

# Exploring Core and Peripheral Insurgencies in India's Northeast

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Internal conflicts in India's Northeast are distinctly conceptualized within the framework of unique ethnic identities that are threatened by and in altercation with, the nationalist state, with the latter often viewed as an agent of an inchoate cultural 'mainstream'. While some of the conflicts in the region fit into this general framework of interpretation, few, if any, are absolutely explained by it. Several, in fact, are entirely unrelated to this reductionist scheme of 'freedom struggles' by ethnic minorities against the 'homogenising state'. Indeed, even where militant groups direct their rhetoric and their violence against the symbols of the state, the underlying motives and ideologies are more correctly interpreted in terms of conflicting tribal identities and histories of internecine conflict, based entirely on tribal, sub-tribal, or tribal-outsider rivalries and parallel antagonisms over control of or accesses to limited resources, especially land.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Ajai Sahni, "Survey of Conflicts and Resolution in India's Northeast", Faultlines, May 2002, Volume 12, <http://old.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume12/Article3.htm>.

Have the ethnic insurgencies of India's Northeast entered their long waited final phase, as insurgency related violence records continuous declines over the past few year? Has the drop in violence in States such as Assam, Tripura, Nagaland and Manipur as a combined result of the loss of cross-border safe havens, geo political transformations, operational successes of Security Forces (SFs) and negotiations with militant groups, finally resulted in a cascading effect that could bring an end to the troubles in Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and the North Cachar Hills as well? The quantitative data suggests that these insurgencies have entered a waning phase with incidents and fatalities declining to their lowest in a decade. The insurgency in Tripura has been substantially defeated, with no insurgency related fatalities recorded since 2015, while negotiations with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) are reportedly in their final stages.<sup>2</sup> Peace talks between United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and Government authorities are also nearing fruition with recent reports indicating that a consensus has been reached.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, according to Union Ministry of Home Affairs (UMHA) across the Northeast, 43 insurgent formations are now under Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreements with the Government and another nine have arrived at Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) / Memoranda of Settlement (MoS) with the Government.<sup>4</sup>

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2 "Congress Demands PM's Clarification on Naga Peace Accord", *Northeast Today*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.northeasttoday.in/congress-demands-pms-clarification-on-naga-peace-accord/>.

3 Rajeev Bhattacharya, "Talks complete between Centre and pro-talks ULFA faction : Accord likely after completion of NRC", *First Post*, May 6, 2018 <https://www.firstpost.com/india/talks-completed-between-centre-and-pro-talks-ulfa-faction-in-assam-accord-likely-after-completion-of-nrc-4457623.html>.

4 Giriraj Bhattacharjee, "Northeast: Negotiated Success", *South Asia Intelligence Review (SAIR)*, Volume 16, No.45, May 7, 2018 <http://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-16-No-45#assessment2>.

The road to the comparatively peaceful environment in the region has been a long and gory one, with a total of more than 15,000 insurgency-linked fatalities just between 1992 and 2005.<sup>5</sup> However, between 2006 and 2018 the fatalities recorded in the region totaled 5,742, indicating a substantial fall in violence in the region.<sup>6</sup> An even more remarkable drop in fatalities can be observed between January 2009 and June 22, 2018, with 3,021 fatalities in nearly ten years, while just the four years between 2005 and 2008 (inclusive) accounted for 3,441 fatalities in the region).

The dynamics of core and peripheral insurgencies in the region have been complex, and it remains to be determined whether the drop in violence in one State or group of States experiencing a ‘core insurgency’ has a ripple effect on the ‘peripheral insurgencies’ in the region.

Most of the insurgencies in the Northeast were initiated after significant agitations by articulate sections of the affected groups and civil society representatives leading agitations to promote their cause, sometimes violently. Later, sections of these agitated youth were drawn towards the armed insurgency due to the perceived lack of progress in meeting their demands. In a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-linguistic society, such violent means to achieve stated goals by particular ethnic groups has often led to a cycle of violence, which is then emulated by members of other ethnicities.

The larger ethnic militant groups, which have been responsible for a lion’s share of violence (constituting the core insurgencies) in the region, have propped up ‘peripheral’ insurgent groups, primarily in logistically vital areas to act as facilitators for the larger groups.

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5 “Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in Northeast 1992-2018”, SATP, <http://www.satp.org/Datasheets.aspx?countries=india>.

6 Ibid.

These 'peripheral' groups play a vital role for the sustenance of the insurgency because of their trans-border linkages, which cut across states and international boundaries (e.g., the Garo's inhabit Assam, Meghalaya and Bangladesh). Moreover, these groups also engage in a range of criminal activities, such as abduction and extortion, which provide additional sources of revenue for the patron groups. A mutually supportive insurgent ecosystem thus develops and is fed by and compounds the extortion, abduction and arms trade.

A widespread misperception about the conflict in the Northeast has been that the conflict exists primarily due to lack of administration and development. However, on closer inspection it can be determined that these reasons by themselves have not been the cause of the emergence, spread and sustenance of violence over a prolonged period of time. Rather, the ever-present threat of violence itself has contributed to the lack of administration and development. Violence has been sustained primarily because of the conflict dynamics itself, with the persistence of violence over a long period diluting the initial causes for the emergence of the conflict, and establishing an alternative and self-sustaining dynamic.

The insurgent groups in the region have ethnic and tribal underpinnings, with most groups being formed or dominated by tribes of the same or shared ethnicity. This tribal nature of the insurgency has also led to factionalisation of insurgent groups which, along with various other political factors, has resulted in a range of impediments to any negotiated resolution of these insurgencies. Any 'dialogue' is inevitably complicated by a multi-layered procedure to accommodate factions and ethnic fissures in once-unified groups, often protracting conflicts indefinitely. Naga groups such as NSCN-Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) and the Khaplang faction, NSCN-K, is the primary

example of this pattern of fission and persistence of conflict. While NSCN-IM is dominated by Thangkuls and Semas,<sup>7</sup> Aos and Konyaks dominate the Khaplang faction.

Political and insurgency dynamics of in the region are compounded by a variety of factors including ethnicity, tribalism, linguistic concerns and regional pride, which in turn are further accentuated due to a demographic destabilization as a result of immigration (starting from 19th century and continuing) and by narratives driven by loss of identity and political marginalization.

Further, although the multitude of insurgencies in the Northeast may seem like a conflict based on a homogenous factor, caused by antagonism between the state and its agencies on the one side and various ethnicities attempting to 'safeguard' their unique identities, on the other, the ground reality is quite different. Some insurgencies may genuinely have sprouted out of ideas of ethnic identity, provoking the insurgents to attack government forces and installations. However, the underlying reasons and motives for the majority of insurgencies can be traced to competition for scarce resources (such as land) and the historical animosity between various tribes or ethnic groups.

The indigenous tribal groups are known to have a strong attachment to the land and forests in their areas of demographic dominance, and any encroachment by 'outsiders' generally creates resentment and frictions between communities.<sup>8</sup> The Naga-Kuki conflict in Manipur during the early 1990's is a prime example of competition for land. In Assam, Bodo violence targeting the Muslim migrant and Santhal ('tea tribe')

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7 Sashinungla, "Nagaland: Insurgency and factional intransigence", *Faultlines*, January 2005, Volume 16, <http://www.satp.org/faultline-chapter-details/29>.

8 B.G Verghese, *India's Northeast Resurgent*, 1996, Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 1996, p.8.

populations can also be traced to land issues between the communities. The Nellie Massacre of 1983 was orchestrated by instigating the Tiwa tribal population against immigrant Muslims who were settled in land reserved for the tribals, which the latter believed the immigrants had ‘stolen’ from them.<sup>9</sup>

### **DEFINING ‘CORE’ AND ‘PERIPHERY’**

The first armed insurrection in the Northeast emerged in 1952 in the form of the Naga rebellion. Later, insurgencies sprouted throughout the region, with insurgency being initiated in Manipur in the 1960’s, with the formation of United National Liberation Front – UNLF, the armed movement of the Meiteis; and in Tripura, with the formation of the Tripura Sena, as a result of inflow of ethnic Bengalis from erstwhile East Pakistan into the State); and in Assam due to the demographic destabilization resulting principally from illegal migrants from erstwhile East Pakistan and subsequently, Bangladesh. These States faced the brunt of insurgency-related violence, thereby forming the ‘core insurgencies’ of the region.

As a result of armed violence in these States, a spillover effect was felt within areas of Assam not affected by the principal insurgencies, such as the North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong, which border Meghalaya and Nagaland; as well as Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh, both flanking Assam and Nagaland. Armed violence spread to Meghalaya, with the formation of the Hynniewtrep Achik Liberation Council (HALC) in 1992. Arunachal Pradesh, which did not witness any substantial insurgent violence by local groups, primarily had to contend with a spillover from insurgency from the other States, principally dominated by the NSCN faction,

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9 Ibid., p. 44.

but with other insurgent groups also vying for control of the borders with Myanmar.

The principal actors engineering the spillover were the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), who propped up local militant groups to act as facilitators in regions outside their direct spheres of influence. These groups acted as peripheral or support groups for the core insurgencies in the region. One example was the A'chik National Volunteer Council (ANVC), formed in the year 1995 and operational in the Garo Hill Districts of Meghalaya. ANVC coordinated its operations in tandem with a variety of insurgent formations, including NSCN-IM, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and ULFA. Naga militant groups also propped up peripheral insurgencies in Arunachal Pradesh, most recently the Eastern Naga National Government Group (ENNG) formed in January 2016.<sup>10</sup> According to officials, the group was formed by NSCN-IM and was operating in the Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh.

## CORE INSURGENCIES

### Assam

The insurgency in Assam started in 1979, alongside the vigorous anti-outsider agitation, primarily targeting refugees from East Pakistan since Partition, with augmenting flows after the creation of present day Bangladesh. The movement was initiated by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) which initially demanded detection and deportation of those who had

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10 Rishu Kalantri, "New outfit raises head in Arunachal", *The Telegraph*, April 27, 2017, [https://www.telegraphindia.com/1170428/jsp/northeast/story\\_148683.jsp](https://www.telegraphindia.com/1170428/jsp/northeast/story_148683.jsp).

entered India after 1951. Although the Government of India (GoI) agreed to the demands of the protestors, the cut-off date it insisted on applying was 1971,<sup>11</sup> which was not accepted by the agitators. This led to the breakdown of talks between AASU and AAGSP, on the one hand, and GoI, on the other. The anti-outsider agitation quickly mutated into a secessionist movement, marked by the formation of ULFA in 1979.

As ULFA gained force, the Bodos (one of the earliest settlers in Assam) started a parallel armed movement demanding the creation of a separate State. Bodo militants are primarily active in what is now the Bodo-dominated Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD), comprising of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri. The first Bodo militant group was the Bodo Volunteer Force (BVF), formed in 1987. Later, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) emerged in 1994, with a declared goal of a 'sovereign Bodoland'. In due course of time, there were multiple splits within these organisations. Currently, peace talks are progressing with two factions of NDFB: NDFB Pro-talks Faction (NDFB-PTF) and NDFB-Ranjan Daimary (NDFB-R). However security operations are ongoing against NDFB-S (formed by I.K. Songbijit, currently led by Saoraigwra), which has been involved in large scale violence such as the December 2014 attack on Adivasis . The Bodo Liberation Tigers, formed in 1996, renounced violence in 2003, after signing a tripartite Memorandum of Settlement with the State and Union Government.

According to South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), between 1992 and June 22, 2018 at least 8,294 people were killed in Assam (4,298 civilians, 831 Security Force personnel and 3,165 militants).

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11 "Assam Backgrounder", *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, <http://www.satp.org/background/india-insurgencynortheast-assam>.

## **Manipur**

Although the princely state merged with India in 1949, it became a full-fledged State only in 1972. This led to a sense of grievance, which resulted in Meitei dominated groups like UNLF and People's Liberation Army (PLA) launching violent insurgencies to restore 'sovereignty'. The Meiteis dominate the Imphal Valley areas, while the tribals residing in the Hill Districts were not enthusiastic about the idea of a sovereign Manipur, which they feared will be dominated by the Meiteis. The ethnic divide is widened further by the Hill-Valley distinction. The Meitei majority inhabitants of Manipur do not belong to the scheduled tribes and reside mostly in the fertile Valley Districts, while the various Kuki and Naga tribes dominate the hill Districts.

According to SATP, between 1992 and June 22, 2018 at least 6,140 people were killed in Manipur (2,292 civilians, 1,030 Security Forces and 2,818 militants).

## **Nagaland**

The Naga secessionist movement is the oldest in the region. Though there were periodic negotiation between the rebels and Government, the issue remained unresolved. After the parent group, the Naga National Council (NNC), signing the 1976 Shillong Accord, it slowly lost prominence. It was replaced by a breakaway formation that rejected the Accord, NSCN led by Isak Chisi Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah and S.S.Khaplang. Clashes between NSCN and SFs continued through the 1980's and the 90's. In 1988, after bloody internecine clashes, the NSCN split, leading to the formation of NSCN-IM and NSCN-K. GoI entered into a ceasefire agreement with NSCN-IM in 1997, and with NSCN-K in 2001. A 'framework agreement' was signed with NSCN-IM in 2015, shortly after NSCN-K walked out of its Ceasefire agreement. GoI has also

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taken on board seven member Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs)<sup>12</sup> in the ‘talks process’ to forge a ‘comprehensive solution’ acceptable to all.

According to SATP, between 1992 and June 22, 2018 at least 2,526 people were killed in Nagaland (812 civilians, 259 Security Forces and 1,455 militants).

## **PERIPHERAL INSURGENCIES**

The spillover of insurgency into Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh can primarily be attributed to their locations. Meghalaya, with Bangladesh bordering it on one side and Assam on the other three, was a critical corridor for insurgent groups in Assam, as a ‘spring board’ to and from Bangladesh, where their safe havens and training camps were located. By virtue of its location the State became an important lifeline for the insurgency. With the Garo Hills bordering Bangladesh, insurgent groups could set up ‘transit camps’ in the region. However, given the probability that the locals would have turned against them if outside formations were to engage in any armed activity or intimidation, the groups cultivated local militants to provide logistical support, and to raise revenues through extortion.

### **Arunachal Pradesh**

Arunachal Pradesh, which borders Myanmar, has been used by Indian Insurgent Groups (IIG) to cross over to Myanmar, where insurgent camps have long been located. The hilly terrain, accompanied by thick jungles in the border areas offered attractive havens to the insurgent groups, making it easy for them to hide, while SFs have a difficult time pursuing

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12 Giriraj Bhattacharjee, “Nagaland: Widening discord”, *South Asia Intelligence Review* (SAIR), Volume 16, No.20, November 13, 2017, [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/sair16/16\\_20.htm#assessment2](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/sair16/16_20.htm#assessment2).

them. Although there were indigenous militant groups from Arunachal Pradesh such as Arunachal Dragon Force (ADF), National Liberation Council of Taniland (NLCT) and United Liberation Movement of Arunachal (ULMA), these groups have been rather ineffective and have not executed any noticeable attacks targeting Security Forces or Government installations in the recent times. Arunachal Pradesh has, thus, not witnessed any effective indigenous militant movement.

However, over the years, the state has become an important 'connector' for militant groups of Assam and Nagaland, to cross over to their safe heavens in Myanmar, with Tirap, Changlang and Longding (along the Myanmar border) forming the hub of militancy in the State. According to UMHA Annual Report (2017-2018)<sup>13</sup> at least six insurgent groups from Assam and Nagaland, namely NSCN-IM, NSCN-KK, NSCN-K, NSCN-R, ULFA-I and NDFB-S<sup>14</sup> were active in Arunachal Pradesh, and are also involved in extortion and recruitment in the State.

In recent years, militant activity in Arunachal Pradesh has increased. According to an April 10, 2017, statement by Hansraj Ahir, Minister of State (MoS) for Home Affairs, militant formations have shifted their 'centre of gravity' to the Indo-Myanmar border. Although insurgency-related fatalities have been minimal, there were 61 insurgency related incidents in the State according to the UMHA Annual Report 2017-18. In 2012 there were 21 insurgency-related incidents, after which the number increased steadily – 33 in 2014, 36 in 2015, 50 in 2016 and 61 in 2017.<sup>15</sup>

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13 "Annual Report 2017-18", *Ministry of Home Affairs*, Government of India, <https://mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MINISTRY%20OF%20HOME%20AFFAIR%20AR%202017-18%20FOR%20WEB.pdf>.

14 Ibid.

15 "Annual Report 2017-18", *Ministry of Home Affairs*, Government of India, <https://mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MINISTRY%20OF%20HOME%20AFFAIR%20AR%202017-18%20FOR%20WEB.pdf>.

### **North Cachar Hills**

Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao constitute the three Hill Districts of Assam. The predominantly tribal Districts have considerable autonomy. The major tribal communities residing in these Districts are Karbi, Dimasa, Kuki, Hmar, Tiwa, Zeme Naga, Biete, Hrankhols, Khelma and Rengma Naga.<sup>16</sup> Non-tribal communities include Assamese, Bengali, Nepalese and Hindi-speakers.

During the mid- and late-1980's, the Mikir (later rechristened Karbi Anglong) and NC (North Cachar) Hill Districts (later renamed Dima Hasao) witnessed an agitation for an 'autonomous State' within the State of Assam led by the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC). Militancy in the region started in the 1990's with the formation of groups such as the Karbi National Volunteers (KNV) and Karbi People's Front (KPF). Later the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) carried out violent activities in the region with an objective of setting up '*Hamprek Khangtim*' (self-rule). Around the same time Dimasa militant groups such as the Dimasa National Security Front (DNSF) and later Dima Halam Daogah (DHD) and Black Widow (BW) fomented trouble in the NC Hills (Dima Hasao). These militant groups wanted to create a separate state for the Dimasa in areas of their demographic dominance, such as the Dima Hasao, Cachar, Nagaon and Karbi Anglong Districts of Assam and parts of the Dimapur District in Nagaland. Prominent militant groups, including Naga formations and ULFA helped raise Dimasa militant units in these Districts. The major groups also collaborated with local groups, sharing of extortion revenues and benefits from the arms trade.

Corruption within the autonomous council set up in 1952 (which was bifurcated in 1976 into Karbi Anglong and NC

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16 The major tribal communities residing in these Districts.

Hills autonomous District Councils) benefited the militants. The presence of State and Central Government Public Sector Units (PSUs), private cement companies and major infrastructure projects like the East-West corridor and Broad Gauge Conversion Project were prominent targets. Funds meant for development were thus diverted due to the politician-militant nexus, which emerged as political parties exploited militant formations during electoral processes. Over time, diminishing state revenues and high recurring expenditures further undermined development in the area. At the same time, competitive ethnic assertion led to repeated ethnic violence, primarily led by the various ethnic insurgent groups, leading to the death of hundreds and displacement of thousands.

### **Meghalaya**

Meghalaya, one of the four tribal majority States in the North East region, became an autonomous State in 1970 and was upgraded to a full-fledged State on January 21, 1972.<sup>17</sup> The political situation in Meghalaya was heavily influenced by the ‘anti-outsider’ agitation in the neighboring Assam, which was spearheaded by student organisations such as AASU. Similar ethnically charged agitations began to take shape in Meghalaya later, spearheaded by the Khasi Students Union (KSU),<sup>18</sup> primarily targeting ‘non-tribals’ (Bengalis, Biharis and Nepalese). Three major cycles of rioting in Meghalaya, where the non-tribal population was specifically targeted, were in 1979, 1987 and 1992. According to the Sharma Commission, the riots of 1979, 1987 and 1992 resulted in the death of more

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17 Official website of Meghalaya Government, <http://meghalaya.gov.in/megportal/stateprofile>.

18 Leishipem Khamrang, “Geography of insurgency –Contextualisation of ethno-nationalism in Northeast India”, *Scientific Research*, June 11, 2015, [https://file.scirp.org/pdf/JSS\\_2015061115202722.pdf](https://file.scirp.org/pdf/JSS_2015061115202722.pdf).

than 100 people and more than a thousand were displaced.<sup>19</sup> After the signing of 1985 Assam Accord, many tribal students in Meghalaya demanded that the accord be extended to Meghalaya as well.<sup>20</sup>

The formation of HALC, a secessionist group, is widely considered to be the starting point of armed insurgency in Meghalaya. HALC was created with the assistance of NSCN-IM, and mobilized the Garos, Khasis and Jaintias. However, by 1992, tribal differences came to the fore leading to the split of group into two – Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) representing the Khasis and Jaintias, and the Achik Matgrik Liberation Army (AMLA) representing the Garos.<sup>21</sup> AMLA was more of a vigilante group than a secessionist formation. AMLA too was backed by NSCN-IM. The group never numbered more than 30, and was involved in bank robberies and other crimes.<sup>22</sup> AMLA surrendered in 1994, shortly after the death of its ‘commander in chief’ George Momin.

ANVC was formed in 1995<sup>23</sup> and operated till 2004, when it signed a cease fire agreement with the Union Government in 2004. In 2012 it came to be known that a split had occurred in the ANVC ranks, leading to the formation of the ANVC-

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19 Nabanipa Bhattacharjee, “No more candle light vigils please”, *Mainstream* June 27, 2015, <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article5757.html>.

20 Indranil Banerjee, “Agitation against non-tribals by Khasi Students Union turn violent”, *India Today*, July 15, 1987, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19870715-agitation-against-non-tribals-by-khasi-students-union-turns-violent-in-shillong-799063-1987-07-15>.

21 Brigadier Sushil Kumar Sharma, op.cit., [https://idsa.in/policybrief/gar-national-liberation-army\\_sksharma\\_180316](https://idsa.in/policybrief/gar-national-liberation-army_sksharma_180316).

22 Brigadier S.P. Sinha, *Lost opportunities*, Lancer, New Delhi p. 197.

23 Veronica Khangchian, “Meghalaya : Flawed cease fire”, *South Asia Intelligence Review* (SAIR), Volume 10, No.44, May 7, 2012, [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/sair10/10\\_44.htm#assessment2](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/sair10/10_44.htm#assessment2).

Breakaway faction (ANVC-B). Although the split came to be known to authorities in 2012, Nado R. Marak, ‘personal secretary’ to ANVC-B ‘commander-in-chief’ Mukost Marak, claimed that the split had taken place as far back as in July 2004.<sup>24</sup>

An ex-member of ANVC, Sohan D. Shira formed the Garo National Liberation Army (GNLA) in 2009, which rapidly emerged as the most violent militant formation in Meghalaya, until Shira was killed in an encounter with the Meghalaya Police in April 2018.

Meghalaya witnessed the peak of insurgency in 2014, with 179 insurgency-related incidents, and 76 fatalities. Since then the graph has declined steeply, with 123 incidents and 61 fatalities reported in 2015; 68 incidents and 26 fatalities in 2016; 28 incidents and eight fatalities in 2017; and three incidents and seven fatalities in 2018 (till June 21).

## **REASONS WHY LOCALS JOIN INSURGENCY**

The reasons for locals joining insurgency tend to vary according to diverse local conditions. Some of the factors which contributing to local recruitment include:

### **School Dropouts**

The lack of educational infrastructure in the region and probable lack of qualified teaching professionals is likely to have indirectly contributed to youngsters joining militant ranks. High dropout rates in primary and secondary schooling in the northeastern states has been identified as a reason for the militant recruitment.<sup>25</sup> Except for Tripura all other north-eastern states

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24 Ibid.

25 “A dangerous silence in India’s northeast”, *The Hans India*, April 17, 2015, <http://www.thehansindia.com/posts/index/Hans/2015-04-17/A-dangerous-silence-in-Indias-north-east/144854>.

have dropout rate higher than the national average.<sup>26</sup> Youth unemployment (15-23 age groups) is significantly higher in the region, and could be a reason for restive youth joining militant ranks.<sup>27</sup>

### **Fear of Loss of Identity**

Another motivating factor is the fear of loss of identity and resources to the outsiders. As stated in an interview of Elangbam Johnson, president of the United Committee Manipur (UCM): “Many people of the State woke up only after a Nepali man won the elections in Kangpokpi constituency in Senapati district. The outsider issue is therefore affecting the Hill Districts too. The broad gauge line to Jiribam (Imphal East district) is going to start soon, which will bring more outsiders to the State. If we don’t act now, our land will be gone. Manipur will become another Tripura where the indigenous people have been outnumbered by the Bengalis who came from Bangladesh.”<sup>28</sup> UCM was formed in 2001 after the extension of the GoI-NSCN-IM ceasefire “without territorial limits”, with the aim of protecting Manipur’s territorial integrity.<sup>29</sup> The trust deficit is especially prevalent amongst the hill people towards outsiders, as is their resentment against perceived domination, by plainsmen, especially in the economic sphere.

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26 “School drop-out rates: National average decreases, North-East states increase”, *India Today*, May 6, 2016, <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/drop-outs-in-north-east-india-322042-2016-05-06>.

27 “Employment situation in north eastern region of India: Recent trends and emerging challenges”, *VV Giri National Labour Institute*, 2012, <https://vvglnli.gov.in/sites/default/files/2012-096.pdf>.

28 “Fears Over Land, Identity Fuel Manipur’s Bonfire of Anxieties”, *The Wire*, September 9, 2016, <https://thewire.in/politics/manipur-churachandpur-hill-valley-inner-line-permit>.

29 Wasbir Hussain, "Manipur: Caught in a Homeland War", *South Asia Intelligence Review (SAIR)*, Volume 2, No. 13, October 3, 2003, [http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2\\_13.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2_13.htm).

This sense of grievance combined with the fear of loss of their unique identity is a motivational factor for locals to join armed movements. Notably, the then Khasi Students' Union (KSU), Vice-president Fredrick Kharmawphlang resigned from KSU and joined the banned Khasi militant HNLC in February 2014. In his resignation letter addressed to the KSU, Fredrick Kharmawphlang asserted,<sup>30</sup>

I have taken this step personally with a motive to send a strong message to the State Government that there is a need to protect our indigenous people... As a student leader I found that the Congress-led government has failed the people even on a simple issue of influx of outsiders. I believe 2014 is a political year and I speak as one of the victims of the Government of India even after 67 years of India's attaining freedom.

Later, on July 31, 2015, Fredrick Kharmawphlang surrendered before the Meghalaya Police in Shillong.

### **Violence as a Ticket to Political Power**

Armed violence has emerged as a shortcut to political power. Many present-day mainstream politicians in the region were previously involved with militant formations. Mizoram has had a succession of former insurgents as Chief Ministers and Ministers. The present Chief Executive Member (CEM) of the Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council (DHADC) Debolal Garlosa *aka* Daniel Dimasa was 'deputy commander in chief' of DHD-Jewel Garlosa. In Meghalaya, HNLC 'chairman' Julius K. Dorphang (who surrendered in 2007) became an Independent Member of the Legislative Assembly in 2013.

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30 "KSU respects Kharmawphlang's decision to join HNLC", *Meghalaya Times*, February 24, 2014, <http://meghalayatimes.info/index.php/front-page/24167-ksu-respects-kharmawphlang-s-decision-to-join-hnlc>.

There is, consequently, an increasing perception that militancy could be a 'ticket' to the higher echelons of political power. Moreover, the politico-militant nexus is also very visible in the region. A recent and glaring example was the February 18, 2018, attack on the convoy of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) candidate Jonathone Nengminza Sangma in the East Garo Hills District in which four people were killed, besides the NCP candidate from William Nagar. The victims also included a surrendered GNLA 'commander' Nikam Ch Momin *aka* Baichung, 'second in command' of GNLA.<sup>31</sup> On April 6, 2003, Meghalaya Police seized a State pool car allocated to the former Cooperation Minister and senior NCP leader Adolf Lu Hitler R. Marak when it was being used to ferry ANVC militants.<sup>32</sup> According to DGP (Retired) Prakash Singh, the absence of accountability for past deeds has given the militants confidence and undermined available deterrents to militancy.<sup>33</sup>

### **Porous Border**

A reason for the insurgency to take hold is the location along porous borders with Bangladesh or Myanmar, from where insurgent groups smuggle arms into India. The strategically located Garo Hills region thus housed at least 22 militant formations in 2014.<sup>34</sup> With the easy availability of

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31 "GNLA suffers body blow as top leader surrenders", *The Shillong Times*, December 10, 2016, <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2016/12/10/gnla-suffers-body-blow-as-top-leader-surrenders/>.

32 Anirban Roy, "Shadow boxing in Meghalaya", *South Asia Intelligence Review* (SAIR), Volume 2, No.2, July 28, 2003, [http://old.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2\\_2.htm#ASSESSMENT2](http://old.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/2_2.htm#ASSESSMENT2).

33 "Violence in Assam: Reasons behind the carnage and demands of Bodo militants", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0Vm3nDaAys&t=402s>.

34 Albert Thyrniang, "Critical look at the causes of militancy in Garo Hills", *The Shillong Times*, March 14, 2014, <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2014/03/14/a-critical-look-at-the-causes-of-militancy-in-garo-hills/>.

arms, bands of criminals formed militant groups and engaged in extortion and abduction, collecting huge amounts of money in a short duration. Since its nascent stages, IIG have found safe havens across the border into Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan). Pakistani authorities provided training and support to Naga and Mizo rebels, as well as to militants from Manipur, from the very beginnings of their movements. Some years after Liberation, found renewed refuge in Bangladesh, and this continued till the Sheikh Hasina regime began to take harsh action against them after 2009. ULFA leaders such as Paresh Baruah were hosted by the Directorate General of Field Intelligence (DGFI), Bangladesh's military intelligence agency. In a statement made in 1997, the then Prime Minister Begum Khalida Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) openly declared support for militants in India's Northeast<sup>35</sup> and stated: "They (the insurgents) are fighting for independence. We also fought for it, so we are always in favour of any independence movement."<sup>36</sup>

IIGs dependence on Bangladesh increased in the early 1990's, after the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Myanmarese insurgent group, withdrew its support. Bangladesh (along with the Pakistani ISI) started providing weapons to the insurgents.<sup>37</sup> In 2007 ULFA reportedly funded major political parties such as BNP and Awami League (AL) in Bangladesh.<sup>38</sup> By 2011, ULFA's Paresh Baruah had invested in several

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35 "Khaleda's party backs militants in Northeast India", *Business Standard*, January 27, 2013, [http://www.business-standard.com/article/specials/khaleda-s-party-backs-militants-in-northeast-india-197030301010\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/specials/khaleda-s-party-backs-militants-in-northeast-india-197030301010_1.html).

36 Ibid.

37 E.N. Rammohan, "Manipur: Blue Print for Counterinsurgency", *Faultlines*, Volume 12, May 2002, <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume12/article1.htm>.

38 "Ulfa funding Bangladesh parties", *The Economic Times*, February 26, 2007, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/ulfa-funding-bangladesh-parties/articleshow/1680553.cms>.

Bangladeshi companies, with interests in real estate, shipping, textile, power and medical care. Baruah reportedly invested in three Dhaka-based real estate firms, Basundhara Real Estate, Jamuna Group Housing Project and Eastern Housing Project. He owned a 30 per cent share in Samrita Hospital, 30 per cent in Chowdhury Shipping, and 30 per cent in Kasem Textiles, among others.<sup>39</sup>

In 2005 during an India-Bangladesh Border Coordination Conference, Border Security Force (BSF) officials had handed over a list of 172 IIG camps<sup>40</sup> operating inside Bangladesh territory. There were no actions from the Bangladeshi side. During this time Bangladesh was ruled by BNP's Khalida Zia. However, things changed after 2009, when the Awami League came to power in Bangladesh.

The primary reasons for insurgencies finding roots in Arunachal Pradesh – in Tirap, Changlang and Longding Districts – are connected to geography and demography. The Districts border the Sagaing region of Myanmar, where the Myanmar Government has a minimal presence. ULFA, after losing its bases in Bhutan<sup>41</sup> and Bangladesh,<sup>42</sup> began to use Myanmar camps extensively for training and housing its cadres in Sagaing region, in areas contiguous to the eastern

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39 “Ulfa's Paresh Baruah invested millions in Bangladeshi firms”, *First Post*, September 25, 2011, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/ulfas-paresh-baruah-invested-millions-in-bangladeshi-firms-91844.html>.

40 Ramananda Sengupta, “Why India is concerned about Bangladesh”, *First Post*, December 26, 2005, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2005/dec/22bspec.html>.

41 Wasbir Hussain, “Going for the Kill”, *South Asia Intelligence Review* (SAIR), Volume 2, No. 23, December 22, 2003, <http://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-2-No-23>.

42 Wasbir Hussain, “Dhaka Arrests Terror”, *South Asia Intelligence Review* (SAIR), Volume 8, No.43, May 3, 2010, <http://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-8-No-43>.

districts of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>43</sup> Although Myanmar has been a safe haven for Indian IIGs, this has less to do with the Myanmar's Government policy and more to do with the fact that Nay Pyi Daw does not have effective control in the peripheral Myanmar, which has also faced the issue of ethnic insurgency since its infancy as an Independent country. NSCN-K, with strong affinities with populations on both sides of the border, has had bases in Myanmar since the time of its formation in 1988.<sup>44</sup>

Crucially, adjacent regions of Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar have a significant Naga population, with tribal and family linkages across the border, which have facilitated the spread of insurgency. In 2012, according to an agreement signed between NSCN-K and Myanmar authorities, autonomy was granted to Naga inhabited areas in three Districts (Lahe, Layse and Nanyang) in the Sagaing region.<sup>45</sup> The agreement provides freedom of movement of unarmed NSCN-K militants throughout the country.

The Wancho, Nocte, Tutsa, Singpo and Tanga tribes are the majority inhabitants in Tirap, Changlang and Longding Districts. Till 2000, the NSCN-K enjoyed dominance in Tirap and Changlang, as a result of Chipu Menon's efforts.<sup>46</sup> The insurgency in Tirap was politically imported in January 1999

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43 Rajeev Bhattacharya, "The Sino-Myanmar border: The New Hideout for Separatist Rebels from North-east", *The Wire*, June 1, 2013, <https://thewire.in/politics/the-sino-myanmar-border-the-new-hideout-for-separatist-rebels-from-the-northeast>.

44 "FAQ: What is NSCN-K? Who is SS Khaplang?", *Rediff*, June 11, 2015, <http://www.rediff.com/news/report/faq-what-is-nscn-k-who-is-ss-khaplang/20150611.htm>.

45 Nishit Dholabhai, "NSCN-K bags autonomy in 3 Myanmar areas", *The Telegraph*, May 15, 2012, [https://www.telegraphindia.com/1120515/jsp/northeast/story\\_15477837.jsp](https://www.telegraphindia.com/1120515/jsp/northeast/story_15477837.jsp).

46 T.T. Tara, "A Mismatched Priority", *Outlook*, July 23, 2003, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/a-mismatched-priority/220845>.

[allegedly by Mukut Mithi of Arunachal Pradesh Congress (M)], to overthrow the incumbent State Government led by Gegong Apang of the Arunachal Congress party. The use of militant groups to achieve political objectives was repeated after the October 1999 State Assembly elections, when some political leaders, deprived of expected ministerial berths invited NSCN-IM to 'protect' them from NSCN-K.<sup>47</sup> NSCN-IM influence is primarily concentrated in the Districts of Longding and Tirap while NSCN-K is said to be in prominence in District of Changlang.

Illegal extraction of minerals like coal<sup>48</sup> or illegal cultivation of opium<sup>49</sup> in the affected areas has also yielded revenues for militant groups. ULFA and NSCN factions were reported to have been involved in the coal trade which generated huge funds. Insurgent groups which were involved in illegal extraction of coal in Arunachal Pradesh's Changlang District used the revenue to buy sophisticated firearms.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, an open border regime that allows free movement of people for up to 16 kilometres on both sides of the international border between India and Myanmar has also facilitated the movement of militants.

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47 Dr Narayan Singh Rao, "Super power politics and growth of insurgency in Eastern Arunachal Pradesh", *United Service Institution of India*, June 25, 2008, <http://usiofindia.org/Article/?pub=Journal&pubno=573&ano=331>.

48 "Coal mining in Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh suspended in 2012", *Economic Times*, January 30, 2015, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/indl-goods/svs/metals-mining/coal-mining-in-changlang-district-of-arunachal-pradesh-suspended-in-2012/articleshow/46066261.cms>.

49 Rishi Majumder, "Hurricane heroine", *Tehelka*, January 29, 2011, <http://www.tehelka.com/2011/01/hurricane-heroin/?singlepage=1>.

50 Sanjib Kumar Baruah, "N-E insurgents mined Arunachal coal to buy arms", *Hindustan Times*, October 3, 2003, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/n-e-insurgents-mined-arunachal-coal-to-buy-arms/story-Ww4IxxvMdDqDVvMtQw0gWyM.html>.

## **GEOGRAPHY AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES AS DETERMINING FACTORS IN INSURGENCY**

99 per cent of the boundaries of the Northeast region are international borders, with Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China.<sup>51</sup> These countries have, at different times and in various measures, either provided material and moral support to the insurgents, or have served as a base for their operations. The situation becomes murkier due to the porous nature of these borders and relationships across boundaries based on tribal and other kinship considerations. The proximity to the Golden Triangle (area known for opium production, located at the tri junction of Myanmar, Thai and Laotian border)<sup>52</sup> and the flourishing markets for illegal arms are also responsible for the turmoil. Foreign intelligence agencies, including Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), Bangladesh's Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and Chinese intelligence have hand-held insurgents in various phases, compounding India's internal security problems, particularly in the Northeast.

## **INSURGENT LINKAGES WITH OTHER COUNTRIES**

### **China**

North Industries Corporation (NORINCO), a state owned Chinese corporation has reportedly been involved in supplying weapons to militant formations in the Northeast. NORINCO's name reportedly surfaced in 2004, after the Chittagang arms

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51 Problems of Border areas in North East India: Implications for the thirteenth finance commission Government of India 2009, [http://fincomindia.nic.in/writereaddata/html\\_en\\_files/oldcommission\\_html/fincom13/discussion/report14.pdf](http://fincomindia.nic.in/writereaddata/html_en_files/oldcommission_html/fincom13/discussion/report14.pdf).

52 "Opium Poppy cultivation in 'Golden Trinagle' hits new high in 2014-UN report", *UN News*, December 8, 2014, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2014/12/485662-opium-poppo-cultivation-golden-triangle-hits-new-high-2014-un-report>.

haul, when Bangladeshi authorities recovered a consignment of 4,930 firearms meant for NSCN-IM and ULFA.<sup>53</sup> Further, according to UNLF ‘chief’ R.K. Meghen, his group had been in touch with China since 2008. Meghen also stated that his group met a Chinese agent in 2008. According to an intelligence official, the Chinese have been using corporate companies as fronts to supply weapons to non-state actors.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, according to a December 2011 report, ULFA-I leader Paresch Baruah had found shelter in Yunan Province of China near the Sino-Myanmar border.<sup>55</sup> Paresch Baruah continues to find shelter in China to the present day. Recently, L.R. Bishnoi, Additional Director-General of Police, Assam, disclosed, “Barua in fact has been in Ruili [a Chinese town bordering Myanmar] for quite a long time, and only occasionally visits the ULFA camps that are located closer to the Indian border, primarily because of security reasons.”<sup>56</sup>

## **Bangladesh**

Previously, DGFI, Bangladesh, had helped IIGs. In 2001, DGFI provided a safe house to Paresch Baruah in Dhaka.<sup>57</sup> At peak, Bangladesh hosted a total of 194 camps of Northeast

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53 Sandeep Unnithan, “Chinese agents smuggle arms to revive militancy in north-east India”, *India Today*, May 28, 2011, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/investigation/story/20110606-chinese-agents-smuggle-arms-to-spread-militancy-in-north-east-746248-2011-05-28>.

54 Sudhi Ranjan Sen, “China’s growing link with north east rebels worries India”. *NDTV*, July 19, 2015, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/china-enabling-deadly-attacks-in-north-east-india-782703>.

55 “Paresch gives arms, funds to Maoists: JB”, *The Telegraph*, December 21, 2011 [https://www.telegraphindia.com/1111221/jsp/frontpage/story\\_14908521.jsp](https://www.telegraphindia.com/1111221/jsp/frontpage/story_14908521.jsp).

56 Samudra Gupta Kashyap, “Chinese agencies helping North East militants in Myanmar”, *The Indian Express*, January 10, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/chinese-agencies-helping-north-east-militants-in-myanmar-4468384/>.

57 Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East*, Harper Collins, 2012, pp 183.

Indian insurgent formations.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, ULFA had a strong presence in the port city of Chittagong,<sup>59</sup> which was also a hub for illegal weapons. Militants from Tripura [National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF)] and Manipur [People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK), United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and Kanglei Yowel Kanna Lup (KYKL)] also had camps in Bangladesh.

### **Pakistan**

ISI has been supporting insurgent activity in the Northeast since the days of East Pakistan, and since the emergence of India's first insurgency in Nagaland.<sup>60</sup> In the 1990's ULFA leaders had established contacts with ISI.<sup>61</sup> NSCN-IM's Thuingaleng Muivah was arrested at Bangkok Airport on January 19, 2000, while he was returning after a visit to Pakistan. Similarly, Ranjan Daimary, NDFB 'chief' (currently his faction is known as NDFB-PTF), is also known to have visited Pakistan in January 2000, indicating Islamabad's continuous coordination with insurgent groups in India's Northeast.<sup>62</sup>

### **CAUSES FOR DECLINE IN INSURGENT VIOLENCE**

According to the SATP database, between 1992 and June 3, 2018 at least 21,579 fatalities have occurred in insurgency-related incidents throughout the Northeast. Between, 1992 and

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58 Wasbir Hussain, "Increasing Pressure", *South Asia Intelligence Review* (SAIR), January 12, 2004, Volume 2, No.26, [http://old.satp.org/satporgrp/sair/Archives/2\\_26.htm](http://old.satp.org/satporgrp/sair/Archives/2_26.htm).

59 Ibid.

60 "ISI's link with Northeast Insurgent groups", SATP, [http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/india/document/papers/Pakistan\\_report/Anex\\_G.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/india/document/papers/Pakistan_report/Anex_G.htm).

61 Ibid.

62 "ISI's link with Northeast Insurgent groups", SATP, [http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/india/document/papers/Pakistan\\_report/Anex\\_G.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/countries/india/document/papers/Pakistan_report/Anex_G.htm).

2008, there were at least 11 years when fatalities exceeded a thousand. Since 2009, however, no single year has seen total fatalities touch a thousand. The highest total fatality figure during this latter period was 852 in 2009. Fatalities in 2017, at 103, declined by 36 per cent as compared to 2016 (160), to their lowest level since 1997.<sup>63</sup>

The operational capabilities of insurgent groups in the Northeast have clearly and dramatically diminished over the past decade. While sustained countering insurgency efforts by security forces have played a role, a range of other factors have influenced this outcome. These include:

- The change in the international scenario after 2001: After 9/11 non-state actors involved in armed insurgencies were increasingly perceived as a serious threat worldwide. Stricter enforcement of laws to counter arms trafficking, money laundering, the movement of cadres and the provision of safe havens, made the survival of armed insurgencies difficult. Intelligence agencies across the region and the world started sharing information more willingly and systematically. State agencies also cooperated with each other to detain facilitators for militant groups. A recent example was the case of Willy Naru aka Wthikorn Naruenatwanich, a Thai weapon supplier to NSCN-IM, who was brought to India in December 2015 by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) under a red corner notice issued by INTERPOL.
- International cooperation against on armed non-state actors: Insurgent groups suffered another blow after

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63 "Annual Report 2017-18", *Ministry of Home Affairs*, Government of India, <https://mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MINISTRY%20OF%20HOME%20AFFAIR%20AR%202017-18%20FOR%20WEB.pdf>.

the global change in perception was accompanied by a change in the stance of the Bangladeshi Government. In a departure from earlier policy, Dhaka started taking actions against IIGs operating from its territory, once the Awami League Government led by Sheikh Hasina assumed power in 2009. IIG camps in areas such as Mymensingh, Moulvibazar and Rangamati were dismantled and, between 2009 and 2014, Bangladeshi authorities arrested 17 top Indian insurgent leaders, hailing from Meghalaya, Tripura and Assam.<sup>64</sup> Some of the prominent militant leaders arrested were Arbinda Rajkhowa, ‘chairman’ of ULFA (arrested in 2009); and ULFA’s ‘foreign secretary’ Sashadhar Choudhury, ‘finance secretary’ Chitraban Hazarika, and ‘commander’ Ranjan Chowdhry (arrested in 2010).<sup>65</sup>

- On March 9, 2014, BSF handed over Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) a list of 66 camps of IIGs such as HNLC, ANVC-B, ULFA-I, NDFB-IKS, People’s Liberation Army (PLA), among others.<sup>66</sup> Subsequently, on January 23, 2015, the then BSF Inspector General (IG), Meghalaya Frontier, Sudesh Kumar had stated that the number of camps of Indian militant groups in Bangladesh had diminished after security authorities of

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64 Devesh K. Pandey, “17 Indian Insurgent leaders arrested in Bangladesh in five years”, *The Hindu*, March 7, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/17-indian-insurgent-leaders-arrested-in-bangladesh-in-five-years/article6967230.ece>.

65 “Military training at 13 ULFA camps in Garo Hills”, *Bangla News 24*, July 23, 2010, <http://www.banglanews24.com/banglanews-special/article/2601/Military-training-at-13-ULFA-camps-in-frontier-Garo-hills>.

66 “BSF submits list of 66 camps of NE based outfits to BGB”, *The Shillong Times*, March 9, 2012, <http://meghalayatimes.info/index.php/front-page/24336-bsf-submits-list-of-66-camps-of-ne-based-outfits-to-bgb>.

that country launched a crackdown. In December 2017, the BSF Chief K.K Sharma stated that the number of camps had been reduced to zero over preceding years.

- Security Operations: Security successes have also been critical to the transformation in the region. For instance, sustained action by Bangladeshi Security Forces had an immediate impact on Meghalaya, as the state was used as a location for transit camps for cadres moving from Bangladesh into Assam, and eventually prompted IIGs to relocate from Bangladesh territory to Meghalaya, particularly to the Garo Hills (bordering Bangladesh), which was the main operational centre of groups such as GNLA. In 2014, an operation, code named *Operation Hill Storm* was launched by joint teams of the Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT) of Meghalaya Police and Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA), the commando force of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). The Operation, which started in 2014 continued through 2016, resulted in the killing of at least 75 militants.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, towards the final stages of the *Operation Hill Storm* in 2016, at least 197 militants surrendered in the State. The operation also decreased the incidents of violence, which came down from 310 in 2013, 341 in 2014 and 310 in 2015, to 118 in 2016.<sup>68</sup>
- Negotiations with major insurgent groups: Ongoing negotiations with the principal insurgent groups such as NSCN, vastly reduced the incentive or the stakes such groups had in fomenting violence throughout

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67 M.A. Athul, “Meghalaya: Undercapitalized Gains”, *South Asia Intelligence Review* (SAIR), Volume 16, No. 31, January 29, 2018, <http://www.satp.org/south-asia-intelligence-review-Volume-16-No-31>.

68 Ibid.

the region. As stated earlier, at least 54 insurgent formations in the region are in various stages of negotiations with the Government. More significantly, peace talks with major groups such as ULFA-PTF and NSCN-IM are also heading towards a conclusion. On May 5, 2018 Arabinda Rajkhowa the leader of ULFA-PTF (faction which is in talks with Government) had stated, “Discussions with the government are over on the charter of demands submitted by us although the date for the signing of the agreement has not yet been decided.” Separately, the factionalisation of NDFB and ULFA, with splinter groups joining the peace process has also resulted in the decline of insurgency.

### **COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE PERIPHERAL INSURGENT GROUPS**

The peculiarities of insurgency in these ‘peripheral’ states are also noteworthy. Unlike the principal insurgent groups of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam, which constitute the ‘core insurgencies’ in the region, the survival and activities of insurgent groups in the peripheral States are very short. For example UNLF of Manipur, a Meitei outfit was formed in 1964 while ULFA was formed in 1979. Additionally, currently active factions of NSCN (NSCN-IM and NSCN-K) were 1988, after the split of undivided NSCN, which came into existence in 1980. These groups, despite their periodic factionalisation, have had some ‘ideological continuity’ and have managed to survive over an extended period.

On the contrary, the shelf life of insurgent groups in Meghalaya has been shorter (with the sole exception of HNLC) as they lack ‘ideological continuity’ or, indeed, any coherent ideology to speak of. Thus, for example,

- AMLA was formed in 1992 and became defunct by 1994.
- ANVC was raised in 1995 and signed a cease fire agreement in 2004, though a splinter group, ANVC-B, emerged later.
- GNLA, formed in 2009, has been defeated as a group after SFs killed Sohan D. Shira, its ‘commander in chief’, in 2018. By 2013, GNLA had already split, with the creation of GNLA-F.
- In 2013, United A’chik Liberation Army (UALA) was formed by militants of GNLA and ANVC-B. UALA was disbanded in February 2016.<sup>69</sup>
- The Liberation of Achik Elite Force (LAEF), one of the oldest Garo militant outfits after ANVC, was formed in 2005 and surrendered in 2016.<sup>70</sup> The group had also factionalised during its relatively brief existence, with two ‘commanders’ Augustine Marak and Matthew Momin forming their own factions.<sup>71</sup>
- DHD was formed in 1995 and signed a ceasefire agreement in 2003. The Jewel Garlosa Faction rejected the peace deal and established the Jewel Garlosa faction, DHD-J. which underwent further factionalisation, but eventually surrendered en masse in 2009. 10 DHD-Jewel faction cadres led by Bihari Dimasa, floated the Dimasa National Democratic Front

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69 "Meghalaya militant outfit UALA bids farewell to arms", *Newsx*, June 10, 2016, <https://www.newsx.com/national/31848-meghalaya-militant-outfit-uala-bids-farewell-to-arms>.

70 "LAEF ends armed struggle with leadership surrender", *The Shillong Times*, April 18, 2016, <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2016/04/18/laef-ends-armed-struggle-with-leadership-surrender/>.

71 "LAEF C-in-C, deputy & cadres surrender", *Oh Meghalaya*, April 18, 2016, <http://www.ohmeghalaya.com/laef-c-in-c-cadres-surrender-with-arms/>.

(DNDF) immediately after the October 2009 surrender of the parent formation. DNDF surrendered on August 3, 2011.

- The KPLT was formed on January 8, 2011, by the Anti-talks faction of Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF-AT). The group suffered multiple splits and is no longer active.

This continuous sprouting of new militant outfits, factionalisation and quick demise is a likely indicator that no widespread discontent against governmental agencies or policies underpinned these movements. These short-lived militant groups were primarily interested in extortion and abduction for ransom, and the tag of ‘militant’ acted as a factor of legitimization and intimidation.

In Arunachal Pradesh, known indigenous insurgency groups such as the Arunachal Dragon Force (ADF) and United Peoples’ Democratic Front (UPDF) have not been involved in any known incidents of insurgency-related violence. Almost all such violence in the State was perpetrated by ULFA or NSCN factions.

By virtue of their geographical location, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh became vital for IIGs, whose safe havens lay in Myanmar and Bangladesh. This helped the formations to spread their influence and prop up facilitator groups, which provided safe houses and logistical support in these regions.

Meghalaya shares its entire international border with Bangladesh and emerged as a transit point for militant groups and illegal fire arms. This geographical peculiarity explains the emergence of the succession of peripheral militant formations in the State. Arms dealers were reported to have been using Shillong and other parts of the state to meet Naga and Assam militant groups to negotiate arms deals. Moreover the militant

groups were using the East Garo Hills to cross over from Assam to Bangladesh and back.<sup>72</sup> In return for their support, the peripheral formations received arms and training from NDFB and ULFA<sup>73</sup>, who also maintained a presence in the Garo Hills. By 1985, ULFA had set up a base in the Moulavi Bazar District of Bangladesh, bordering Meghalaya. Other outfits, including HNLC, also had camps in Moulavi Bazar.<sup>74</sup>

Beside the spillover from neighboring Assam and Nagaland, the state of affairs in Myanmar, which had a six decade-long history of continuous ethnic insurgency, influenced the security scenario in Meghalaya. KIA had camps in the Adedi area of Myanmar, bordering the Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh. During ULFA's initial days, its cadres fought alongside KIA militants against the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar Army) to gain combat experience. NSCN-K had camps in Laung Lowang. Moreover, this was also the infiltration route from Myanmar into Assam, passing through Arunachal Pradesh.

#### FORESEEABLE DESTABILISING FACTORS AND CONCLUSION

The demographic imbalances due to both legal and illegal migration from other parts of India, as well as from Nepal and Bangladesh (East Pakistan before 1971), generated fear of

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72 Anirban Roy, "Shadow Boxing in Meghalaya", *South Asia Intelligence Review* (SAIR), Volume 2, No.2, July 28, 20013, [http://old.satp.org/satporgrp/sair/Archives/2\\_2.htm#ASSESSMENT2](http://old.satp.org/satporgrp/sair/Archives/2_2.htm#ASSESSMENT2).

73 Jayanta Gupta, "Shillong a safe Haven for militants", *Times of India*, February 2, 2011, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/Shillong-a-safe-haven-for-militants/articleshow/7414157.cms>.

74 "HNLC has seven camps in Bangladesh", *The Shillong Times*, March 16, 2015, <http://www.theshillongtimes.com/2015/03/16/hnlc-has-seven-camps-in-bdesh/>.

political and economic marginalization among the ‘indigenous’ residents of the region. The fear of the ‘outsider’ and of loss of identity has been the common factor in various insurgencies in the region. Perceived political, ethnic and linguistic domination by major indigenous communities in relation to minor population groups, including indigenous groups, also led to discontent and protests by the latter.

Although violence and fatalities have declined over the years, the underlying factors of insurgency which have sustained violence in the region for decades have not been effectively addressed. The Rohingya crisis (mainly effecting Myanmar and Bangladesh) has a further potential to impact adversely on the security situation in India’s Northeast.

The Rohingya issue has been magnified over the past two years, after militant attacks in the Arakan State and counter operations by the *Tatmadaw*, resulting in a huge refugee influx into Bangladesh, and fears of a large spill-over into India. An Indian intelligence official had stated that, “We are wary of Rohingyas sneaking into India through Moreh in Manipur and through Indo-Bangladesh borders in Tripura.”<sup>75</sup> On May 16, 2018, Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh stressed the need for verification of all non-local settlers in the State. Similarly, the Finance Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma observed, “Our experience in the Northeast with immigrants has been very bad. Over 30 per cent people are immigrants and as a result, the indigenous people are fast losing their identity.”<sup>76</sup>

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75 Bikash Singh, “Northeast on alert as threat of influx by Rohingyas loom large”, *The Economic Times*, September 29, 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/northeast-on-alert-as-threat-of-influx-by-rohingyas-looms-large/articleshow/60887580.cms>.

76 K.G Suresh, “The Rohingya Threat” *Indian Express*, September 27, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-rohingya-threat-rohingya-crisis-muslims-myanmar-rakhine-bangladesh-kg-suresh-4862759/>.

Significantly, according to reports, on May 24<sup>77</sup> and May 30,<sup>78</sup> 2018, at least 171 suspected illegal immigrants were arrested in Manipur.

Furthermore, the ongoing exercise to update the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which is intended to identify ‘illegal immigrants’ in Assam, may also impact on the prevailing security situation. Compounding this, the Citizenship Amendment Bill proposes to decrease the required number of years of continuous stay from 11 to six for illegal immigrants from the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian religious communities of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, to become citizens of India. There have been active protests against the proposed Bill as the local perception in Assam is that the passing of the bill will result in Hindus from Bangladesh who entered India after the cutoff date of March 24, 1971, becoming citizens of India. With illegal immigration (of both Hindus and Muslims) from Bangladesh at the heart of the Assam insurgency, the proposed amendment has the potential to be a significant impediment to political resolution. On May 29, 2018, ULFA ‘general secretary’ Anup Chetia threatened that ULFA would pull out of peace negotiations

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77 Bikash Singh, “Northeast on alert as threat of influx by Rohingyas loom large”, *The Economic Times*, September 29, 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/northeast-on-alert-as-threat-of-influx-by-rohingyas-loom-large/articleshow/60887580.cms>.

78 “Over 70 illegal immigrants nabbed in Manipur”, *Business Standard*, May 24, 2018, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/over-70-illegal-immigrants-nabbed-in-manipur-118052401033\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/over-70-illegal-immigrants-nabbed-in-manipur-118052401033_1.html); Sobhapati Samom, “Rohingya family arrested in Manipur without valid documents”, *Hindustan Times*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rohingya-family-arrested-in-manipur-without-valid-documents/story-3nQa63Z3t1Xg1p19JrxOuN.html>.

with the Government in case the Citizenship Amendment Bill was enacted.<sup>79</sup>

These issues have the potential to reverse the counter-insurgency gains in the region and consequent de-escalation of violence. Although, it remains to be seen how the Rohingya problem, NRC and the Citizenship Amendment Bill issues will play out, it is imperative that the authorities are cognizant of the local and regional sentiments. The indigenous tribes apprehend the possibility of further demographic marginalisation, deepening the very grievances that provoked the insurgencies of the 1970s. If the same political narrative and movements are revived, this could unleash a renewed of large scale violence.

Separately, while the peripheral groups have effectively acted as conduits for the larger ethnic groups, and as facilitators and extortionists, as the violence in the region has ebbed, the role of the facilitator groups is also likely to diminish. Some of these groups have lost their relevance and withered away (like GNLA). However, given the porous nature of the border and the ongoing insurgency in adjoining Myanmar, the easy availability of weapons is likely to persist, tempting insurgent factions to engage in the trade in illegal arms even while they continue to engage in talks with the authorities. Additionally, prospects of surrendered or ex-militants forming criminal gangs and getting involved in the drug trade are also significant. The emergence of new narco-criminal gangs with access to lethal fire power is a potential risk. The proximity of the Golden Triangle is escalates this danger. With a porous border which is yet to be fully secured, smuggling of contraband, including drugs, has been a persistent issue. Major insurgent

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79 Bijay Shankar Bora, "ULFA threatens to pull out of peace talks over citizenship bill", *The Tribune*, May 30, 2018, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/ulfa-threatens-to-pull-out-of-peace-talks-over-citizenship-bill/597155.html>.

groups such as NSCN-IM have already been involved in the drug trade and, with the settlement with GoI now imminent, the possibility that some of its leaders could use the political solution to further their involvement in drug trade cannot be ruled out. Additionally with the decrease in insurgent violence, more areas are likely to be targeted by narco-traffickers. One of the primary examples of this is Mizoram, where the absence of violence has made the state more attractive for traffickers.<sup>80</sup>

Insurgency in Northeast India is at its lowest ebb in decades, and the region has an opportunity to address the long-standing developmental deficits. The development of infrastructure, including improvements in road and air connectivity with the rest of the country will improve the movement of goods and people, promoting the further integration of the region with rest of India.

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80 Pratim Ranjan Bose, "Drugs and arms: Mizoram fights an uphill battle", *The Hindu Business Line*, June 3, 2015, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/variety/drugs-and-arms-mizoram-fights-an-uphill-battle/article7383679.ece>.