affected society in conflict resolution transcending the three levels is also significant revealing the role

of indigenous mediators in resolving traditional armed ethnic conflicts. Edwar Azar offers an interesting model of conflict called the “theory of protracted social conflict (PSC)” (Azar 1990: 23-27) where he argues that internal conflicts cannot be understood by creating an artificial functional differentiation between the social, psychological, economic or ethnic elements or between its internal and external dimensions. Azar believes that the root causes and nature of violence involved in internal conflicts were determined by “across level variables” rather than compartmentalized ones. To him, the most useful unit of analysis in internal conflicts is the unit level: racial, religious, ethnic and cultural. He also points out the significance of the ‘individual’ (at the unit level of analysis), as a main factor for understanding rebel membership. To him, most of the individual loyalties and motivations to join armed groups are an attempt to fulfill one’s own basic needs: security, identity, recognition, economic fulfillment, etc. I affirm this line of argument and add that while the ‘individual’ is an important factor to understand rebel membership, structural conditions like poverty, lack of employment, relative deprivation (Gurr 1969: 15-40) and the availability of small arms and an illegal war economy (Kaldor 2007: 1-17) play an equally important role in sustaining armed ethnic conflicts.

EXTRAPOLATING THE FACTORS

The four interactive qualitative variables leading to armed ethnic conflicts in the Northeast isolated for study are: ethnic exclusivity and colonial isolation; strategy of the armed groups; the use of violence; and external connections.

Ethnic Exclusivity and Colonial Isolation

The basic issues leading to armed ethnic conflicts in the Northeast are identity, ethnicity, desire for political empowerment and land. Added to this is the colonial residue of being treated as “excluded, partially excluded” areas based on the Inner Line Regulation of 1873.³ Due to the lack of a pre-colonial and colonial integrative policy with the rest of India, the hill tribes resisted the post-colonial Indian state’s entry into the hill interiors. And out of these contradictions emanates what Johan Galtung conceptualized in the 1960s: the conflict triangle. According to Galtung, conflict, both symmetric and asymmetric, is best understood when seen through a triangle, whose vertices consists of i) contradiction, ii) attitude and iii) behaviour (Galtung 1996: 17-19). Contradiction refers to the actual or perceived incompatibilities of goals between conflicting actors and the conflict of interest inherent in the relationship between them; attitude refers to negative perceptions of the “other”, which is mostly informed by emotive (feeling), cognitive (belief) and conative (will) components. Behaviour includes threats, coercion, and direct physical attacks. According to Galtung, all three factors act simultaneously resulting in the dynamic nature of violence (Galtung 1996: 17-21). Interesting, these factors are evident in the ethnic movements pertaining to the NSCN (IM), UNLF, ULFA and the DHD.

The Naga ethnic conflict has a long historical trajectory tracing back its roots to 1918 with the formation of the Naga Club by 20 members of the Naga French *Labour Corp*, who had served in World War I in Europe. The few Nagas who had

³ The Inner Line Regulation of 1873 prohibited any British Indian subjects from entering Naga inhabited areas without having a prior permission thereof. The same policy continues till date even after India became independent in 1947.

come in contact with the European battlefield were motivated to politically organize themselves as a distinct ethnic political identity. The local British administration in Naga areas did not dissuade this move. The Club submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission in 1929, in which it stated that the people of Naga areas and that of mainland India had nothing in common between them. “We should not be thrust to the mercy of the people who could never subjugate us, but leave us alone to determine ourselves as in ancient times” (Nuh and Lasuh, 2002: 114). This view was supported by John Henry Hutton, the Deputy Commissioner of Naga Hills, and N C Parry, Superintendent of Lushai Hills, in 1928 and 1930, respectively. Hutton, presenting the case of the Nagas to the Simon Commission asserted that the tribes of Northeast India were racially, linguistically, culturally, politically, and economically distinct from the Indians. He believed they would suffer by joining a people of irreconcilable culture in an unnatural union that would harm them and the people of the plains too.⁴ Hutton and Parry even envisioned a separate ‘Crown Colony’ or a North East Frontier for the Naga territories (Chaube 1973: 69 and Gundeiva 1975: 67).

In 1946, the Naga Club was further reinforced with the formation of the NNC under the leadership of A.Z. Phizo, a charismatic leader belonging to the Angami tribe. Significantly, a Nine Point Agreement known as the Akbar Hydari Agreement was signed between the moderates in the NNC like T. Sakhrie and Imkonglba Ao and the Governor of Assam, Sir Akbar Hydari on June 29, 1947. The Agreement gave the Nagas rights over their land as well as executive and legislative powers but the Agreement was rejected by Phizo. On August 14, 1947, Phizo declared Naga independence, a day before India attained its own independence. The period between mid-1950s to early 1990s were a tumultuous period in Naga history with militancy on the rise coupled by the state’s military response propelled by acts like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, amended in 1972. The cross-fire between the state forces and the NNC resulted in many non-combatant deaths as well as human rights violations. Though efforts at peace continued with the grant of statehood to Naga areas in 1963, the establishment of a peace mission in 1964 and the signing of the Shillong Peace Accord in 1975, the demand for a sovereign Naga ethnic homeland was not given up. The Shillong Accord was the proximate cause for the foundation of the unified National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). Replicating Phizo’s aversion to the Hydari Agreement, Thuingaleng Muivah, Isak Chisi Swu and S S Khaplang, then young leaders of the NNC, condemned the Shillong Accord as a sell out to the Union government by the NNC moderates and formed the NSCN in Myanmar in 1980. Subsequently, due to intense differences between Khaplang, Muivah and Swu, the NSCN further split into two factions: the NSCN (IM) led by Muivah and Swu while Khaplang formed the National Socialist Council of Nagaland--NSCN (K) in 1988. Incidentally, both the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) are under cease-fires with the Union government since 1997 and 2001 respectively. Significantly, despite increasing factionalism, the notion of ethnic exclusiveness and unique history are recurring demands from all the Naga armed groups. In the latest round of talks with the Union government in January 2011, Muivah, the General Secretary of the NSCN (IM) stated that for a final resolution to the Naga ethnic conflict, the Union government must give due recognition to the unique history and culture of the Nagas in an institutionalized manner.⁵

⁴ See Deputy Commissioner, Naga Hills District, *Hutton to the Indian Statutory Commission Memorandum of the Government of Assam*, Indian Statutory Commission, 14, London, 1930, pp. 111-118.

⁵Nishit Dholabhai, “Leaders Tryst with Destiny—Swu Drops Hint that Khaplang May Join Talks”, *The Telegraph*, January 24, 2011 at http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110124/jsp/frontpage/story_13484375.jsp (sighted on 01.02.2011).

The radical turn in Assamese nationalism could be traced back to the influx of illegal migrants from East Pakistan after partition of India in 1947, and later Bangladesh since 1971 onwards. This massive migrant flow created immense anxieties amongst the ethnic Assamese population, who resented the rapidly changing demographic profile of the state and the loss of land to the Bengali migrant. The dominant Assamese fear is that the Bangladeshi illegal migrants will demographically dominate Assam politically, socially and economically.⁶ This issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh resulted in the non-violent highly visible Assam Agitation (1979-1984) spearheaded by the All Assam Student's Union (AASU). That agitation resulted in the Assam Accord of 1985 which stated that anybody settled in Assam from Bangladesh after March 25, 1971 is not a citizen, but an illegal migrant. This provision of the Accord, due to its non-compliance at the level of state policy, has however failed to change the nature of Bangladeshi immigration into Assam, now termed as a "silent invasion". Though there is no documented data on the number of illegal migration, it is assumed that out of the 26 million people residing in Assam according to the 2001 census, around 6 million are illegal Bangladeshi migrants.

The most proximate cause of the Assam Agitation was however not the Bangladeshi illegal migrant issue by itself but the blatant politicization of it in local Assamese politics. Malpractices in the electoral procedure of 1979 in Assam came to light when in the Mangaldoi Assembly elections, 45,000 illegal migrants' names were found on the voter's list. The first strike against this was kick started on June 8, 1979. The AASU led agitation demanded that the 1951 National Register for Citizens be utilized to determine the citizenship of all those living in Assam. Subsequently, the 1983 state elections witnessed tremendous voter malpractices with the state's heavy handed response to non-violent dissent leading to one of the most violent ethnic movements in Assam. The ULFA was formed on April 7, 1979 at Ranghar, in Sibsagar district, a place of historical significance since the time of the Ahom rule. Most of the recruits of the ULFA were drawn from the *Asom Jatiyabadi Parishad* (AJYCP), which professed Marxism and advocated the Assamese right to dual citizenship and self-determination. The outfit advocated scientific socialism, Assamese nationalism and self-determination or *Swadhin Asom* (Independent Assam). The ULFA sought to revert Assam's status to the Ahom ruled Assam, pre-1826 treaty of Yandaboo between the British and the Burmese, which ushered in British rule in Assam (Baruah 1994: 863-897). ULFA's Vice Chairman, Pradip Gogoi states that his organization's political objectives are "Sovereign, Socialist Assam" in which "All indigenous people must stay, all others must leave".⁷

The UNLF in Manipur was established by Arambam Samaranda Singh. It is based on a leftist ideology *vis-à-vis* the economic and social alienation of the people of Manipur which the group asserts will be undone with the establishment of an ethnic Meitei sovereign homeland. The outfit's support base is mostly from Meiteis inhabiting the Imphal valley. Indeed, the UNLF enjoys a reasonable degree of support in Meitei areas of Manipur as there is a deep seated fear of the NSCN (IM)'s agenda of *Nagalim* (Greater Nagaland) [Goswami 2007: 287-313]. The *Nagalim* map includes all Naga inhabited areas in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Manipur had erupted into violence in 2001 when the Union government

⁶Namrata Goswami, "Bangladeshi Illegal Migration into Assam: Issues and Concerns from the Field", *IDSa Issue Brief*, January 11, 2010 at

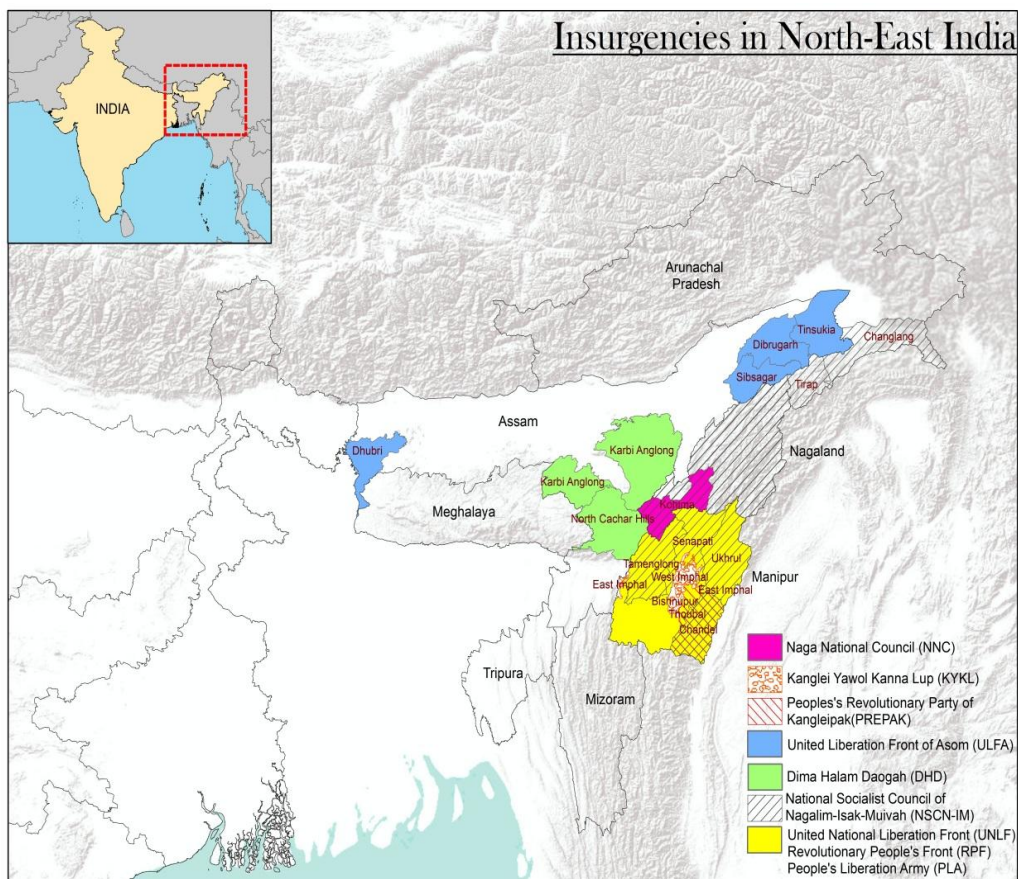
http://www.idsa.in/system/files/IB_BangladeshiIllegalMigrationintoAssam.pdf (sighted on 04.11.2010).

⁷Seema Hussein, "Exclusive Interview, PradipGogoi, Jailed ULFA Vice Chairman", *The Week News Magazine*, July 20, 2003 at <http://www.the-week.com/23jul20/events/9.html>. (sighted on 5 January 2007).

extended the cease-fire with the NSCN (IM) to Naga inhabited areas in Manipur. The resistance turned so violent that the Union government had to revoke the move. The situation, in fact, reflects the classic “security dilemma” faced by states at the systemic level. When one state arms itself, neighbouring states feel insecure. Consequently, the best way to protect oneself is to increase ones own armament. This situation is reflected when two or more ethnic groups occupy the same space. When one ethnic group arms itself, other ethnic groups also arm themselves creating a vicious cycle of “violence” versus “counter-violence” (Hartzell 2006: 31-52).

The DHD was formed in 1995 after most of the cadres of the erstwhile Dimasa National Security Force (DNSF) surrendered with the exception of its commander Jewel Garlosa.⁸ It was under his leadership that the DHD was organized into a violent force. The stated demand of the then unified DHD (it subsequently broke into two factions in 2003) was a unified Dimaraji state comprised of ethnic Dimasa inhabited areas of N C Hills district, Karbi Anglong district, Cachar district, parts of Nagaon district in Assam, and Dimapur and Dimasa inhabited areas in Dhansiripar in Nagaland. Interestingly, the demands of the NSCN (IM) for a unified *Nagalim* (Greater Nagaland), the DHD for a *Dimasa* state, the ULFA for a sovereign *Asom* and the UNLF for a Meitei homeland consist of conflicting claims to overlapping territorial spaces. Indeed, the emergence of multiple ethnic armed groups with claims over the same territory has further complicated the situation in these remote areas of Assam (See Figure 2)

Figure 2: Insurgencies in Northeast India



Source: The author; map devised by the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, 2011

⁸ Interview with Pranob Nunisa, Self Styled Commander in Chief and President of DHD, Haflong, July 19, 2007.

Strategy of the Armed Groups

Strategy, traditionally, has come to be understood as “the use that is made of force and the threat of force for the ends of policy” (Gray 1999: 17). Significantly, with regard to insurgencies, strategy entails more than just the mere use of force. It involves the “total house of strategy” (Lawrence 1935: 1-10) including not only the use of force/violence as an assertion of political intent, but also economic, political, psychological, cultural and social factors (Shy and Collier 1986: 815-862). The nature and character of an armed group’s use of force cannot be simplistically understood as resulting in direct bodily harm, mostly the consequence of conventional use of force. Notably, with regard to the use of force by states, legitimacy is automatic due to the fact that states enjoy monopoly of organized violence. On the other hand, the use of violence as a means to an end by rebel groups requires deliberate efforts at legitimization. Therefore, armed groups’ strategy involves a complex mix of political legitimization, support base, emotional category, symbolic gestures and historical narratives buttressed by the elements of time and space. In an interesting essay on asymmetric conflict, Andrew Mack argues that the “the aim of the insurgents is not the destruction of the military capability of their opponents as an end in itself...Direct costs become of strategic importance when, and only when, they are translated into indirect costs. These are psychological and political...” achieved through prolonged conflict (Mack 1983: 126-151).

Politics forms the core of any armed group’s mobilization strategy (Gray 1999: 283-85). Armed groups garner popular support for their violent means by citing a political cause which is important to the target population. Mao Tse Tung, one of the best known theorists of revolutionary warfare indicated the importance of the political objective based on local support for the success of a revolutionary rebel movement (Griffith 1962: 42-43 and Fall 1998: 46-57) Violence justified by “politics” also diffuses the outrage felt by society against indiscriminate violence in normal circumstances (Kiras 2002 : 211). It must also be noted that armed groups construct a “social imaginary” (Schmidt 2001: 4) based on real or perceived economic, political and social alienation, and cultural subjugation by “other” dominant cultures thereby vindicating the need for violent assertion to bring to bear the legitimate concerns of the armed groups’ social base (Schmidt 2001: 2-6).

It is also crucial to understand the role of “power” in mobilizing recruits for armed revolt. Rebel leaders behave like socially powerful individuals; they display their prestige by openly projecting their armed cadres, weapons and financial prowess. In areas where the state is unable to provide livelihood, rebel employment is looked upon as an important source of livelihood for unemployed youths.

The NSCN (IM), the ULFA, the UNLF and the DHD have a declared strategy of protracted armed conflict. Interestingly, cease-fires are seen as a phase when an outfit can re-group, recruit, finance and re-arm oneself. This has happened in most cases. The ULFA and the NSCN (IM) re-armed and re-grouped themselves during the cease-fire phases.⁹ During the 2007 ceasefire period, the ULFA reorganized its units in the traditional stronghold of Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Tinsukia, and formed

⁹ “Assam Timeline 2007” at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/timelines/index.html> (sighted on 5 March 2007). (The PCG was the 11 member civilian group formed by ULFA in September 2005 to talk to the Centre on its behalf).

new battalions like the 27th battalion.¹⁰ Similarly, the NSCN (IM) also increased its cadre-base from 1000 in 1997 to 5000 in 2010.¹¹

The UNLF started its overt violent movement in 1990 with the formation of its armed wing, the Manipur Peoples' Army (MPA). Interestingly, the armed group's violence is not condemned outright by Meitei society as the reform agenda of the outfit appeals in a society reeling under the influence of AIDS, and drugs from Myanmar. Myanmar is part of the golden triangle transporting huge amounts of drugs and disease into India's North East. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), poppy cultivation is on the rise in Myanmar with an estimated produce of 460 metric tons by 163, 000 households spread over 27, 700 hectares in 2007 alone.¹² Drug addiction/injected heroin users are increasing amongst the north eastern youths due to the easy availability of drugs through Moreh, Mokokchung and Champai, the three border towns in Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram respectively.¹³

The strategy of the DHD is also informed by its protracted nature. As a result, it has not disarmed despite signing a cease-fire with the Union government. A recent video on a DHD (N) training camp situated deep in the jungles of Cachar district revealed that the outfit is training young boys and girls aged 12-18 to handle sophisticated weapons. Phaizan Dimasa, Assistant Commandant, DHD, Harangajao Camp admitted that there were nearly 500 hundred child/teenage insurgents in his outfit.¹⁴

Use of Violence

Despite cease-fires between the Union government and the armed groups, the cult of violence has dominated the social fabric in Northeast India. In fact, cease-fires appear to have benefitted the security forces rather than society at large. During the cease-fire period, while violence ceases between the armed groups and the security forces, violence between the multiple armed groups continues resulting in both combatant and non-combatant deaths. In this context, the ULFA increasingly attacked Hindi speaking people especially from the year 2005 onwards. In January 2006, it killed nearly 55 Hindi speaking people across Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Tinsukia and Dhemaji districts in Assam.¹⁵ In August 2007, it changed its area of operation and struck in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam killing 14 Hindi speaking people. Significantly, it must be stated that ULFA's killings of Bihari migrants is influenced by its Bangladesh linkage; the Bihari migrants poses stiff competition to the illegal Bangladeshi migrants in Assam's cheap labour market. Therefore, Bangladesh's pressure groups could have in a *quid pro quo* demanded the ULFA to take violent action to deter more migration from neighbouring Bihar in order to benefit their own people migrating to Assam for livelihood.

¹⁰ "8 ULFA ultras arrested, Karbi Anglong Bandh Tomorrow", November 17, 2006 at <http://www.zeenews.com/znews/articles.asp?rep=2&aid=336232&sid=REG> (sighted on 11.12.2006).

¹¹ Field Visit by author to Nagaland, July-August 2007.

¹² See UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) fact sheet, 'Opium Poppy Cultivation in South East Asia 2007', http://www.unodc.org/pdf/research/icmp/fact_sheet_SEA_2007.pdf (sighted on 11 January 2007).

¹³ UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 'Drug Use in the Northeastern States of India', http://www.unodc.org/india/drug_use_in_ne.html (sighted on 15 February 2008).

¹⁴ See Rajiv Bhattacharya, "Assam's Teenage Guerrillas" at <http://timesnow.tv/NewsDtls.aspx?NewsID=5960#> (sighted on 18 February 2008).

¹⁵ See "Dealing with ULFA's Terror" at <http://www.idsa.in/publications/stratcomments/InternalSecurityCluster220107.htm> (sighted on 17.01.2006).

The NSCN (IM)'s fratricidal killings against the NSCN (K) had vitiated the atmosphere in Naga areas in recent years. However, Naga society's enthusiastic participation in an informal yet structured dialogue based on their deep-seated desire for peace and progress in the Naga areas have strengthened the community-based peace movements and has succeeded to an extent in reasoning with the Naga armed actors to be responsible in their use of violence. From the late 1980s, the joint ownership of the process facilitated by the *Naga Hoho* has taken on a mass base, with participation increasing to an astounding 10,000 people since 2007.¹⁶ In March, 2009, a 'Naga Convention for Reconciliation and Peace' was held in Kohima in order to send across 'a message of peace and an end to bloodshed and violence'.¹⁷ The convention was attended by thousands of people from various Naga tribes, the militant actors, the church and the civil society. According to Vivi, General Secretary of the National Mothers' Association (NMA), 'the convention is a positive attitude, everyone expressing the desire for reconciliation ... and this is where we can build our hope'.¹⁸ What is most refreshing to observe is that no single actor claims ownership of this process. Rather, it is viewed as a collective effort by all stakeholders to the conflict.

However, I would like to add a caveat so that we keep the 'politics of representation' in stark focus. Armed groups like the NSCN (IM) would ideally like to control the dialogue process. For instance, in 2001 the Naga Peace Reconciliation move under the joint ownership of the Naga Hoho, the Nagaland Peace Centre and the UNC proved so successful in addressing issues of violence, basic needs and political aspirations of the Nagas that the NSCN (IM) feared losing its dominant position as the sole peace negotiator with the Union Government. In reaction, it issued 'threat notices' to the leaders of the Reconciliation Committee forcing them to leave Nagaland.¹⁹

Learning a lesson or two about NSCN (IM) behaviour from these experiences, the later dialogues, especially from 2005 onwards, have involved both the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K) in the process of consultations. On July 24, 2007, when the Joint Forum of *Gaonburahs* (village headmen) and *Doaibashis* (village elders) or the JFGBDB issued an overall underground cease-fire, the NSCN (IM) and NSCN (K) representatives were present.²⁰ Moreover, the visible involvement of the JFGBDB in the dialogue since 2007 makes it difficult for the NSCN (IM) to issue similar notices to the Naga peace facilitators as it did in 2001 due to the social stature of the JFGBDB. The legitimacy of the present Naga dialogue was acknowledged by the NSCN (IM) General Secretary, Muivah in his speech at Camp Hebron, the NSCN (IM) headquarters, in July 2007.²¹

The UNLF in Manipur broke up into two factions, one led by Meghen and the other led by Namoijam Oikam---the UNLF (Oken group) in 1990 resulting in a

¹⁶ Field Observations by the author in Nagaland, 2007.

¹⁷ Vibhou Ganguly, 'Peace and Reconciliation Convention Held in Nagaland': http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/india-news/peace-and-reconciliation-convention-held-in-nagaland_100163818.html (sighted 5 June 2009).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Author's interview with Naga Peace Reconciliation Leaders, July 2007. Names not revealed due to protection of source.

²⁰ 'GBs and DBs Declare CFs Among Factions', *Nagaland Post*, 25 July 2007, 1. The author was also present in Dimapur on that day to observe the process.

²¹ Speech by Thuingaleng Muivah, 6th Naga Peoples' Consultation Meeting, 27 July 2007, Camp Hebron, NSCN (IM) headquarters, Nagaland where the author was present as an observer.

bloody factional clash leaving more than 100 people dead. The UNLF (both factions) have accelerated violent activities against the security forces with no ceasefire being envisioned in the near future. With regard to the DHD, the spate of violence in the North Cachar Hills could be viewed as a consequence of power-battles with factional fights mainly aimed at dominating the authoritative allocation of resources and territory. Given the fact that both factions of the DHD: DHD (N) and DHD (J) are heavily dependent on the extortion networks run in common areas, violence is about dominating a particular territorial space.

External Support: The Regional Level of Analysis

Internal wars fought for local issues are hardly localized affairs. They involve a complex transnational network (Kaldor 2007: 2). Armed groups garner support from external sources especially with regard to the hardware of violence. External support is contingent on the geography of the area where the armed groups are active. Support from neighbouring areas could be political, moral, military, economic, territorial or cultural based on ethnic ties.

The Northeastern states share a 4500 km highly porous border with China in the north, Myanmar in the East, Bangladesh in the southwest and Bhutan in the northwest whereas it precariously clings to the rest of India by a 22 km narrow strip of land in Bengal known as the “Chicken’s Neck”. Both the ULFA and the NSCN (IM) have training camps in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Significantly, the unified NSCN was formed in Myanmar on January 31, 1980.²² In 1986, ULFA established linkages with the unified NSCN. Both the rebel groups have strong connections with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in Myanmar (Tucker 2000:82-85). The Kachin National Army (KNA) took Rs. 100,000 per head to train ULFA cadres in the 1980s and 1990s in Myanmar. Southern Bhutan also offered a safe haven in the 1980s and 1990s. However, on December 15, 2003, the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) and the Royal Body Guards (RBG) comprising 6000 military personnel forcefully expelled 3000 ULFA and KIO cadres from Bhutan and destroyed nearly 30 training camps. Many top ULFA functionaries were also arrested. These groups then shifted to Myanmar and Bangladesh.

ULFA leaders like Arabinda Rajkhowa and Paresh Barua, Commander-in-Chief were able to function from Bangladesh until they were arrested in December 2009 with the change of regime there in 2008. From 1995 onwards, India also conducted joint military operations along with the Myanmar’s army known as the Tatmadaw. These operations have however not been very successful as underground camps continue to flourish along the porous 1,463 kms India-Myanmar border.

The NSCN (IM) takes the help of the Karen National Union (KNU) fighting the Myanmar junta since 1947. The outfit has also ventured into the Chinese black market in Yunnan province. Small arms are shipped through the Chittagong port in Bangladesh. It also had a procurement officer in Philippines, Anthony Shimray, who enjoyed deep connections with the South East Asian small arms network (Egratau 2006: 78). Also, in order to get a deeper sense of these external linkages, it is rather important to understand that the Nagas and the Meiteis had played a crucial role in the Burma Front (1942-42) against the Japanese assault during World War II. The joint training, and experiences in the Burma jungle and their successes in thwarting the Japanese, immensely influenced the Nagas, Mizos and the Meiteis.

²² See “Nagalim” at http://www.unpo.org/member_profile.php?id=41n (sighted on 21.02.2007).

China began to aggressively support similar revolutionary movements across the world after the Communist takeover in 1949. Thereafter, it provided strong political, economic and logistical support to various armed groups in Northeast India motivated by the goal of countering Western imperialism, Soviet revisionism in Asia in return of which most of these groups supported the “One China policy” with regard to Taiwan. The Nagas were greatly inspired by the Chinese ideas of “Peoples’ War” and “protracted struggle”. In 1966, Muivah, then member of NNC led a 130 strong Naga guerrilla force in a three month trek to Yunnan province in China mostly helped by the Kachins. He later on moved onto Beijing to get political training thus becoming the first Naga to visit China followed by Isak Chisi Swu and Moure Angami in 1968. China’s help to the Mizos is also well documented subsequently followed by help to outfits like the UNLF. ULFA was also in contact with China in the 1990s. However, Deng Xiaoping “good neighbour policy” stopped Chinese aid to these outfits except for flow of illegal Chinese arms through the black market via Cox Bazar near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

STATE RESPONSE TO THE ARMED CONFLICTS

The Indian state’s response to armed ethnic conflicts in the Northeast can be located within three conceptual parameters.

1. Limited and proportionate use of force.
2. Use of dialogue and negotiations.
3. Structural changes.

Limited and Proportionate Use of Force

If one analyses the response of the Indian state to armed ethnic conflicts starting with the Naga conflict in the 1950s, the ULFA in the 1970s, or the Mizo armed insurgency in the 1960s-1980s, proportionate use of force has been the key dominating factor of a responsive state. However, policies like “grouping of villages” in the Mizo conflict did result in population displacement and death of non-combatants. From 1967 to 1972, 80 per cent of the Mizo population numbering nearly 240,000 people were uprooted from their homes and placed in 102 new villages known as ‘protected and progressive villages’(Nunthara 1981: 1237-40).The army contended that population control was important for counter-insurgency. However, the re-grouping resulted in forced displacement of people, destruction of centuries-old traditional homes, paddy and grain. It also created deep seated resentment against the Indian state. Therefore, the Mizo case teaches us that though grouping of villages worked effectively in isolating the armed group, it was not the most prudent policy to be followed and will not work in other areas of the Northeast. At best, the grouping strategy creates difficulties for the local population. At worst, it follows an earlier British colonial tactic of countering dissent from the locals against colonial practices. An India that itself fought colonialism must not be seen as replicating the colonisers’ behaviour in its post-colonial phase of state-building. The Indian state has thereby learned from the Mizo experience and has ensured that the use of force in armed ethnic conflicts be guided by the notion of ‘proportionality’.

Before getting down to the issue of proportionality with regard to the use of force by India against armed groups in the Northeast, let us dwell on the intellectual roots of proportionality.

Intellectual Roots of Proportionate use of force

The proportionate use of force enjoys a rich intellectual tradition known as Just War. In setting forth this tradition on war, the contributions of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Vattel, Vittoria, Hugo Grotius, Paul Ramsey and Michael Walzer have been significant.

St. Augustine is widely believed to be the founder of the intellectual tradition of Just War (Brunk 1996: 36). He was amongst the foremost Christian thinkers to formulate the concept of *justum bellum* systematically directing western Christian thought towards the problem of war (Holmes 1989: 15). Augustine questioned the Roman idea of morality as more vicious than others in its pursuance of the end that is morality especially after witnessing the sack of Rome in 410 A.D. For Augustine, the “heart of the matter of virtue or of justice consists in a matter of the heart” (Ramsey 1992: 10). The right inner intention or direction of the will is of prime significance. He explicitly covered the issue of right intention, which means legitimate goals. Augustine also emphasized on the need for a legitimate authority, allowing only those responsible for public order to declare war in his *jus ad bellum*. According to him, ‘just wars’ were to be waged strictly for the restoration of peace and must be the last resort. It was to be undertaken, not to kill, but to prevent further loss of life. It was only in the twelfth century that Augustine’s theory received publicity and acquired significance in warfare. This was mainly due to the writings of the Bolognian monk, Gratian, who wrote the classic *Decretum*. Drawing upon the Just War writings of Augustine, as well as other Roman and Greek scholars, Gratian added a significant aspect to the theory – that a Just War must avoid non-combatants. During this time, a lot of thinking went into the concept of “double effect”. Double effect means that in case of firing between two enemy platoons, if non-combatants got hit, it was largely unintentional and thus justified. In today’s strategic vocabulary, such killings are termed as “collateral damage.” The problem, as Walzer argues, is that this provides a ‘blanket – justification’ for civilian deaths that are ‘unintended’ but foreseeable (Walzer 1992: 153). Going further from Gratian, St. Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* developed and strengthened some of the various sub-divisions of *jus ad bellum*, most notably legitimate authority, just cause and right and moral intention. He stressed that competent authority must not wage war out of their own thirst for political hegemony, but only to avenge evil done to them (Teson 1988: 43).

Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) and Emmerich de Vattel (1714-1767) were instrumental in the development of a secular Just War doctrine. Both pointed out that armed intervention to assist people suffering under an unjust sovereign was just, but the tension between order and justice remained. In *On the Law of War and Peace*, Grotius cited three causes that are just: to defend against an injury, to recover what is legally due, and to inflict punishment on a wrong doing state for excessive crimes. In other words, Grotius cited punishment of excessive crimes (*punitio*) on its citizens by a state as a just cause for war (Grotius: 44).

The reconsideration of the Just War theory in contemporary times has much to do with the writings of Paul Ramsey, and Michael Walzer. Walzer through his seminal work *Just and Unjust Wars* has been the driving force in restating the theory in the present context. Paul Ramsey’s *War and Christian Conscience* has a profound impact on Just War thinking. He drew inspiration for his work from the New Testament, St. Augustine, Immanuel Kant and Reinhold Niebuhr. Augustine’s understanding of *agape* (love thy neighbour) influenced Ramsey’s principles. According to Ramsey, *agape* established a set of principles which all Christians

should follow. Use of force to protect oneself denies neighbourly love (Sermon on the Mount). The aggressor must never be denied the love Christ taught. The enemy, however, wicked or deceitful remains one's neighbour. Ramsey uses this reason in his philosophy for the *jus in bello* principles of discrimination and proportionality. Ramsey also made an explicit connection between the idea of non-combatant immunity and the requirements of Christian love for neighbour. This turned out to be a powerful argument in connection to religious ethical reflection during the 1950s and 1960s. Ramsey was against intentional attack on non-combatants. The *jus in bello*'s criteria states that discrimination must be given a prior normative position over all other principles of the theory. If it cannot be met, no amount of reasoning for proportionality can supplement it. Michael Walzer contends that *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* principles of the Just War Theory are crucial in both the recourse to war and the conduct of war. Just wars are limited wars and their conduct is governed by a set of rules designed to restrict behaviour (Walzer 2002). He argues that it is easier now than ever before, to imagine a General saying "no, we can't do that; it would cause too many civilian deaths; we have to find another way" (Walzer 2002). Walzer advocates the necessity of turning the non-combatant immunity principle into a stronger rule, until it is something of an absolute dictum.²³

While there are several principles of the Just War theory, for the purposes of this study, the *jus in bello* (right conduct in war) principles are extremely important. These are the following:

1) Proportionality of Means

Means used in war must not outdo or outweigh the good achieved. This calls for proportionality between the probable course of action and the end that it serves. Michael Walzer does not agree that mathematical calculation of proportionality is possible, for values at stake are not commensurate – as the idea of proportion may suggest. How can one measure the value of a country's independence against the value of lives lost in defending it? (Walzer 1992: xv-vi). It is neither feasible nor morally correct to put in mathematical terms the number of lives that should be lost in acquiring freedom or self-determination for a community.

2) Discrimination/Non-combatant Immunity

The laws of war affirm that civilians or non-combatants should never be targeted in war. Certain categories of the population are classified as non-combatants: the very young, the very old, infirm and all those who lack capacity to engage in war or to contribute to the running of machinery of war. Direct targeting of civilians as well as civilian infrastructure is not supported by *jus in bello*.

According to D.P Lackey,

there is an objective and a subjective version of the principle of non-combatant immunity. The objective version holds that if civilians are killed as a result of military operations, the principle is violated. The subjective version holds that if civilians are intentionally killed as a result of military operations, the principle is violated. It follows on the subjective versions that if civilians are killed in the course of a military operation directed at a military target, the principle of discrimination has not been violated. (Lackey 1989: 60).

This criterion also prohibits targeting of economic infrastructure, communication and transportation systems, electric power grids and water pumping systems. If such infrastructures are targeted, the costs to human lives (spread of disease in epidemic levels) are disproportionate to the threat posed.

²³ A Conversation with Michael Walzer, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, 23 December 2002.

Since the ULFA and the NSCN (IM) project a certain degree of civil society support, the disproportionate use of force by the Indian state can be counter-productive. The Kakopathar incident of February 5, 2006 in Tinsukia district of Assam is telling in this regard. Ajit Mahanta, a civilian, picked up by the army on suspicion of linkages to the ULFA was found dead after a few days in army custody. On February 10, 2006, people from nearly 100 villages protested Mahanta's death. The police opened fire on the protesters killing eight people. Police sources stated that the protestors had got unruly.²⁴ In reaction, S. Kaliban, the Inspector General (intelligence), Assam pointed out that the army and police should have observed restraint as laid down by the Unified Command Structure. Consequently, ULFA reaped enormous benefits from the Kakopathar killings. Its military head, Paresch Barua stated that "we have called for the strike to protest against inhuman crimes committed by Indian forces such as killing innocent people in its custody and firing on unarmed protesters."²⁵

Policymakers and elite advisors at the Central level perhaps range themselves from political compromise and accommodation to "repressive coercion" and "co-optation". Along with this state policy, armed insurrection of this nature is fed by antagonistic feelers like exclusivist histories, ethnic homelands, and demonizing the "other" propaganda. The state is also responsible for limiting democratic space in the Northeast with draconian laws like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, amended in 1972, which gives enormous powers to the security personnel: arrest without warrant, search on limited proof of suspicious activities, and immunity from judicial review of personnel behaviour.²⁶ While armed groups like the UNLF frequently target innocent people without cause, the state's disproportionate use of force is more criticized than that of the armed groups given the fact that it can be held accountable to the 'rule of law'.

It is asserted by many security analysts that the ULFA, UNLF, DHD and the NSCN (IM) pretend to espouse people's causes. Politics of the people interspersed by historical sub-national narratives, demanding acceptance of unique identity and culture, are used by armed groups to justify their violent tactics of engagement (Baruah 2005: 99-106). Such arguments by security analysts are valid and worth engaging upon, but they fail to capture a distinct reality. These armed groups are rooted in local civil societies. Young cadres might be misguided, impoverished and illiterate, yet are deeply aware of the rebel outfits' version of political and social history. These youths believe that the present conditions of poverty and tribal melancholy can be redressed by an independent status. The Indian state's failure to directly deal with these radical ideologies has only aggravated the situation (Mahanta 2008: 95-107).

With regard to the use of force, the Indian Army, like most other conventional armies in the world, treats counter-insurgency as secondary to its primary duty of defending India from external threats. Consequently, little serious thought has been given to doctrinal innovations within the Army with regard to insurgent contingencies. Earlier organizational innovations like the Insurgency (I) Battalions and the present paramilitary force, the *Rashtriya Rifles* (RR) was/is mostly of a light infantry variety composed of deputed army personnel trained within the rigour of the

²⁴Anand Kumar, "Assam: Kokopathar Killings Gives Strength to Dying ULFA", at <http://www.saag.org/%5Cpapers18%5Cpaper1733.html> (sighted on 5 February 2007).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ For more on the AFSPA, see "The Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958" http://www.mha.nic.in/acts-rules/armed_forces_special_powers_act1958.pdf (sighted on 4.04.2008).

conventional regimental ethos (Rosen 1996: 212-248). Hence, these units were/are ill equipped to deal with insurgents whose strategy is aimed at protracted war by small guerrilla bands.

Organizationally, India has established extensive paramilitary forces under the aegis of the Ministry of Home Affairs like the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Force (BSF), the Assam Rifles (AR), etc, but it has been increasingly felt that these units are neither capable nor trained enough to counter highly motivated armed groups sprung from a local population base. Mostly equipped with classic police functions like “riot control” and “cordon searches, the BSF, the CRPF, and the AR has failed to handle the complexity of ethnic conflicts in a consequentially effective manner (Rajagopalan 2004: 25-37). More often than not, counter-insurgency operations are based on an informal “community of military knowledge” drawn upon experiences of personnel stationed in insurgency zones and not on a formally codified body of knowledge attuned for unconventional warfare. Consequently, such unconventional military action is open to various interpretations. At best, one could argue that such informality could perhaps result in adaptability and flexibility in the mission area. At worst, it might result in fuzzy understanding of the conflict zone, the strategic context and the political issues at stake. There is also a discernible lack of self criticality within army circles to acknowledge counter-insurgency failures and learn from past mistakes. Sadly enough, the army continues to follow a strategy of attrition---whose principal goal is the number of insurgents killed vis-à-vis army fatalities (Goswami 2009: 66-86). Ironically, amidst this strategy of attrition, a strategy of “winning hearts and minds” of the local population is supposedly followed by the army despite a contextual situation of high distrust between the army personnel and the affected population (Komer 1972: 1-17).²⁷ The end result is, therefore, sub-optimal. Also, the winning “hearts and minds” strategy fails to garner support of the local population since it is mostly viewed as espousing certain vested state interests.²⁸

It serves the purpose of democracies best when the military measures are limited. In this context, Assam has witnessed the gradual change in its overall counter-insurgency strategy due to the measured military responses by the army after the 1990s. The ULFA has tried to provoke the military to respond disproportionately by targeting non-combatants since 2000 onwards but the restraint shown by state forces has led to a public outcry against ULFA’s violence discrediting the group to a large extent.²⁹ Similarly, the increasing violence in Naga areas in recent months between factions,³⁰ and the security forces’ measured response have build a certain level of trust between the army and the local people in Nagaland. The populations of Diphupar and Chumukidima villages in Nagaland were of the firm view that their safe passage through the state highways as also protection of agricultural fields from insurgent actors by the army has been a respite. Otherwise insurgent actors would routinely stop public transport and demand exorbitant taxes from passengers, non-payment of which results in either grave physical injury or death. This local attitude towards the army is a far cry from the 1960s and 1970s when it was feared by the local people and routinely accused of human rights violations.³¹

²⁷ See “Doctrine for Sub-Conventional Operations”, Integrated Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence (Army), Headquarters Army Training Command, December 2006.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Field Visit to Assam in July 2007 and interviews with local media, people and villagers.

³⁰ See “Wanyuh, others condemn factional clash”, *Nagaland Post*, May 7, 2008 at <http://www.nagalandpost.com/Statedesc.asp?sectionid=59518> (sighted on 7 May 2008).

³¹ Interview with Naga *Hoho*, Apex Naga tribal body, Diphupar, Nagaland, July 2007.

Critique and a Recommendation

The case of Malaya and Punjab amply demonstrate the necessity of a well trained, highly motivated and localized state police force to counter-insurgency. This is not happening in Assam, Nagaland or Manipur where the state police forces are in disarray due to absence of reforms. Police infrastructure in the North East also lacks focused attention compromising the force's ability to counter insurgencies (Marwah 1996: 224-230). The North East Police Academy established in 1978 remains largely ineffective due to lack of funds (Latimer 2004: 53).³² Interestingly, the *2007-2008 Ministry of Home Affairs Report on Internal Security* has pledged 100 per cent funds for police modernization in the region.³³ Hopefully these recommendations will be implemented in letter and spirit. It is rather important that the local police are given the task of fighting insurgents rather than the army. The advantages enjoyed by local police in this regard are manifold: they belong to the area of operations and are permanently posted there. Consequently, their intelligence gathering and assessment skills are more developed. This "special police" capability in countering insurgents was vividly visible in the Malayan experience where the army, at best, played a supportive role.

Some argue that the RR is the Indian army's answer to counter-insurgency. To my mind, the RR is primarily an organizational innovation without doctrinal support suited to counter-insurgency. Originally conceptualized by former Chief of Army Staff, General B. C. Joshi, the RR was mostly established to provide *rear area* security in Punjab during *Operation Brasstacks* against Pakistan in 1987. It was later made into a counter-insurgency force when Jammu and Kashmir erupted with insurgent violence in 1989. However, the RR is handicapped as it is not manned by personnel with a separate doctrinal training outside the army; indeed, the personnel belonging to different infantry regiments in the army are posted on RR duty on a rotational two year basis. This limits their ability, unlike the police, to create a well-honed culture for counter-insurgency operations based on a continuous field experience. Neither are they capable of acquiring cultural knowledge of an area in such a short posting. According to Rajesh Rajagopalan "the RR is like any other regular army infantry battalion in the way it operates" (Rajagopalan 2004: 35). This lack of doctrinal changes has limited the military's ability to work out complex issues of insurgencies in a context specific manner. Most counter-insurgency operations are manned by massive force concentration ill-suited to counter a small band of insurgents. In Assam, *Operation Bajrang* and *Operation Rhino* were intensive military operations against the ULFA, which included other paramilitary forces as well like the AR, the CRPF, etc., mostly trained in conventional warfare, riot control, and cordon searches. The operations' size was a massive 30, 000 to 40, 000 men in order to fight an armed ULFA guerrilla force of a 1000 men and women! Tactically, of course, these operations were successful as they flushed out the ULFA headquarters at Lakhpathar, Assam and also succeeded in arresting many ULFA cadres. Strategically, however, these operations were disastrous. Not only did the massive deployment of troops alienate the local people but also most ULFA leaders and cadres were able to flee to neighbouring Bhutan. The plethora of forces also created immense confusion with regard to efficient coordination. Realizing the problem of coordination, the Central Government has now set up the Unified Command Structure under the *IV Corp* in Assam. This step, which upgrades the army to operational dominance over the local police, is however, seen as hostile to

³²North East Police Academy, North East Training Academy Background Information at <http://nepa.nic.in/main.html> (sighted on 12 August 2007)

³³ See *Status Paper on Internal Security Situation*, New Delhi, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (March 31, 2007) : 23.

local democratic procedures (Marwah 1996: 224-230). Indeed, I argue that this is a flawed approach. What is actually needed is a “special police” branch based on small agile forces comprised of personnel trained in guerrilla tactics and adept at mountain warfare, who will patrol thickly forested areas even at night. Equipped with adequate terrain knowledge and enjoying permanency of tenure in the insurgency affected area, these special police forces stand a better chance in activating “trust and nurture” (Goswami 2009: 66-86)

Counter-insurgency is a difficult task; the personnel involved in such duties is required to project a combination of a policeman, a guerrilla fighter, an intelligence officer, a peace negotiator and a giver of humanitarian aid. It also requires high initiative, visible motivation, passion for the job, local trust building and nurturing, terrain awareness, permanency of tenure, effective intelligence (Gompert 2007), creative leadership, and political awareness. Most importantly, special counter-insurgency units must be adept at both intelligence gathering and population reassurance. Guaranteeing the local population of their security is a must for building a trust relationship but it also includes development of infrastructure and continuous dedicated maintenance of these projects (nurture). The 57 Mountain Field Artillery Brigade stationed in Haflong, Assam, despite its reluctance to shoulder counter-insurgency duty, is doing a good job to safeguard villages from insurgent activity by operating out of garrison and in the night. The reassured village communities are grateful for the security brought into their otherwise high risk existence through these efforts.³⁴ However, since this particular division will be stationed in the area for not more than two years, it is necessary to instill the local police with such practices coupled with better pay and incentives. At present, the salaries received by police personnel in Assam is so miniscule that he is forced at times to join the insurgent extortion nexus to keep his family off a “hand to mouth” existence.³⁵

In Nagaland, the local villages have undertaken counter-insurgency measures by forming their own small groups of armed young men for security against insurgent raids especially at night.³⁶ Though not completely successful, these measures have brought in some succour for the local people from factional fighting between the NSCN (IM), the NSCN (K) and the NSCN (U). Also, the Army has been seen with guarded hope given the fact that it has engaged in local development activities like building schools, providing medical facilities in remote villages and also enabling transportation. The idea of small defence village units could be taken ahead and be converted into special police units adept in local culture, dialect, as well as urban and jungle warfare.

Use of Dialogue and Negotiations

The word ‘dialogue’ is a combination of the Greek words *dia* meaning ‘through’ or ‘across’ and *logos* meaning ‘word’ or ‘reason’. Dialogue therefore implies ‘a sense of creating meaning through talking or reasoning together’ (Broome and Hatay 2006: 630). Dialogue deals with the challenge of understanding complexities at the social, political and cultural levels buttressed by differences in perceptions of the contextual situation, vagueness regarding causes of conflict, and ambiguity with regard to the future. Hence, the notion of dialogue, operating within the framework created by such antecedent conditions, is to squarely meet the challenge of coordinating meaning through participatory processes by bringing together diverse groups of

³⁴ Author’s interviews with village communities in Mpuielo, Jatinga and Sonpijang villages, North Cachar Hills, Assam, July 17-21, 2007.

³⁵ Author’s interviews with Haflong police personnel, Haflong, Assam, July 19, 2007.

³⁶ Author Interview with local villages, Dhansiripar, Nagaland, July 2007.

actors with differences in personal experiences, perceptions and, at times, a history of violent conflict between them. The aim of most dialogical conflict resolution mechanisms is to create conditions for coordinated action towards a common goal: the end of violence and the emergence of an inclusive and peaceful society.

According to Hal Sanders, of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue and the Kettering Foundation,

dialogue is a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn. Each makes a serious effort to take others' concern into her or his own picture, even when disagreement persists. No participant gives up her or his identity, but each recognizes enough of the other's valid human claims that he or she will act differently toward the other. (Pruitt and Thomas 2007: 20-21)

If one assesses the Indian response to the armed conflicts in the Northeast, dialogue and negotiations have always been an option. In the case of the Naga conflict, the dialogue started as early as 1947 with the Akbar Hydari agreement, the Naga Peace Mission of 1964, the civil society interactions, the Shillong Accord of 1975 and now the ongoing peace negotiations with the NSCN (IM) and the NSCN (K). The Mizo armed conflict also witnessed negotiations from a very early period. The Mizo National Front's shift in interests towards a more power-sharing mechanism within India was met by the Union government with the grant of Union Territory status in 1972. Consequently, the Union government held out the promise of full statehood, which met the political interests of most Mizos short of independence. In this regard, then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's role in signing peace agreements with protest movements and insurgent groups in North East India like the Assam Accord of 1985 and the subsequent Mizo Accord of 1986 was significant. This empathy shown by the Union government to the political demands of the Mizos worked in its favour towards resolving the issue. The Mizoram case of indigenous mediators is also classic in this context. The Mizo Church, led by Revered Zairema, took on a leading role in mediation as early as 1968. Subsequently, a peace mission comprising of the Presbyterian and Baptist Church was formed to persuade the MNF to give up violence. Chief Minister Chhunga along with the Young Mizo Association (YMA), the MizoZirlai Pawl (MZP), and the Human Rights Committee of Brigadier T. Sailo, who later became chief minister, formed the Mizo Peace Advisory Committee on November 12, 1974, to pressurise both the MNF and the security forces to resist violent means (Verghese and Thanzawna 1997) Counterfactually, without these strong mediations from the local society, the MNF might not have been amenable to a political settlement (Goswami 2009: 579-89)

Coming to the ULFA, the latest developments with regard to release of ULFA leaders indicate that the Union government on its part, with active facilitation by the Assam state government, is open to "unconditional talks" with the ULFA. Hence, jailed ULFA leaders are being released in a phased manner perhaps to ensure that its commitment to talks is sealed. This is buttressed by the fact that on December 7, 2010, ULFA founding member and ideologue, Bhimakanta Burhagohain was released from jail following the November 27 release of ULFA Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Raju Baruah and Culture Secretary Pranati Deka. These three releases were contingent upon developments on the "talks" front. In fact, to add credibility to the Government's desire for talks with the jailed ULFA leadership, founding member and Vice Chairman of ULFA, Pradip Gogoi had been released on March 7, 2010 itself. On December 31, 2010, ULFA Chairperson, Arabinda Rajkhowa was released.

While one could argue that there is not much hope for long lasting peace to settle in Assam given that ULFA leaders are forced to talk to the Union government under duress, it is important to note that this is not the first time the framework of talks have been utilized by the Government of India as a conflict resolution mechanism with the ULFA. In September 2005, efforts had been made to reach out to the ULFA with the formation of the People's Consultative Group (PCG). (The PCG was the 11 member civilian group formed by the ULFA to talk to the Centre on its behalf). At that time, the process failed as ULFA lacked commitment to the talks and instead increased its armed cadres during that period.

This time around, it is critical that the talks succeed and ULFA's commitment to the peace process is sincere. For that to bear fruit, it is vital that the framework of the talks be informed by the element of inclusiveness based on a 'problem solving' approach. A number of stakeholders in the conflict including local civil society actors from ULFA strongholds like Sibsagar, Tinsukia and Dibrugarh with divergent or common interests and perceptions should come together to work out a map for prevention, management and resolution of the conflict. This will also ensure that the talks enjoy solid societal support and limit the ability of "peace spoilers" to sabotage the peace process. Also, the dialogue process must not be hijacked by a powerful actor (for instance, the state) who could perhaps utilize it to buy time to forward its own agenda. Instead, there must be joint ownership of the process in order to address problems and issues which have brought about this division.

Dealing with the fear of domination within the dialogue framework

The fear of being dominated by the northern Indian heartland is a perennial feature in Assamese Manipuri, Dimasa and Naga political, cultural, and social discourses. These groups express hurt at a perceived northern treatment of them as inferior people.³⁷ They dislike being termed exotic, mysterious and unknown. Having witnessed a modern war (World War II) in their soil and high levels of migrations from South and South East Asia, they see no justification for such arguments. The armed groups provide platforms for articulation of such concerns. The fear element also has a more lethal connotation. Fear is also used as a tool of population control and intimidation by these armed groups. Many mainstream journalists argue that local Assamese people are fearful of ULFA.³⁸ At least 10,000 people, mostly civilians, have died since ULFA's inception in 1979. These tactics of terror have killed the support base of the ULFA to a large extent. Prominent Assamese public figures like Homen Borgohain, Dr Hiren Gohain, Dr Amalendu Guha, Kanak Sen Deka, Chandra Prasad Saikia, Jayanta Madhab, Dr Nagen Saikia etc have condemned ULFA's indiscriminate violence. The NSCN (IM) is also ruthless in its use of violence. On May 19, 2006, the NSCN (K) 'Education Kilonser' (Minister), Ngampan Konyak was killed by the NSCN (IM) faction.³⁹ Tribal passions run deep in the cadre base and create inter-tribal conflict. The DHD and UNLF also target "others" and passions run high resulting in extreme violence. The October 2005 violent confrontation between the DHD and the UPDS in the hill districts of Assam is a case in point.

³⁷ Interviews conducted with Assamese and Naga students in Delhi, 2003-2006.

³⁸ Praful Bidwai, "ULFA: Assam's Irrational Syndrome", *Sunday Times of India*, New Delhi, December 23, 1990.

³⁹ See "Nagaland Assessment-Year" 2006, at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/nagaland/index.html> (accessed on November 18, 2006).

³⁹ <http://www.nagalim.nl/news/archive-072006.html> (sighted on November 18, 2006)

To deal with these fears, certain structural response has been undertaken by the state.

Structural Changes

The most important structural response is the grant of greater political autonomy and statehood. In fact, as early as 1947, the Interim Government appointed a sub-committee to the Constituent Assembly, the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Committee under the Chairmanship of then Assam Chief Minister, Gopinath Bardoloi. The committee recommended setting up of autonomous district councils to provide due representative structures at the local level to the tribal population. The recommendation was later incorporated into article 244 (2) of the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Nagaland has been accorded special status under Constitutional law. Article 371 (A) states that no Act of Parliament in respect of religious or social practises of the Nagas, Naga customary law and procedure, administration of civil and criminal justice and ownership and transfer of land and resources will apply to Nagaland unless passed by the State Assembly. Statehood was also granted to Nagaland in 1963 followed by the North Eastern Areas (Re-Organization) Act of 1971 which granted statehood to Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura and granted Union Territory status to Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. In 1986, the Mizo armed conflict was also resolved by granting statehood to Mizoram through the Mizo Accord of 1986.

Another structural change that is being envisioned is through the 'Look East' policy wherein it is envisioned that economic development and 'opening up' trade routes to South East Asia *via* land and sea will bring about prosperity to the North-Eastern states.

Despite these significant state responses, three of the Northeastern states, namely Assam, Manipur and Nagaland continue to be affected by ethnic violence. In light of that, a few policy recommendations are in order.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Since most of the armed groups are geared towards ethnic dominance, it is rather pertinent to manage ethnic dominance of one group by another. This can be realistically addressed by institution building at the local level giving representation to most groups (Hartzell 2006: 31-52).

2. Societies support the armed groups due to lack of economic opportunities. Interviews with armed cadres by the author reveal this aspect starkly. Thereby, the state needs to activate a Disarmament, Demobilization and Rehabilitation (DDR) programme to train, and provide alternate avenues for young misguided youths in these areas (Dzinesa 2007: 73-89). Also, infrastructure building must be done in remote areas buttressed by vigilant oversight mechanisms to deter corrupt practices.

3. The Indian constitution already possesses significant provisions to protect minority rights Articles like 371 (A) with regard to Nagaland and reservation of seats in the State Legislative Assemblies for Scheduled Tribes in the Northeast guarantee power sharing. Yet, the "rule of law" is abysmal in these areas resulting in security dilemmas and armed violence. Subsequently, the law enforcement mechanisms need an urgent overhaul.

4. Many conflict analysts argue that internal armed conflicts are driven more by greed than grievance. Leading this school is Paul Collier who argues that economic agendas are the causes of conflict (Collier 2006: 1-29). This inference is based on a statistical data set which indicates that “need deprivation” do not co-relate to the incidence of armed violence as much as indicators for economic incentives. The indicators for the economic agenda are: easily available assets like diamonds, drugs, extortions, etc., and this is linked to the proportion of young men in society aged between 15-24 years. This is based on the co-relation that rebellions are run by young unemployed men. However, Edward Azar’s insightful analysis refutes the “only greed” theory and indicate grievances like ethnicity, identity, needs-deprivation etc informing conflicts. Interestingly, the recommendations that flow from both these two schools are similar as well as Collier’s own admission in his section on policy recommendations that grievances could be a contributing factor. This paper argues that both greed and grievance play an equal role in creating armed conflicts and thereby, policy makers need to take cognizance of both while generating policy responses.

5. Cross-border linkages are a crucial aspect of all the four cases of armed violence identified here. Hence, instead of “looking east” since 1992, India needs to “act east” by carefully working out actionable frameworks of cooperation between itself and its neighbours based on sound groundwork on the nature of its neighbouring regimes.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined a research framework for understanding armed ethnic movements in Northeast India as well as drawn attention to the Indian state’s response to armed violence in the Northeast. The four cases of armed ethnic conflicts in the Northeast generated similar findings on armed ethnic conflicts in general. Five of the findings are very significant for larger theoretical studies on ethnic conflicts:

First, individual motivations, security needs, identity issues, social status and means of livelihood are the prime reasons for the sustenance of armed ethnic conflicts across time and space.

Second, armed ethnic conflicts do not have a specific timeframe; they are protracted in nature.

Third, historical narratives on being different or feeling of alienation from a dominant ‘other’ fuels armed ethnic conflicts.

Fourth, armed ethnic conflicts in a state are sustained over time by external connections.

Fifth, proportionate use of force and dialogical conflict resolution mechanism is perhaps the best response to armed ethnic conflicts especially in a democracy.

A final concluding thought is in order here. Besides viewing armed ethnic conflicts through the level of analyses prism, it is equally important to do substantive study on conflict resolution mechanisms based on the policy recommendations offered above. Conflict resolution by definition indicates a comprehensive framework, going much beyond conflict management, which addresses the deep sources and root causes of any particular conflict. The Mizo peace process (1968-

1986) in India indicates that the conflict was transformed from violent assertion to peaceful resolution as the root causes of the conflict were addressed, attitudes of the conflicting actors changed, and issues got reframed. Perhaps, taking clue from this successful case of conflict resolution as well as other successful examples from across the world, policy makers could better address the multiple armed ethnic conflicts plaguing the Northeastern landscape.

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