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Re-thinking Nagaland

The future of the NSCN-K

In what appeared to be a coordinated effort between the Myanmar and Indian militaries, operations against Indian insurgents on the Indian side of the border and the Naga Socialist Council of Nagaland – Khaplang (NSCN-K) in Sagaing, Myanmar, have largely been successful in diminishing the threat the NSCN-K posed to both governments.

> MYANMAR, IN REALITY, DOESN'T CARE FOR THE REAL ASPIRATION OF THE NAGAS. THE SEVEN YEARS CEASEFIRE ONLY BENEFITED THEM AS IT WAS ONE-SIDED. NSCN STARTED TO FEEL THAT WE WERE AT THE RECEIVING END OF THE MYANMAR GOVERNMENT'S OPERATIONS.
>
> Joseph Lamkang

Hostilities between the Tatmadaw and the NSCN-K heightened after 400 soldiers from six battalions led by the Hkamti district tactical commander under the Tatmadaw's North-West Command took control of the NSCN-K's headquarters in Taga area of Nanyun township on January 29, 2019.

A month later 'Operation Sunshine-1' from February 22 to 26, occurred with the Indian Army acting against suspected Arakanese Army (AA) camps inside Indian territory, with fleeing Arakan troops arrested by the Myanmar Army on their side. The move was largely seen as a tit-for-tat action to encourage Myanmar to increase operations against anti-India rebels.

The latest operation known as 'Operation Sunshine-2', took place between May 16 and June 8, and included two battalions of the Indian Army — along with Special Forces, Assam Rifles and infantry Ghataks (commandos) — on the Indian side of the border, while clearance action was taken by four brigades of the Myanmar Army resulting in around 70-80 insurgents being detained.[1]

Although, the NSCN-K is based in Myanmar's Sagaing division its primary dispute is with the Indian Government as it wants to create a united independent Nagaland based on a federal system[2] that is to include parts of Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh in India and parts of Sagaing Division.[3] That said, however, the group's presence, its support for Indian rebel groups, and its refusal to take part in the Myanmar Peace Process remain a contentious issue within the Myanmar government.

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According to Ministry of Publicity (MIP) in-charge of NSCN-K Joseph Lamkang,

> In the last three years, they have been aggressively forcing us to sign the NCA. But we did not do so. Then they became aggressive at the negotiating table, stopped all our supply routes and have applied their famous 'four cuts' policy.[4]

The NSCN-K has consistently maintained that it will not sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and sees itself outside the purview of the current peace process. In reality, however, the chances of the NSCN-K being allowed to continue its own administration are increasingly waning.

The NSCN – K runs the Government of the People's Republic of Nagaland (GPRN) which holds sway over the Naga inhabited region in northern Sagaing Division and acts as a semi-autonomous administration in the area. It is based in northern Lahe and Nanyun townships in Sagaing. A number of anti-Indian groups had been training at NSCN-K bases in Sagaing including the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF). It has been alleged that China has been providing finances as well as arms and ammunition to the NSCN-K.[5]

On 9 April 2012, representatives from the NSCN-K met with the Myanmar government's peace negotiators, and a five-point agreement was made, the terms were:

1. Cessation of armed conflict with the Myanmar army April 9, 2012
2. Opening of a liaison office by NSCN-K at Khamti to facilitate further talks
3. Coordination among both sides for carrying arms beyond their agreed jurisdiction
4. Freedom of movement of unarmed NSCN-K cadres within Myanmar
5. Holding of sustained negotiations.

On 17 August 2018, the group removed Lt-Gen Khango Konyak, who is a western Naga and an Indian national, from his role as chairman following a three-day meeting from 15-17 August at its HQ in Taga. Konyak, 70, is a a China-trained rebel and had taken over as chairman of the NSCN-K after Khaplang died in June 2017 after a prolonged illness.[6] He was replaced by Yung Aung, the deputy minister of the NSCN-K defence department, as interim chairman and also the head of the Government of the People's Republic of Nagaland (GPRN). Yung Aung, 45, is the nephew of the group's founder SS Khaplang and is a Hemi Naga from Myanmar. The move has been seen by many as an attempt by the Myanmar Naga to expel their Indian brethren.

According to reports, Yung Aung has deep links with China and maintains close ties with the United Liberation Front of Asom-Independent (ULFA-I) 'commander-in-chief' Paresh Baruah and other Manipuri militants.[7]

Now, the NSCN-K has been forced out of its main HQ at Taga and five of its top leaders NSCN-K Peace Committee leader U An Kam, spokesman U Kyaw Wan Sein, official U Saw Htein and officers Major-General Aung Mai and Lieutenant-Colonel Aung Sai have been arrested and charged under the Unlawful Associations Act for harbouring insurgents from the Indian side of the border, the situation for the NSCN-K and its continued existence seems even more precarious.

On 3 June, at a press briefing, Myanmar Army Major General Tun Tun Nyi said operations against the NSCN-K and the other India-based insurgent groups it was sheltering would continue. The NSCN-K had

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earlier claimed in a press release on 27 May that a "war-like situation" had been created in the Naga inhabited region as a result of the "joint political and military operation" by Myanmar and India, which it claimed has also violated its Myanmar ceasefire.[8]

The statement also said that while the NSCN-K had exercised "extreme restraint", it had refused to sign Myanmar's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) since it was "alien" to the Nagas. The spokesperson of the Myanmar military Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun had responded by telling the media that the army would not relent against the NSCN-K unless the outfit abided by three conditions – accept the NCA, uphold the principles stated in the bilateral agreement, and stop supporting rebels from India's Assam and Manipur states.

The NSCN-K's belief in creating a separate Naga homeland is unlikely to be realised. Neither India nor Myanmar would allow such an occurrence and without that recognition, such a state cannot exist. The Naga resistance movement began at a time in the 1950s when many ethnic organisations believed their struggle for self-determination would be successful and armed resistance would realise a political solution. While a number of the ethnic armed organisation have now sought a path towards finding a political solution to their own, albeit limited, self-governance, others have not.

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While the Naga resistance struggle continues, the leadership must recognise that the movement is gradually being decimated and may soon cease to exist as a coherent political administration in Myanmar. While the Naga leaders may resolutely believe in a singular Naga homeland stretching across the two countries, such an objective seems increasingly difficult to achieve.

Consequently, for the NSCN-K to continue to exist it must re-evaluate its role in a planned Federal Union of Myanmar.

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Notes

[1] https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-myanmar-forces-coordinate-destroy-north-east-insurgent-camps-across-border-5782686/ accessed 18 June 2019
[2] Email correspondence with Rajeev Bhattacharyya, 25 September 2015
[3] See also The National Socialist Council of Nagaland - Khaplang (NSCN-K) - EBO Background Paper No.1/2015 - June 2015 for further background.
[4] https://www.news18.com/news/india/nscn-k-refuses-to-sign-ceasefire-agreement-with-myanmar-says-ready-to-die-for-naga-cause-2170343.html, accessed 18 June 2019
[5] 'We have strong ties with China, says NSCN(K)', Prasanta Mazumdar, The New Indian Express, 27July 2010 The New Indian Express
[6] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nscn-k-purges-indian-elements/article24727420.ece, accessed 2 September 2018
[7] https://www.eurasiareview.com/28082018-india-myanmar-nscn-k-coup-analysis, accessed 2 September 2018
[8] https://www.efsas.org/commentaries/myanmar%E2%80%99s-offensive-against-nscn-k-camps-spells-doom-for-northeastern-indian-insurgent-outfits/, accessed 2 July 2019