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The Big Picture: End of the Road for Northeast Insurgency

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With more and more insurgent groups joining peace talks with the government, the Northeast region is witnessing a drastic decline in insurgency in the last 5 to 6 years. According to a Home Ministry's data released in 2019 reveals that insurgency in the **Northeast region** has been declining since 2014.

Root Cause of Insurgency

- There are over a hundred of ethnic groups in the Northeast. It is populated with people who have very strong ethnicity. There is a strong sense of identity in each of these different communities.

- There have been several groups which have distinct identity in the region emphasizing their uniqueness. They want to retain this uniqueness in their political and social and orientations as well. It is due to this there are so many divisive forces at play in this reason which gave rise to insurgency.

Insurgency is essentially rebellion against the political organisation when the ethnic communities feel that they are not properly represented. There is a sense that their interests have been neglected, this gave rise to violent moments.

Historical Reasons for Insurgency

- Most of the states except Plains of Assam were deliberately excluded from mainstream government administration of Britishers and categorised as **excluded areas** in Government of India Act 1935 and the ethnic people were called **backward tribes**.
- British deliberately made them believe that they were a British Crown Colony and not part of any province in India.

For example **Naga Hills** were governed by Assam province but later on they were excluded and many of the parts of the administration were directly governed by the Chief Commissioner.

- A sentiment was always propagated that more or less they are independent so after independence the groups nursed the ambition of becoming an independent state. Nagaland National Council was first to assert their Independence from India for nationhood.

British Legacy

- The British had annexed Assam in 1826, in which they subsequently created the Naga Hills district. The earliest sign of Naga resistance dates back to 1918, with the formation of the Naga Club.

In 1929, the **Naga Club** famously told the Simon Commission “to leave us alone to determine for ourselves as in ancient times”.

- In 1946, A Z Phizo formed the Naga National Council (NNC), which declared Naga independence on August 14, 1947, and then, in 1951, claimed to have conducted a referendum in which an overwhelming majority supported an independent Naga state.
- In the 1950s, the NNC took up arms and resorted to violence over Naga’s sovereignty.

In 1975, the NNC split into NSCN, which further split into **NSCN (I-M)** and **NSCN (Khaplang)** in 1988.

Reasons for decline in violence in last few years

- **Cutting off external support:** Earlier the insurgents groups used to take refuge in countries adjoining the NorthEast states. The insurgents cannot survive and cannot function effectively until and unless they use the Bangladesh or Myanmar territories and also get their supplies of weapons and ammunition from there. Improved security relationship with Myanmar and Bangladesh have cut off these supports.

- **Engagement in talks:** A lot of insurgent groups were engaged in talks due to which the violent incidents declined over the last few years. For example Naga talks were going on from 1997 however in 2015 actual terms of agreement were negotiated and signed between the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak-Muivah (NSCN-IM) and the Union government.
- **Fatigue Factor:** The fatigue of continuous engagement of insurgents in conflicts has been building for years and thus the moments lost its intensity gradually. Local population got fed up with the violence going on for years and the popularity of the leaders of insurgent groups also declined with time.
 - There is a difference in the approach of the state and moment in dealing with the conflict. Because it has a prolonged life, successive governments changed and the representatives even the soldiers would change on the front.
 - However, for the moment to sustain there is need that an individual leader should continuously motivate and lead it. These movements lost their leadership and very often splintered in faction over differences.
- **Disagreements among insurgent groups:** Government forces and its intelligence units have been able to play one group against the other and dismantle the unity of insurgent groups. Splintered groups are comparatively small groups and don't have so much revenue and resources and hence have no other option other than coming to the negotiation table.

Naga Agreement 2015

- The Nagas have now reached a common understanding with the government that boundaries of the States will not be touched. Initially, the Nagas had stuck to the idea of unification of Naga inhabited areas resolutely maintaining their stand of 'no integration, no solution'.
- The NSCN-IM has been fighting for 'Greater Nagaland' or Nagalim — it wants to extend Nagaland's borders by including Naga-dominated areas in neighbouring Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, to unite 1.2 million Nagas.
- Article 371A, which guarantees special constitutional status to Nagaland, could also be extended to Naga-inhabited areas in neighbouring Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

Way Forward

- **Enhancing Connectivity:** Comprehensive geographical connectivity is key to the development of NorthEast states. For this transit arrangement to connect to Indian mainland through Bangladesh and **India-Myanmar-Thailand** Trilateral highway should be completed.

This highway is expected to boost trade and commerce in the ASEAN-India Free Trade Area, as well as with the rest of Southeast Asia.

- **Continuing vigilance:** India should not lower its guard thinking insurgency has ended it should continue to be vigilant. There have been instances where violent acts have been committed after a very long gap by new formed groups.
The centre and the state government should identify all the groups small and big and deal with them so that the insurgency doesn't sprung up again.
- **Addressing people's aspirations:** The conflict in NorthEast is the physical manifestation of the aspiration of people. Thus there is a need to address the aspirations of the people by establishing continuous dialogues with them.
The success of peace agreements should be evaluated more on socio-economic outcomes than in terms of military outcome.
- **Ending corrupt nexus:** Identifying stakeholders and addressing their issues is needed to permanently resolve the issues. Election results in NorthEast have often been determined by which groups the political parties pay their allegiance to.
Thus the vicious cycle of corruption involving the state legislature and these underground groups should be ended.
- **Forward looking policy:** A structured counterinsurgency policy is needed in which all the factors should be considered by the government by consulting all the stakeholders to comprehensively deal with such insurgency in future.
- **Greater integration:** A sense of belongingness should be encouraged among the local population and a sense of pride should be inculcated in them for their contributions made to India such as the Kohima war during Indian freedom struggle.

Conclusion

- It is only the end of one cycle where one generation involved in the moment has become substantially older. However the local population still feels for the moment and are emotionally attached to their cause only the mode of putting the demand has changed from violent to nonviolent one.
- The sense that political aspirations could be achieved through violence has to be continuously discouraged. For this the political empowerment of the Northeast States has to be done and the good governance should penetrate to the grass root levels.
- Care should be taken that the aspirations of people should be fulfilled bringing overall development of the region.