Conflict Resolution in Assam
A Critical Inquiry

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In view of the changing dynamics of conflicts in northeast India, a critical analysis of India's conflict resolution strategies in Assam gains urgency. The resolution of the conflict is not actually taking place. Rather, it is the transient management of conflict that continues, but results in the generation of new issues and challenges. Although the sustained deployment of security forces in the State has achieved a promising outcome in controlling the level of violence, insurgent groups continue to exist, suggesting that the insurgencies in the State have not been entirely neutralised. Moreover, the existing negotiation process is exclusive rather than inclusive in nature, creating new demands and issues from groups other that those that are accommodated, and who become more eager to protect their own ethnic identity and local culture against groups that succeed in securing their ethnic demands. Given its strategic interests and aspiration to bring development to Assam, the Government of India will need to encourage wider participation

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in the conflict resolution process, instead of following the path of political exclusiveness by outbidding majoritarian or dominant groups over other minority communities.

In contemporary South Asia, India's north-eastern State of Assam represents a conflict-prone volatile region. Starting from the late 1950s, Assam has witnessed armed conflicts ranging from insurgency for sovereignty to insurgency for statehood and autonomy, and including occasional violence over immigration and inter-ethnic conflicts over the issue of land and identity politics. These conflicts have brought Assam to several crossroads, and to both domestic and global attention. In the face of the difficult internal security situation in Assam, the Government of India (GoI) has adopted certain strategies to address extremism and insurgencies. Besides, the sustained violent activities of militant groups and their factional splits in Assam have led strategic communities to question the Government's approach. In this context, it is necessary to examine the nature of conflicts and conflict resolution processes in Assam.

The purpose here is not to describe or trace the historical evolution of the insurgencies and armed conflicts in Assam, but to highlight the nature of conflict and analyse the present security situation. As a result, the primary focus is on the prominent insurgencies in the State.

CONFLICTS IN ASSAM

Conflicts in Assam revolve around three major issues– land, (ethnic) identity and immigration. Many scholars trace the 'root causes' of conflicts in Assam back to the colonial period. They argue that it was British colonial policies, such as introducing Bengali as the State language in 1837, and the Inner Line regulations in 1873 (introduced in the Hill Areas of undivided

Assam)which sowed the seeds of many of the conflicts today. Sanjib Baruah[1] observes that it was such colonial policies which encouraged large-scale immigration from Bengal, and the way in which the boundaries of Assam were drawn up created a perception of fear among natives, eventually transforming into the anti-foreigners movement in Assam in the post-Independence era. Hiren Gohain[2] alleged that it was the same colonial decision which awakened community consciousness in Assam, and later, further generated perceptions of insecurity and the fear that they would be eventually marginalized in their own homeland.

Baruah[3] and N.K. Das[4] have also discussed the history of tension between Assamese sub-nationalism and pan-Indianism since the early days. Nonetheless, numerous scholars consider unabated immigration from the then-East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) and the inability of the Indian State to accommodate identity aspirations as the major driving factor behind the emergence of the insurgency orchestrated by the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in the State.[5] However, ULFA gradually weakened in terms of its organizational structure and loss of public support, which it enjoyed till the early 1990s. The outfit has often allegedly been found to be involved in various anti-social activities.

1   SanjibBaruah, *India against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Identity*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001.
2   Hiren Gohain, *Assam: A Burning Question*, Spectrum, Guwahati, 1985.
3   SanjibBaruah, op. cit.
4   N. K. Das, *Northeast India: A profile,* Critical Quest Publishers, New Delhi, 2015.
5   S. K. Sinha, *Report on Illegal Migration into Assam*, A report submitted to the President of India by Governor of Assam, 1998; Bezbaruah, M. P. "Security-Development Interconnection: The Assam Perspective", in Rakhee Bhattacharya and Sanjay Pulipaka eds., *Perilous Journey: Debates on Security and Development in Assam,* Manohar Publications, Kolkata, 2011, p. 191.

Moreover, it has split into two factions: pro-talks and anti-talks. The anti-talks faction, ULFA-I (United Liberation Front of Asom– Independent) continues its operational activities and there are cyclical surges in violence in the State from time to time,[6] indicating that the insurgency in Assam has not yet ended.

Unlike ULFA, the origin of Bodo grievances and the subsequent insurgency can be traced back to the resentment among the Bodos with growing ethnic Assamese nativism. Many consider the signing of the ill-fated Assam Accord[7] one of the major causal factors behind the rise of the Bodo insurgency. For instance, the clause 6 of the Accord defines specific provisions for protecting the cultural identity of the 'Assamese people'. The Bodos disapproved the provision, 'as they feared the clause might give legitimacy to the imposition of Assamese language and culture'.[8] With growing differences among its leaders, the Bodo insurgency split into two groups: the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) and Bodo Liberation Tigers Force (BLTF). However, both the factions demanded a separate homeland for the Bodo communities. In 2003, the Bodo insurgency led by the BLTF ended with its disbandment following protracted negotiations with GoI, which led to the formation of an Autonomous District Council–

6   Indrajit Sharma and N. Mohandas Singh, "Resurgence of ULFA (I) in Assam: Implications for Internal Security", *Indian Defence Review*, Volume 32, Number 3, 2017, pp.55-59.

7   The Assam Accord was signed on 15th August 1985 between the Union Home Secretary, the Assam Chief Secretary and the representatives of the Assam Movement i.e. the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP). The core theme of Assam Accord was the issue of illegal immigration aimed at preservation of Assamese identity and deportation of 'foreigners' – meaning illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

8   M. Amarjeet Singh, *Conflicts in Assam*, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, 2010, p.3.

the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). This arrangement was unsuccessful as the NDFB continued to engage in violent activities.

Later in 2005, the NDFB also reached a ceasefire agreement with GoI, but it split into pro-talks and anti-talks groups. The anti-talk faction of NDFB led by IK Songbijit, NDFB (IKS), was responsible for the killing of more than 80 Adivasis (indigenous communities) in Assam in the year 2014. In a recent development, IK Songbijit has separated from NDFB and formed another insurgent group – the People's Democratic Council of Karbi-Longri (PDCK) to fight for the cause of the Karbi communities in Karbi Anglong, the largest Hill District of Assam.[9] The formation of PDCK took place in Myanmar and the group currently has an estimated more than 60 cadres. It is patronized by National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) faction previously led by the (Late) S.S. Khaplang (NSCN-K, which defected from NSCN in 1988, and is primarily settled in the Taga region of the Sagaing Division of Myanmar) and the Paresh Baruah led ULFA- I.[10] NDFB is now led by B. Saoraigwra and is designated as *NDFB (S).*

The subsequent burgeoning of multiple insurgent groups in the State (by the communities such as Karbis, Dimasas, Koch-Rajbangshis, Rabha-Hasong, Tiwas, and Missing) has been associated with the prevailing culture of movements

9   Prasanta Mazumdar, "Songbijit, the planner of Adivasi massacre raises outfit in Myanmar", *Express News Service*, October 31, 2016, http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2016/oct/31/songbijit-the-planner-of-adivasi-massacre-raises-outfit-in-myanmar-1533552.html.

10   Hemanta Kumar Nath, "New Karbi outfit group PDCK forms under former NDFB head", *India Blooms News Service,* August 16, 2017, http://www.indiablooms.com/ibns_new/news-details/N/25489/new-karbi-outfit-group-pdck-forms-under-former-ndfb-head.html.

based on ethnic assertion and identity politics.[11] The growing perceptions of exploitation of Assam's natural resources by the Centre, increasing unemployment, alleged human rights' violations by the Security Forces, and corruption and nepotism in Government offices are identified as the other causal factors of conflict.[12] Besides these, there are several other elements that sustain the insurgencies in the State. One predominant element is the easy availability of arms and narcotics in the border-states, with its geographical proximity to the notorious 'Golden Triangle' in Southeast Asia and Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. Arms and drugs are smuggled into the Northeast region of India through unguarded borders.[13] The long porous border further provides a safe passage into neighbouring countries, where insurgent groups find safe havens. Hence, the intricate nexus between insurgency and arms smuggling, along with the lack of development in the region altogether have, have supported thriving insurgencies in the State for years.[14]

11   M. N. Karna, "Conflicts Amid the Historical Experiences of Identity, Nation and the State in North Eastern India", in Walter Fernandes ed., *Search for Peace with Justice: Issues Around Conflicts in Northeast India,* North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati, 2008, p. 21.

12   Mahanta, N. G. "Human Security Mapping in Conflict Zones: The Case of Northeast India", in Amitav Acharya ed., *Human Security: From Concept to Practice (Case Studies from Northeast India and Orissa)*, Volume 1, World Scientific, USA, 2011, p.79.

13   Rajeev Bhattacharyya, "Small Arms Proliferation in the Northeast: The Chinese Connection – I", *Indian Defence Review*, June 27, 2011, http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/small-arms-proliferation-in-the-northeast-the-chinese-connection-i/; Ajai Sahni, "The Northeast: Troubling Externalities", *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Volume 10, Number 38, 2011, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/sair/Archives/sair10/10_38.htm.

14   Author interview with Professor N. G. Mahanta, Department of Political Science, Gauhati University, during field visit in Assam in the year 2017.

CURRENT CONUNDRUMS

In due course of their armed struggle, many of the insurgencies in Assam have died down and some of them are engaged in peace talks with GoI. Moreover, conflict-related fatalities are also declining in comparison to previous years. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)'s Armed Conflict Survey 2018, 'Assam witnessed one of its most peaceful years since the onset of insurgency with an estimated 33 fatalities'.[15] The lowering level of violence in the State can be attributed to cooperation with some of the neighbouring countries, i.e. Bangladesh and Bhutan. At present, several militant groups have signed Suspension of Operations (SoO)[16] agreements with the government, including ULFA (Pro-Talk), and NDFB (Pro-Talk). Other militant groups – Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS), Dilip Nunisa faction of Dima Halim Daogah (DHD) and Jewel Garlosa faction of DHD (DHDJ) – have signed Memorandum of Settlement (MoS)[17] agreements with GoI.[18]

However, the momentum in the peace process is slow and frustration is high among the outfits. According to the IISS's Armed Conflict Survey[19], 'the year 2017 marked a slow year for peace talks with the major armed factions: NDFB (Pro Talk), NDFB – Ranjan Daimary and ULFA (Pro Talk)'. The insurgency problem in the State is comparatively down but not

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15 Armed Conflict Survey, *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, July 2018, pp: 238-242.

16 A formal agreement between two or more parties in which there will not be carrying out of any operations against each other.

17 A formal agreement leading to dissolution of the organisation.

18 South Asia Terrorism Portal, Assam Assessment 2017, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/index.html.

19 Armed Conflict Survey, op. cit. pp: 232-242.

completely out. In 2013, the State Government disclosed that six new militant groups had emerged in the State, five of which came from the two autonomous Hill Districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, whilst the sixth was a Bengali community-based movement in the Bodo Territorial Council area.[20] Today, there are still several insurgent organizations active in Assam, based on ethnic identity, religion, community and political ideology. For instance, according to the Annual Report of Ministry of Home Affairs 2017-18, the active insurgent organisations in Assam include the anti-talks factions of NDFB-S; ULFA-I; Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO); Karbi Peoples' Liberation Tigers (KPLT) and Karbi Longri NC Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF). This makes Assam one of the most conflict-prone states in India.

In addition, there is also growing potential for civil unrest, besides the problem of insurgency. For instance, the growing perceptions of insecurity among the educated Bodo youth, who fear that they will become a minority in their own home State has generated another ethnic fault line in Assam, particularly between the former and non-Bodo ethnic groups. Sometimes, people sharing the religious-linguistic profile with so-called 'foreigners' are harassed and unreasonably forced to prove their Indian citizenship.[21] This was one of the main factors behind a violent ethnic clash between Bodos and Bengali speaking Muslims in Kokrajhar District in 2008, 2012 and 2014. Moreover, the recent process of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC) created a feeling of insecurity

20   P. Kalita, "Six new militant groups emerge in Assam", *The Times of India*, December 25, 2013, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Six-new-militant-groups-emerge-in-Assam/articleshow/27530203.cms.

21   "Capacity Building for Conflict Resolution: Friction to Fusion", *Second Administrative Reforms Commission (ARC) 7th Report,* Government of India, 2008, http://darpg.gov.in/sites/default/files/capacity_building7.pdf.

and alienation among between those seeking the prevention of illegal immigration, on the one hand, and the State's indigenous Muslim population, on the other. The unresolved political question of illegal immigration is an enormous source of potential civil unrest in Assam, and is likely to have major spill-over effects in the whole Northeast region.

TABLE 1: PROMINENT CURRENTLY ACTIVE INSURGENT ORGANISATIONS IN ASSAM[22]

Insurgent Organization	Active/ Inactive	Areas of Operation (District Wise)	Organisational Base	Status of Peace Process
NDFB – (S)	Active	Baksa, Chirang, Udalguri, Kokrajhar, Sonitpur, Darrang	Ethnic identity	Anti-Talk Faction
ULFA- I	Active	Tinsukia, Goalpara, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Sonitpur, Dhubri, Charaideo	Political Ideology	Anti-Talk Faction
KLO	Active	Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Goalpara	Ethnic Identity	Not Involved in Peace Process
KPLT	Active	KarbiAnglong, Dima Hasao	Ethnic Identity	Not Involved in Peace Process

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22 South Asia Terrorism Portal, op. cit.; "Annual Report 2017-18", *Ministry of Home Affairs*, Government of India, New Delhi, 2017.

UPDS (United People's Democratic Solidarity)	In Active	KarbiAnglong, Dima Hasao	Ethnic Identity	Under Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) with GOI
DHD	Inactive	Cachar, Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglongand Nagaon	Ethnic Identity	Under Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) with GOI
ULFA (Pro talks)	Inactive	At one point of time ULFA operated in almost entire Assam with prominent districts such as Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Tinsukia, Sonitpur etc.	Political Ideology	Under Suspension of Operations (SoO) with GOI
NDFB (Pro talks)	Inactive	Baksa, Chirang, Udalguri, Kokrajhar	Ethnic identity	Under Suspension of Operations (SoO) with GOI
NDFB (RD)	Inactive	Baksa, Chirang, Udalguri, Kokrajhar	Ethnic identity	Under Suspension of Operations (SoO) with GOI

FRAMEWORK OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict resolution is a method and process in which deep-rooted sources of conflict are addressed and transformed.[23]

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23 O. Ramsbotham, T. Woodhouse and H., Mail, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: the prevention, management and transformation of deadly conflicts,* Polity Press, UK, 2011.

This implies that behaviour between the conflicting parties is no longer hostile and the structure of the conflict has been changed. Conflict resolution is a comprehensive term which presumes that conflicts are never wholly zero-sum and, consequently, there is the possibility of an integrative outcome whereby all parties gain much of what they need or want.[24] Generally speaking, it is an approach that focuses on preventing, decreasing, stopping, or transforming violent conflict, often using peaceful and non-violent methods.[25] In reality, conflict resolution is something which is pursued by the advocates of peace by resorting to certain means towards establishing a lasting solution in society, acceptable to all the communities.

Approaches to conflict resolution can be observed from two contending perspectives –conservative and liberal. The conservative approach to conflict resolution advocates the use of hard power, such as the use of force.[26] On the other hand, the liberal approach considers the use of (hard) power as a subsidiary element of a conflict resolution policy,[27] and as such advocates the use of soft power, including economic development, dialogue and negotiations, as well as bringing about structural changes. In the latter perspective, conflicts are dealtwith in a better way when the root causes are addressed;

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24   Y. Auerbach, "Conflict Resolution, Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Material and Identity Conflicts", *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*,Volume 29, Number 2, 2005, pp. 41-80.

25   T. Woodhouse, *Peacekeeping and International Conflict Resolution*, Peace Operations Training Institute, USA, 2015.

26   Kanti Bajpai, *Roots of Terrorism,* Penguin Publications, India, 2002; Namrata Goswami, *Indian National Security and Counter-Insurgency: The Use of Force Vs Non-violent Response,* Routledge, London and New York, 2015; Rajesh Rajagopalan, *Fighting Like a Guerrilla: The Indian Army and Counterinsurgency,* Routledge, New Delhi, 2008.

27   Kanti Bajpai, op. cit., p. 27

this approach, consequently, seeks instrumental change in factors such as political, economic, and geopolitical structures in a conflict zone. This approach is related to the human needs model of conflict resolution, which regards conflict as a socio-political phenomena derived from the suppression of basic human needs and underdevelopment, and thus seeks to address these root causes. Such arguments are best reflected in the works of Johan Galtung,[28] Edward Azar[29] and Burton[30]. The conflict discourse in their work reflects a shift from mono-dimensional to multi-dimensional approaches in dealing with conflict, and incorporates economic and political reforms, as well as human rights, development, and democratization into the strategies to address conflict.[31]

India's Conflict Resolution Approach

India embraces both the conservative and liberal perspectives of the conflict resolution process. In its conservative approach, India practices the use of force which is derived largely from military doctrine, especially relating to counterinsurgency. In the 1960s and 1970s, "India extensively used this approach to curb the Naga and Mizo insurgency movements as a part of its

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28 Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization,* Sage, London, 1996.

29 Edward E. Azar, "Protracted International Conflicts: Ten Propositions",in J. Burton and E. A. Azar eds., *International Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice,* MacMillan, London, 1986.

30 J. Burton, "The History of Conflict Resolution", in J. Burton and E. A. Azar eds., *International Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice,* MacMillan, London, 1986.

31 K.Subuddhi, "Structure, Processes and conflict discourses: Problems and Prospects of conflict resolution and Peace building with a focus on Northeast region", in Prasenjit Biswas and C. Joshua Thomas eds., *India's North-East: Meaning, Metaphor, and Method: Essays of Concern and Commitment*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2006, p. 23.

counterinsurgency strategy."[32] The 'use of force' has been one of the core elements behind India's counterinsurgency doctrine, in which the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), 1958, has played a vital role. The Act's antecedents date back to the British colonial era. Since 1990, however, the Armed Forces' and paramilitary's counterinsurgency doctrine has been broadened. The Western doctrine of counterinsurgency, based on the concept of winning 'hearts and minds', has become a major part of Indian military doctrine. In addition, the conservative approach has also adopted the limited use of force, as the extensive use of force sometimes escalates the sense of insecurity within society, particularly in areas where the Forces are deployed.

The liberal perspective of conflict resolution has also been incorporated, and this has led to increasing importance being attached to negotiation with insurgents, as well as the social and economic development of conflict zones. The political approach uses various mechanisms such as conferment of Statehood, the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution,[33] and the signing of 'Accords' or 'Agreements' as part of a move for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. The GoI has now adopted a 'multi-pronged' strategy comprehending (i) Security Forces and Police action; (ii) granting local autonomy through mechanisms such as conferment of Statehood or Autonomous District Councils under the Sixth Schedule and through 'tribe specific accords'; (iii) negotiations with insurgent outfits; and (iv) developmental activities, including special economic packages.[34]

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32   Rajesh Rajagopalan, op. cit.
33   Special Provisions for Administration of Tribal Areas.
34   Second ARC 7th Report.op.cit, p.149.

Conflict Resolution in Assam

India's conflict resolution strategy in Assam can be analysed in broad conceptual parameters of counterinsurgency strategies such as the use of force, surrender-cum-rehabilitation schemes, developmental approach, political dialogue and negotiations (including peace talks).

Use of Force

The use of force has been a special and most prominent element in India's militaristic approach to conflict resolution. The main objective of this initiative is tostabilize law and order in the disturbed areas and maintain the territorial integrity of the country. Since the 1950s, it has been one of the principal means of confronting insurgencies in Assam, till the late 1990s. The Government implements this approach through the Police, Army and Paramilitary Forces. The Paramilitary Forces comprise the Assam Rifles (AR), the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Force (BSF), and the National Security Guard (NSG).

The use of force covers a conventional military approach, though it is slightly different in the Indian case, as compared to many other countries. In India, the dominant idea is that the fight is against fellow Indians, and this has tended to inhibit the use of heavy artillery or air power (except in the classic case of the Mizo insurgency in the 1970s where air power was used). The principle is simply that, when force is required to combat any insurgent activity, it is to be used in moderation. Although "the Indian Army did not have a formally laid down doctrine for its counterinsurgency campaign until the decade of the 2000s," it is possible to observe its evolution over the

years, as Rajagopalan[35] has indicated. Banerjee[36] argues that formal Indian Army Doctrine (IAD) was spelled out in 2004 and its subsequent flow in the form of the Doctrine for Sub-Conventional Operations (DSCO) in 2006 provides a basis for understanding counterinsurgency doctrine in the Indian Army. Goswami has observed that, in the case of the Indian Army's response to conflicts such as the Naga conflict, the Mizo armed insurgency or the ULFA in Assam, the dominant idea has been the proportionate use of force.[37]

Surrender cum Rehabilitation Schemes

To bring insurgents into the mainstream, the surrender cum rehabilitation scheme was first introduced in Assam for the first time in 1992 by GoI. It was the brainchild of thenChief Minister of Assam, Hiteshwar Saikia's Government. The scheme was known as the '100 per cent Special Margin Money Scheme'. The policy was justified on the grounds that it would mitigate the then existing level of unemployment. Although it did not achieve its intended objectives, the scheme was reviewed in 1998 by Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mohanta's Government.The objective behind the scheme was to wean away the misguided youth and hardcore militants who had strayed into the fold of insurgent organizations, and found themselves unable to escape that net. The scheme sought

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35 Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Restoring Normalcy: The evolution of the Indian Army's Counterinsurgency Doctrine", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Volume 11, Number 1, 2007, pp. 44-68.

36 D. Banerjee, "The Indian Army's Counter Insurgency Doctrine", in SumitGanguly and David P. Fidler eds., *India and Counter Insurgency: Lessons Learned*, Routledge Publications, UK, 2009.

37 Namrata Goswami, "Armed Ethnic Conflicts in Northeast India and the Indian State's Response: Use of force and the 'notion' of Proportionality", *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, Working Paper Number 60, 2011, p. 11.

to ensure that surrendered cadres could lead a normal life. From this period onwards, such schemes, with progressively generous provisions, have become a significant part of the multi-pronged conflict resolution strategy in Assam.

Surrendered militants were hosted in various rehabilitation camps. As a part of the scheme, a monthly stipend of INR2000 per month for a period of 12 months was given and there were also revised incentives for the weapons surrendered by the insurgent.[38] This continued for a period of one year. In addition, the Government of Assam, in consultation with the Centre, adopted several vocational training programs for surrendered militants. Following this scheme, after the singing of the Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) with the Government in the year 2003, BLTF disbanded its organization and 2,711 militants surrendered to the Government. The scheme was reviewed in April 2005, under which an immediate grant of INR 150,000 was to be kept in the name of the surrendered insurgent as a fixed deposit for a period of three years. And the duration for the monthly stipend of INR 2,000 was also increased from 12 months to 36 months.[39] It was further revised and amended in 2009, in which the amount of the stipend was hiked to INR 3,500 per month, but for a period of one year. In case, more support was required, the State Government could consult the Union Ministry of Home Affairs to increase the tenure beyond one year.[40] In April 2018, the scheme was revised again in order to make it more effective. Under the new guidelines, the amount

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38 "Annual Reports 2011 to 2017", *Ministry of Home Affairs,* Government of India.

39 "Annual Report 2006-2007", *Ministry of Home Affairs,* Government of India.

40 "Annual Report 2009-2010", *Ministry of Home Affairs*, Government of India.

of the stipend was hiked to INR 6,000 per month, for a period of three years. And the one-time grant was increased to INR 400,000, with a waiting period of three years.[41] In addition, the monetary incentive for weapons/ammunition surrendered by the insurgents was also revised from to INR 100,000. This financial grant is given after proper scrutiny, only to those surrendered militants certified for their good conduct and confirmed not to be indulging in any unlawful activities. In 2010, the Government of Assam made an announcement that it would recruit some of the surrendered militants into Assam Police battalions, based on their eligibility and physical fitness. According to *Assam Tribune* reports, in the period between 1998 and 2010, more than 10,000 militants surrendered. However, in the period between 2011 and 2017, the number of surrendered militants declined drastically (Table 2).

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF THE SURRENDERED MILITANTS FROM 2011 TO 2017 IN ASSAM[42]

Years	Number of Extremists/Militants Surrendered
2011	789
2012	757
2013	92
2014	102
2015	30
2016	15

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41 "Surrender Cum Rehabilitation of Militants", Press Information Bureau, *Ministry of Home Affairs*, Government of India, New Delhi, 20 March 2018, http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=177726.

42 "Annual Reports 2011 to 2017", op. cit.

2017	13
Total	1798

Developmental Approach

Considering that insurgencies andissues relating to ethnicity often have socio-economic rootsand thrive in less developed areas, GoI adopted a new approach in its conflict resolution process, starting from the mid-1990s. This approach was based on the assumption that providing development packages or pouring money into economically backward regions would minimize existing social insecurities and vulnerabilities. In this context, commenting on the insurgency problem in Northeastregion, Jairam Rameshargued that "give them (people) development (i.e. building of schools, bridges, IITs and other infrastructure including refineries)and they will forget about problems of identity, problems of assertion, problems associated with creating a nation out of essentially tribal communities."[43]

In Assam, such efforts could be observed for the first time during the 8th Five Year Plan in 1996, when the then Prime Minister, *H.D. Deve Gowda,* announced a special package for the entire northeast region.[44]Succeeding Governments continued this policy of economic package for the region. Such measures were directed at alleviating economic backwardness and improving living conditions of the population in particular and the Northeast region in general. In fact, development has been considered by many as the ultimate panacea to all sorts of internal conflicts in Assam. This aspect is reflected in various

43 Jairam Ramesh, "Northeast India in New Asia", # 550, June 13, 2005, *Seminar Web Edition*, http://www.india-seminar.com/2005/550/550%20 jairam%20ramesh.htm.

44 Ibid.

policy initiatives, which have been taken for the development of the region, and detailed Government studies and reports.[45] The framing of the Look East Policy[46] gave further impetus to the process and the development paradigm started to take precedence in the State. Apart from the Government, development efforts have also been taken up by the Security Forces, including the State Police, in the form of civic action programs as a part of their counterinsurgency measures.[47] For instance, Assam Rifles has started adopting schools in remote areas, opening free medical camps and providing free medicines for the local population from time to time.

Currently, Assam has been at the forefront of India's development paradigm due to its strategic location.[48] It also has tremendous potential to meet various policy objectives of India's vision towards the East.

POLITICAL DIALOGUES AND NEGOTIATION FOR RECONCILIATION

With the changing narratives as well as dynamics of conflicts, the unidirectional militaristic approach has been often found not to be successful in containing conflict in the

45   For details, see the High Level Commission Report on "Transforming the North-East", also known as the "Shukla Commission Report" framed in the year 1997. See also, "L.C. Jain Committee Report", *Planning Commission,* Government of India, 1990.

46   In its pursuit for economic growth and development, the GoI devised the policy in 1991 to establish economic relations with the neighbouring countries in the East. In 2015, LEP was renamed as Act East Policy with an objective of establishing pragmatic relations with the neighbours in terms of economy, culture and development for the Northeastern states.

47   "Operation Sadbhavana", *Ministry of Information and Broadcasting,* Government of India, 2013, http://inbministry.blogspot.in/2013/03/operation-sadbhavana.html.

48   Indrajit Sharma, "The Growing Role of Assam in India's Foreign Policy", *Eurasia Review,* June 27, 2017, http://www.eurasiareview.com/27062017-the-growing-role-of-assam-in-indias-foreign-policy/.

contemporary world. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs document on *Innovative Methods in Fighting Insurgency in North-East India,*[49] mentions that the State's response has shifted from merely arming State Forces, to adopting a strategy of using agreements and negotiations, alongside improved counterinsurgency measures. It is with these innovative methods that the State aims to restore normalcy in the Northeast region. With counterinsurgency operations and the use of force failing to end movements of violence in the State, GoI initiated processes of negotiations to secure political settlements with various insurgent outfits operating in the Northeast, as a strategic option. In the contemporary scenario, the Indian State aims to bring the conflicting parties to the table for peace talks, toachieve a political solution towards a lasting and durable outcome.

The characteristics of the negotiation processes adopted in Assam can be classified as follows:

1. *Accord based negotiation:* The primary objective of the negotiation strategy for the state has been in the form of an accord or a peace agreement that reduces the level of violence.

2. *Bilateral negotiation:* The State engages to bring the insurgent outfits onto the negotiating table in a one-on-one policy.

3. *Selective negotiation with prominent insurgents:* First the State identifies the prominent insurgent groups and then selectively invites them for negotiations. For instance, in the entire Northeast, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland – Isak Muivah(NSCN-IM) is considered as the mother of all insurgencies (in terms

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49   "Innovative methods in fighting insurgency in North-East India", *Ministry of Home Affairs,* Government of India, http://indiagovernance.gov.in.

of funds, total strength of the cadre, orgnisational structure and functioning, weaponry, power, etc.). A similar assessment holds for ULFA within Assam. It is believed that once the principal insurgent groupings are brought to the negotiating table, others will automatically follow.

4. *No involvement of third parties:* GoI does not involve any third party or mediator to resolve its internal conflicts. Reverend Michael Scott's peace mission to Nagaland in the 1960s was the first and last time India even considered seriously involving a third party (an international intervention) to settle an internal problem.[50]

Another traditional mechanism that GoI often deployed is the granting of statehood and autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution. For instance, in 1963, 1972 and 1987 the State of Assam was subjected to territorial reorganization after the massive armed uprising in the Hill Districts of Assam. In fact, the Sixth Schedule, a model of decentralized governance within an autonomous framework, has also sometimes led to the formation of a separate State, e.g., Nagaland, Meghalaya, etc. However, it has often been seen that bringing a particular community or tribal area under the Sixth Schedule isolates the target population from other tribes inhabiting those areas. Worse, this kind of development inspires every other ethnic group to assert their sub-ethnic identity and to demand similar treatment, undermining social harmony within the society.

ASSESSING THE APPROACHES: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Conflict resolution strategies in Assam have been designed to control deteriorating security situations, often suggesting

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50 Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for Asia's most Volatile Frontier,* Harper Collins Publication, India, 2012, p. 207.

that the State is engaged only in managing conflicts rather than seeking their resolution, and a lasting peace in society. In a conflict management framework, conflicts are controlled in such a way that the level of violence does not escalate, or conflict is considered as no more a major problem. There are a number of factors that need to be better understood to secure a greater clarity on this issue:

Counter-productive AFSPA

It is observed that the militaristic approach operates under the legal cover of AFSPA. In Assam, the presence of AFSPA has often attracted criticism, with allegations of disproportionate use of force and human rights violations during counterinsurgency operations. This has given a platform to insurgents to legitimize their armed movements. For instance, Goswami[51] cites the case of the Kakopathar incident that took place on February 5,2006, in Tinsukia District,in which a civilian was picked up by the Army on suspicion of linkages to ULFA, and was found dead after a few days in Army custody. Subsequently, on February 10, 2006, people from nearly 100 villages protested the incident sparking wider mass unrest. ULFA reaped significant benefits from the situation. It is to be noted that ULFA once enjoyed an estimated 10 percent of popular support among the Assamese masses.[52] According to Lawrence, this is more than adequate, as insurgencies require only two per cent of popular support to endure.[53] Further, AFSPA has not been able to contain the insurgency; rather, it continues to exist in Assam where the conflict has taken a dynamic shape.

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51 Namrata Goswami, op. cit., p. 14.
52 Jaideep Saikia, *Terror Sans Frontiers: Islamic Militancy in North East India,* Vision Books, New Delhi, 2004.
53 Cited in Kaushik Roy and Sourish Saha, *Armed Forces and Insurgents in Modern Asia,* Routledge, New York, 2016, p. 122.

The objective behind the militaristic approach has always been to contain insurgencies. However, over the past two decades, pursuing this objective has created thorny challenges to the mainstream stakeholders. Conflict in Assam has become dynamic and complex in nature with the growing assertion of sub-regional identities among many ethnic groups, along with newly emerged anti-talks factions, with new leaders, that have been engaged in armed violence. These factions (anti-talks) have the ability to recruit new members, as well as to carry out occasional ambushes and attacks on the Security Forces. This suggests that the militaristic campaign has been successful neitherin containing nor eliminating the insurgencies in terms of a particular geographic location. Rather, it has resulted in producing offshoots of multiple insurgencies.

Recent reports highlight the fact that Assam-based insurgent organizations such as ULFA-I, NDFB-S and KLO, along with the Myanmar-basedNSCN-K, have jointly formed a conglomerate of militant groups across India's Northeast – the United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFWSEA). This development underlines the potential for a resurgence of insurgent activities in the State. It is estimated that "different ethnic armed groups (EAGs) continue with efforts to engage in disruptive activities and had formed this united platform. They are also engaged in developing a nexus with transnational *jihadi* groups and Maoists, increasing the threat potential in Assam."[54] This, in fact, indicates that the existing issues still require urgent policy review.

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54 South Asia Terrorism Portal, Assam Assessment 2017, http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/assam/index.html.

EXCLUSIVENESS AND PROCRASTINATION IN RECONCILIATION PROCESSES: NEGOTIATION

The strategy behind the use of the militaristic approach in India's conflict resolution is to contain and weaken the insurgents and to compel the outfits to come to the table for negotiations. However, the whole discourse on negotiations has its own discrepancies. Policies relying on the use of force have been rather counter-productive. Negotiation has been employed at the forefront of strategy in addressing insurgencies in Assam. However, government efforts for reconciliation through negotiation and peace talks look very exclusive, and lack an inclusive nature. In general, the negotiation process is selective, choosing only the dominant groups, in the belief that this will help resolve the principal issue as well as problems with other subordinate groups. However, in Assam, a diverse State in every sense, with growing and complex problems of ethnicity, selecting one dominant group over another does not result in anticipated policy outcomes. Although the Government has, very recently, started inviting the smaller groups for peace talks, the progress in this direction has been slow.

Besides, the State engages to bring the outfits onto the negotiating table by its one-on-one policy. In one sense, this is justified, as competing demands would be difficult to accommodate in a single process. The demands of ULFA-I and NDFB-S, for instance, include the contentious issue of sovereignty, whereas KLO seeks a separate 'Kamtapur' State, to be carved out of six Districts in north Bengal and four districts of Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Goalpara and Kokrajhar in Assam. The demands of the three insurgent formations are fundamentally irreconcilable, confronting the State's mediators with complex dilemmas. Nonetheless,it is seen that there are various factions

that have agreed to ceasefires, Suspension of Operations and Memoranda of Settlement Agreements.

Given the changing dynamics of conflicts in the region, the question of procrastination in the State's approach to negotiations also acquires some urgency. Today, a fair number of ethnic insurgencies in Assam remain unresolved, years, even decades after the initial Agreements have been signed. The nature of peace processes has been very tardy. The Centre's strategy to bring the rebel groups to the table for negotiations has been successful only to the extent that it has given the State symbolic victories, even as problems continue to fester. The multiplicity of insurgent outfits in the form of splinter groups puts a question mark over the very technique of reconciliation for conflict resolution. Thus, many issues remain unresolved and there is a tendency for the negotiations themselves to generate new demands and issues from outsider groups eager to protect their own ethnic identity and local culture.

ACCORDS AND AGREEMENTS

It is seen that the primary goal for conflict resolution strategies has been to produce an agreement that reduces the level of violence. However, many of the accords have not been inclusive in nature, which is an essential element to meet the ends of a peace process. For instance, after the Bodo Accord was signed, other ethnic communities such as the Rabhas, Tiwas and Mishings raised further demands in the State. In 1995, the Government accordingly established Autonomous Councils for the Rabhas, Tiwas and Mishings. These accords were, however, seen as pre-emptive measures by the Government.[55] An interesting fact in this context is

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55   B. G. Verghese, *North East Resurgent: Ethnicity, Governance, Development*, Konark Publishers, New Delhi, 2004, p. 68.

argued by Rajagopalan[56] that "one of the great fears generated by demands for autonomy is that they snowball; a State cannot grant greater autonomy to one segment of its citizenry without coming under pressure to do so with others".

Besides, various Accords, Agreements, and Ceasefires failed to provide a better result in terms of achieving the anticipated objective in the form of ending violence. Many groups have been involved in peace parlays amid various uncertainties and mutual distrust. In the case of direct negotiations between the State and the rebel outfits, there has always existed a kind of negative environment. While the divisions within the outfits were believed to be a positive outcome, new factions and new leaders framed new political objectives, tactics and strategies, creating new challenges for peace. Occasional attacks, bombings andthe emergence of new splinter groups still constitute a threat to the State's quest for the resolution of the conflict.

GRANTING OF AUTONOMY ON ETHNIC LINES

In Assam, there are three Autonomous District Councils (ADCs): the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC), the Dima Hasao District Autonomous Council (DHDAC) and the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). These autonomous councils have been constituted under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, and on the basis of ethnic identity, to protect and develop particular communities. It is argued by many scholars that the territorial councils or autonomous councils based on ethnic lines create further tensions, given the complex mosaic of populations in Assam. Territorial councils on the grounds of ethnicity are an unending process. Moreover, it is also

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56 Swarna Rajagopalan, *Peace Accords in North East India: Journey Over Milestones,* East West Center, Washington, 2008, p. 20.

believed that any policy that seeks to protect the interests of ethnic communities *per se* will lead to a proliferation of such identities and would further divide society, as it projects ethnic identity is a powerful political platform.[57] Such fragmentation has gradually become a challenge for the State in Assam.

GENERATING SPLINTER GROUPS

The peace process in Assam has faced various problems. The pattern of conflict in the State is extremely complex and it has often been hard to broker any lasting peace, given the militant political mood among many ethnic communities. Further, negotiating with the insurgents creates its own set of problems. Often, when the Government engages in peace talks with an insurgent outfit, it simultaneously provokes a splintering process, with anti-talks factions rejecting the process and persisting with violence. The newly-formed factions act as spoilers and attempt to derail on-going peace processes. A good example of this is NDFB–S, which has been challenging the State's quest for a peaceful resolution. NDFB-S defected from its parent NDFB when the latter entered into a Ceasefire Agreement. NDFB-S has emerged as a strong outfit, engaging in periodic and wanton killings in the Bodo dominated areas in what some view as part of an 'ethnic cleansing' program. There is, thus, the constant apprehension that talks themselves may lead to the emergence of new militant movements that may hamper any long-term strategy of peaceful resolution.

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57 Mahanta, N.G., "What Makes Assam a Perpetual Conflict Zone? Going Beyond Management to Conflict Transformation", in Walter Fernandes ed., *Search for Peace with Justice: Issues Around Conflicts in Northeast India*, North Eastern Social Research Centre, Guwahati, 2008, p. 99.

Fake Surrender and Corruption in Rehabilitation Programmes

The State Government's strategy of awarding economic incentives to surrendered militants and of rehabilitating them, initially in designated camps, has been criticized on the grounds of endemic corruption. Various sources indicate that past records of those who wanted to surrender were not checked properly. Taking advantage of this situation, a number of 'fake surrenders' have occurred, leading to the misuse of the funds sanctioned for the scheme, often with the complicity of State authorities.[58] Highly placed sources indicate that the number of those who have surrendered was much higher than the total number of militants. In many cases, the majority of the militants who laid down arms did not have any police case against them, and the Police and Security Forces had no record of their involvement in militant activities.[59] There is similar news of 'fake surrenders' in the neighbouring Manipur State as well (and, indeed, in most insurgency afflicted States where similar schemes are on offer). The lack of employment and poverty is often the driving factor behind this growing problem. Unemployed youth imitating insurgent cadres are attracted by the State Government's announcement of absorbing surrendered militants in State Police forces, and succeed in securing such employment because of the corruption that exists within the system.

Again, the stipends and fixed deposits provided are vastly inflated by bringing in fake surrendered militants, and disbursing these sums, with a substantial proportion flowing back to corrupt officials.

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58   R. Dutta Choudhury,"Fake surrender of ultras rampant in State", *The Assam Tribune,* February 06, 2012, http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/mdetails. asp?id=feb0612/at06.

59   Ibid.

Another paradox is that, although the scheme was successful as it brought a number of misguided youth and many senior cadres and leaders back into the mainstream, it failed to stop others from joining militancy. Thus, for example, fresh recruitment drives by ULFA-I in rural areas of eastern Assam, including districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sivasagar, especially those hailing from remote areas bordering Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, were quite successful.[60]

Worse, many surrendered militants have also been found to be engaging in unlawful activities, such as extortion. Bhattacharjee has also argued that these schemes give birth to irregular counterinsurgency forces, such as the Surrendered United Liberation Front of Assam (SULFA).[61]At one point in time, these were used to eliminate rebels, eventually leading to the infamous 'secret killings' from 1998 to 2001. Many inquiry commissions have been instituted into these events, including the K.N. Saikia Commission[62] of 2005, but not a single person has been held responsible, so far. Moreover, the primary objective of surrender, which is the social and economic rehabilitation of the militants, also remains substantially unimplemented.

The Government's efforts for the rehabilitation of families of victims' of militants through the schemes such as the announcement of ex-gratia relief, has also been very difficult

60 "ULFA (I) on overdrive to recruit fresh cadres", *The Shillong Times*, April 17, 2017, http://epaper.theshillongtimes.com/epaperimages/1742017/1742017-md-hr-4.pdf; "ULFA on massive recruitment drive in rural Assam, says NIA", *Economic Times,* July 21, 2017, http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/ulfa-on-massive-recruitment-drive-in-rural-assam-says-nia/articleshow/59693579.cms.

61 K. Bhattacharjee, *Blood on My Hands: Confessions of Staged Encounters,* Harper Collins Publisher, India, 2015.

62 An inquiry commission was set up in 2005 in Assam headed by Justice (Retired) K. N. Saikia on the 'secret killings between 1998 and 2001' done during the erstwhile AGP-led Government.

to monitor, and the monies have often not been released. Moreover, such schemes have been seen to fail when there is large-scale devastation due to ethnic clashes.[63] In Assam, most of the cases of ethnic clashes are reported in village areas, where people are mostly ignorant of such provisions. Talukdar observes that, in certain cases, "even if the money is deposited, the families may not be aware of how to utilize the money."[64] Further, many of the victims from the most vulnerable sections of society often lack the courage to visit a government office to claim the ex-gratia payment.

Conclusion

GoI has sought to positively manage the conflicts in Assam, adopting varied approaches, including grant of autonomy, pursuing negotiations, political accords and ceasefire agreements, as well as a range of developmental and rehabilitation programmes. On the ground, however, the State's engagement in managing conflicts remains reactive rather than preventive or proactive. Peace in the State is measured by the absence of violence and a decline in fatalities, even if insurgent outfits remain active. Moreover, each of the approaches adopted have had limitations, flaws and unintended consequences. In particular, they have catalysed the assertion of a multiplicity of sub-ethnic identities by communities originally outside the scope of militancy. New groups have been provoked to resort to political mobilisation and formation of ethnicity-based armed groups, creating new issues and challenges.

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63 Ratna Bharali Talukdar, "Armed Conflicts in Assam: Some Unaddressed Issues", *Bridging the Gap,* 2016, http://www.nezine.com/info/ARMED%20 CONFLICTS%20IN%20ASSAM:%20SOME%20UNADDRESSED%20 ISSUES.

64 Ibid.

The end of an armed conflict does not occur just because of the surrender of arms by rebel groups, or fragments of such groups. In the absence of an inclusive political resolution of disputes, one that ensures a just outcome and a lasting peace, it is incorrect to speak of a resolution of the conflict. Political processes which accommodate divergent demands and aspirations of multiple parties and ethnic groups, encouraging democratic values and popular participation, are integral to the process of conflict resolution.

Part of the problem of many negotiated solutions in Assam is that they have generally been exclusive in nature, and have failed to involve civil society groupings as potential mediators. Elsewhere in the Northeast region of India, civil society representatives have been influential in ending armed conflicts. Involving such entities in the complex negotiations in Assam can help speed up the frequently slow and protracted peace process. GoI must go beyond exclusive bilateral processes that accommodate individual insurgent groups, to extend negotiations into a roundtable format, where the Government invites representatives of various civil society groups representing the complex fabric of community interests in the State. Proper coordination of efforts between the civil administration and the military forces, for the smooth conduct of the conflict resolution approaches, is also a necessity.

Peace in the Assam, indeed, across the Northeast, will not only bring much-needed development to the region, but will also strengthen India's strategic interests in South and Southeast Asia. In the present and challenging environment, the border States of the Northeast can play an important role in India's foreign policy. Many on-going projects, such as the Trans-Asian Highway, Kaladan Multi-Model Project, Tri-lateral Highway Project (India-Myanmar-Thailand), are in

critical interface with the border States of the Northeast. These patterns of development can enormously help counter-balance China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. India's conflict resolution approach in Assam and the Northeast needs urgently to be revamped, bringing a greater sensitivity to attitudes towards the region.