



Future Prospects of Peace Talk with United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) Genesis, Issues and Recommendations

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About the Author



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Abstract

The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was formed in April 07, 1979 in Sibsagar. While secession from India was the declared objective, the ULFA adopted an anti-foreigner stance to gain popular support base on the prevailing public sentiments at that time. This was followed by violent activities including disruption of communications, attacks on economic institutions, kidnappings for ransom and targeting government officials. By 1990, the outfit had become a major threat to internal security in Assam and was banned under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967. The Assam government called in the Army in 1990 and President's rule was declared in Assam. Operations 'Bajrang', 'Rhino' and 'All Clear' were launched leading to the surrender of ULFA Leaders and commencement of peace process. Military Operations, misplaced ideology, and loss of internal and external support base have marginalized the ULFA. Release of Anup Chetia is expected to boost the ongoing peace process with ULFA. Paresh Baruah continues to be a potent threat with his group. Presence of the Army and other security forces at this critical juncture is a necessity, more so when the political leadership in the state is changing. The paper is an attempt to highlight the factors leading to the insurgency and creation of ULFA in Assam. It also highlights the Impact of extradition of Anup Chetia and refusal of Presh Baruah to join ongoing peace process. It concludes with the policy recommendations for lasting peace in Assam.

Introduction

Assam, located in the foothills of the Himalayas, is known as the gateway to Northeast India. The partition of the country had a major impact on Northeast India and Assam. The Assam movement has its genesis in the illegal immigration of Bangladeshis, before the administration could settle down in its new environment in a make-shift temporary capital, the Assam agitation began in 1979 and soon, the Assam Accord – to end the anti-foreigners movement - was drafted and signed overnight on 14th August 1985. The ULFA was formed on April 7, 1979, in a meeting

organised by six radical Assamese youth at the Rang Ghar, the famous amphitheatre of the Ahom royalty at Sibsagar. The ULFA first came into the limelight when it joined hands with the All Assam Student's Union (AASU) and All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) combine in enforcing the boycott of polls of 1983. ULFA carried out silent consolidation and maintained a low profile during the first few years of its formation. It shot into prominence by organizing exceptionally daring bank robberies, by initiating rural development works or by retributive killings and meting out summary justice, particularly in areas where the presence of the Indian State was only cosmetic. While secession from India was the declared objective, the ULFA adopted an anti-foreigner stance to gain popular support base on the prevailing public sentiments at that time. In 1985, the outfit asserted its primary objective, 'to liberate Assam from Indian colonial rule' and form a 'Sovereign, Socialist Assam' through an armed struggle.

ULFA founder and General Secretary Anup Chetia was extradited from Bangladesh in November 2015 and released from Guwahati Central Jail on December 25, 2015, after he apologised for the mistakes the ULFA has made in the past. He promised to work with "nationalistic" organisations of Assam's indigenous communities for a peaceful settlement of the Assam conflict by being a part of the on-going tripartite talks involving the ULFA, the Assam Government and the Government of India. He also dismissed the speculation that he would try to go underground as he had done in 1992 after he was granted bail¹. Paresh Baruah, the Self Styled Commander-in-Chief of the secessionist and anti-talks faction of ULFA, refused to talk to the Government unless Assam's 'sovereignty' was on the agenda². This paper is an attempt to understand the genesis, future prospects of peace talk with ULFA as also the impact of Anup Chetia joining the peace talks and finally, suggest policy recommendations for lasting peace

¹ Samudra Gupta, Top ULFA leader Anup Chetia freed, says 'sorry for ULFA's errors' The Indian Express, available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/ulfa-leader-anup-chetia-released-from-jail/>, accessed on March 10, 2016

² Prabin Kalita, "Sri Sri urges Paresh to join peace talks," The Times of India, December 18, 2015 available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/Sri-Sri-urges-Paresh-to-join-peace-talks/articleshow/50233367.cms>, accessed on March 10, 2016

Background

Geography

Assam, located in the foothills of the Himalayas, is known as the gateway to Northeast India. The word 'Assam' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'ASOMA' meaning 'peerless' or 'unparalleled'. It is located south of the eastern Himalayas and comprises of the Brahmaputra and the Barak river valleys. Assam shares a 263 km International Border with Bangladesh and 265 km with Bhutan. In addition to these, the state shares a 704 km border with Arunachal Pradesh, 434 km with Nagaland, 528 km with Mizoram and 723 km with Meghalaya. Geographically Assam and other north-eastern states are connected to the rest of India via a narrow strip of land in West Bengal called the Siliguri Corridor or 'Chicken's Neck'.

Demography

Assam is rich in culture, ethnic groupings, languages and dialects spoken, and literature which makes it a melting pot of various ethnic, religious, linguistic and tribal groups who have been dwelling together for centuries. The population of Assam according to the 2011 census is 3,11,69,272. The community wise breakdown of the 2011 census has not been declassified. As per the 2001 census, 64.93 % of the population are Hindus, 30.94 % Muslims and 3.70% Christians. The economy of Assam is largely agriculture based, with 69% of the population engaged in it. Assam is reputed all over the world for its production of world famous tea. The state accounts for 15% of the world's production of tea and 60% of India's tea produce. For ages, Assam has been one of the most volatile and sensitive regions because of the problems of economy and migration – both internal and external – which often turn ethnic conflicts into bloody insurgencies

Landmark Incidents Post Independence

Assam took active part in the freedom struggle. Gopinath Bordoloi, Tarun Ram Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Ambikagiri Roychoudhury, Kuladhar Chaliha and many other prominent freedom fighters from Assam made significant contributions to the freedom struggle. Gopinath Bordoloi

was awarded the Bharat Ratna posthumously mainly for his role in the freedom movement and for his contributions to national integration. Significant developments in Assam after the independence are as described in the following part.

Partition of the country

Partition of the country had a major impact on Northeast India and Assam. The problem of transport bottleneck and geographical isolation started in 1947. Road and railway transit routes through erstwhile East Bengal were lost as also the traditional trade relations between Assam and the neighbouring countries were strained. 1947 also witnessed large-scale migration of refugees from East Pakistan to Assam and the beginning of ethnic conflicts in the state.

Wars with China and Pakistan

Assam and the North-East faced the brunt of the 1962 war. It was a big psychological blow to the people of North-East India and it sent a strong negative signal to prospective investors in Assam. The 1962 war also perhaps changed the perspective of the national policy makers vis-a-vis Assam from development to defence. Once again Assam had to go through the trauma of the 1965 war. The riverine route from Assam to the outside world through the then East Pakistan was sealed as a result of the war. The next blow came in 1971 when Assam not only had to suffer war-time tension and inconveniences of the Bangladesh liberation war but also had to give shelter to millions of refugees from erstwhile East-Pakistan for more than a year.

Balkanisation of Assam

In the 1950s, North-East essentially meant Assam, Manipur and Tripura. To meet the ethnic aspirations of various tribes and communities, the Central Government created four more states, namely, Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (1987). The balkanisation added more problems as other smaller and bigger communities started to demand statehood even if the already created states could not deliver the basic public goods. The size of erstwhile Assam was reduced by 35% of its

original size. The state had to shift its capital in 1974 from Shillong to Guwahati.

The Assam Movement

Before the administration could settle down in its new environment in a make-shift temporary capital, the Assam agitation began in 1979 when the administration was stressed to its limits. The Assam movement has its genesis in illegal immigration of Bangladeshis. The extent of immigration was highlighted by the observation of the Chief Election Commissioner, who expressed serious concerns at the large number of names of foreign nationals included in the electoral rolls. All Assam Students Union (AASU) took up the issue raised by the Election Commissioner and began to focus its attention to the dangers posed by illegal immigration, which threatened to change the demographic profile of the state.

The updating of the electoral roll for the parliamentary bye-election to the Mangaldai constituency, caused by the death of the sitting member in 1979, finally set the stage for the Assam Movement. The tribunal set up to update the rolls found 45,000 voters in an electorate of six lakhs to be foreigners. On the initiative of AASU, the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP), composed of several parties, was formed at Dibrugarh in August 1979 to spearhead the Assam Movement. President's Rule was imposed in Assam on 12 December 1979 and the legislature was suspended but not dissolved. Talks between the Indian Government and the agitators broke down over the 'cut-off date' for the definition of 'foreigners' and the agitation turned violent³. The Government took recourse to coercive methods to subdue the agitators. That proved counterproductive. The students now introduced a new weapon to strike at the heart of the Indian economy, i.e., the closure of the pipeline that fed crude oil of the refinery at Barauni.

Controversial Elections of 1983

As Assam was reeling under the mass upsurge led by student leaders, elections were held in 1983. There were very few candidates and fewer

³ Dhruv C Katoch, "A Viable Strategy to Fight Insurgency in the North East", Thesis Submitted to NDC 2004, New Delhi, available at <http://indianstrategicknowledgeonline.com/web/44-kotach.pdf>, accessed on March 10, 2016

voters. In many constituencies there was no polling at all. The election was marred by state level violence including the infamous Nellie Massacre which took place in central Assam on the morning of February 18, 1983. It left over 2000 people dead, all victims of an ethnic clash that was seen as a fallout of the decision to hold the Assembly elections in 1983, despite stiff opposition from people. KPS Gill, one of the key figures responsible for maintenance of law and order in Assam at that time, admitted that the controversial 1983 polls were a mistake.⁴

The Assam Accord

The Assam Accord was drafted and signed overnight on 14th August 1985. It identified 25th March 1971 as the cut-off year to detect and deport illegal foreigners from Assam; and disenfranchised those who entered Assam from 1966 to 1971 for a period of 10 years. The Government agreed to drop all cases against the AASU and other agitators. Draconian laws that gave sweeping powers to government officials and security forces were lifted. On its part, AASU agreed to take part in the elections on the basis of the 1984 electoral rolls, which were prepared on the basis of 1971 list - the same rolls that the AASU had opposed all along. Elections were held soon after the Accord in which Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), formed after the Accord, came out victorious. The Assam Accord had however failed in its main objective of detection and deportation of foreigners⁵.

The Rise of United Liberation Front (ULFA)

Formation of ULFA

The ULFA was formed on April 7, 1979, even before the students had consolidated their movement against the perceived discrimination of Assam by the Central Government. In a meeting organised by six radical Assamese youth at the Rang Ghar, the famous amphitheatre of the Ahom royalty at Sibsagar, among whom were: Rajiv Rajkhonwar alias Arabinda

⁴ "83 polls were a mistake: KPS Gill" The Assam Tribune, February, 19, 2008, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20120207000801/http://www.assamtribune.com/scripts/details.asp?id=feb1908/at02>, accessed on March 10, 2016.

⁵ Hiranya Saikia, "The Foreigners issue in Assam", Times of Assam, December 9, 2012, available at <https://www.timesofassam.com/headlines/the-foreigners-issue-in-assam/> accessed on March 15, 2016

Rajkhowa, the present Chairman of ULFA, Paban Baruah alias Paresh Baruah, the present 'Commander-in-Chief' (C-in-C) of the outfit, Samiran Gogoi alias Pradip Gogoi, the present Vice-Chairman and Golap Barua alias Anup Chetia, the present General Secretary of the outfit⁶. The ULFA derived its inspiration from Asom Jatiyabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad (AJYCP), which was a semi militant organisation. Many of the ULFA founders were members of AJYCP.

The ULFA first came into the limelight when it joined hands with the AASU and All-Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) combine in enforcing the boycott of polls of 1983 till the names of the illegally settled 'foreigners' were struck off from the electoral rolls. ULFA carried out silent consolidation and maintained a low profile during the first few years of its formation. It shot into prominence by organizing exceptionally daring bank robberies, by initiating rural development works particularly in areas, where the presence of the Indian State was only cosmetic or by conducting retributive killings and meting out summary justice in those areas or a combination of these.

ULFA Links with AASU and AGP

ULFA maintained close links with AASU and during the first few years of its founding kept a low profile. The formation of AGP Government in 1985 consequent to its victory in the assembly elections held after the signing of the Assam Accord facilitated the spread of ULFA. Since a large number of the ULFA cadres were close to AGP, therefore, the government was not in a position to take tough measures against ULFA.

Taking advantage of the situation, the ULFA succeeded in infiltrating the state's bureaucracy at all levels. As time went by ULFA's acts of extortion, killings, kidnappings and robberies became brazen. Businessmen paid large amounts as protection money and were reluctant to complain out of fear. Tea gardens paid quietly to buy peace with ULFA. ULFA had also infiltrated the public sector at various levels and manipulated the Public Distribution System to its own advantage by diverting the subsidised commodities to

⁶ K Hrishikeshan, 'Assam's Agony, The ULFA & Obstacles to Conflict Resolution" SATP, available at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/publication/faultlines/volume12/Article2.htm> accessed on March 15, 2016

open market and selling them at premium price⁷. The Central Government was hesitant to take action, as AGP was at that time the coalition partner. It is evident from the fact that ULFA was declared illegal only as late as on 27 November 1990.

Objective and Linkages

While secession from India was the declared objective, the ULFA adopted an anti-foreigner stance to gain popular support base on the prevailing public sentiments at that time. In 1985, the outfit asserted its primary objective, 'to liberate Assam from Indian colonial rule' and form a 'Sovereign, Socialist Assam' through an armed struggle. By 1986, the ULFA had established contacts with the Inter-State Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan, National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) and Kachin Independent Army (KIA). It also joined hands with the anti-Indian faction in Bangladesh and flourished under their hospitality. This was followed by violent activities including disruption of communications, attacks on economic institutions, kidnappings for ransom and targeting government officials. By 1990, the outfit had become a major threat to internal security in Assam. As a result, it was banned under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967. ULFA sought assistance of other militant organisations for arms and training, who demanded a hefty price for the same. To raise money ULFA went on a spree to rob banks and extort money from wealthy businessmen and tea garden owners.

Shift in ULFA's Ideology

One of the reasons for the dwindling public support for ULFA was its change in policy regarding the illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. In July 1992, ULFA stated that immigrants from Bangladesh had now become a part of the national life and Assam's struggle for freedom can never be successful without them. In the same statement it also agreed that English would be the link language of 'Swadhin Asom' (independent Assam), thereby nullifying almost a century of struggle to give the Assamese language its

⁷ Christina S Furtado, "Inter Rebel Group Dynamics, cooperation or competition, The Case of South Asia" Publisher Urbana Illinois, p143

rightful place in the State. Such change in stance led to decrease in public support for ULFA.

External Dynamics

Bangladesh. There has been positive diplomatic and political progress with Bangladesh in recent times due to the friendly Government of the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina. Bangladesh has been launching proactive operations against Indian terrorists on their soil. As a result, it is not a favoured destination for terrorists any more. Some camps providing logistic support and safe havens are still functional. The extradition of ULFA General Secretary Anup Chetia's in December 2015 is another positive step.

Myanmar. Myanmar continues to be a safe haven for most terrorist organisations active in the North-East. Reports indicate presence of camps of militants from Northeast India. Porous borders and easy availability of arms and ammunition, combined with lax administration and poor security environment provide safe havens for the terrorists. Inputs revealed that there is a clear nexus between terrorist groups in these camps, where sharing of facilities is common.

Bhutan. After their sanctuaries in Bhutan were busted by the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA), there are no permanent terrorist camps in Bhutan any more. The Bhutan Government's Operation 'All Clear' has assured India of its cooperation in countering the menace of terrorism. However, inaccessible forested areas along the Assam-Bhutan border continue to serve as temporary bases and safe havens for those who seek refuge there to avoid contact with Indian Security Forces.

Military Operations

Operation Bajrang

The Assam Government called in the Army in 1990 and President's rule was declared in Assam. Operation Bajrang was launched on 28 November 1990, when the ULFA was banned and branded as a terrorist organization. Top leaders of the organization fled to safer countries. Police check posts

became a familiar sight in Assam and people felt troubled by the Army's search operations and interrogations. Innocent youths were detained in Army camps which ultimately led to a growing feeling of hatred for the ULFA among the masses.

When the Army launched Operation Bajrang, the word of the impending operation was leaked out to ULFA by their sympathisers in the State Government. Thus just a few low ranking cadres were apprehended but the top leadership escaped the dragnet. During the operations, in the Lakhpathar camp of ULFA and in the Saraipung jungles, mass graves were found, which told a tale of ULFA's blood and terror. The discovery shocked the people of Assam and demolished the Robin Hood image of the ULFA.

Operation Rhino

On September 14, 1991, Operation Rhino was launched in by the GOI. The operation proved a success in which most of the ULFA bases (91 in the State) were destroyed and nearly all of the top ULFA leadership were arrested. Over 300 ULFA cadres surrendered within 40 days of Op Rhino⁸. In November of the same year, Anup Chetia was apprehended in a guest house at Kolkata by the intelligence agencies. Within weeks of the start of Operation Rhino, the Army had apprehended 4300 suspects, of whom 1,700 were released after initial screenings. Apart from weapons, the Army had recovered seven million rupees. From the statements made by the apprehended leaders, it began to emerge that the leadership was changing its stance from Swadhin Asom to 'Swadhikar' (autonomy).

Operation All Clear

During early 1990s', due to pressure from the Bangladesh Government, ULFA shifted its camps from Bangladesh to the forests of Southern Bhutan. These camps were used to train cadres, store equipment, and launch attacks on targets in India. Talks between the Assamese insurgent groups and the Bhutan Government to prevent such illegal activities dragged on for six years. Finally, the Royal Government of Bhutan, in consultation with

⁸ Scott Gates, Kaushik Roy, "Unconventional Warfare in South Asia: Shadow Warriors and Counterinsurgency" Routledge 2014

India, decided to take military action to destroy the insurgent camps located inside Bhutanese territory. The operation started on 15 December 2003 in which nearly 6,000 troops of the RBA took part. The Indian Army provided logistic support and sealed the Indo-Bhutan border to prevent militants from escaping. By 27 December 2003, 30 militant camps were destroyed and important leaders were either killed or captured. A large quantity of weapons and ammunition was also recovered. The operation was a big blow to all insurgent groups in Assam in general and ULFA in particular⁹.

The Peace Process

Peace Proposal

Arobindo Rajkhowa, the ULFA chairman, wrote a letter to the then Prime Minister, Narsimha Rao, declaring his willingness to end the hostilities and negotiate. In 1992, ULFA gave a written statement, which should have set the stage for ULFA's capitulation. After the written commitment, army operations were suspended temporarily to allow ULFA leadership to convene a meeting of their central council. The top leadership tried to convince and persuade the cadres to accept the assurances given by it to the Government but despite the extension of suspension of army operations from one deadline to the other, the leadership failed to persuade the cadres.

Paresh Baruah, the self-styled C-in-C, who had taken refuge in Bangladesh, was opposed to any peace talks and kept sending messages to his followers to reject the Government's overtures and continue the fight. In desperation Rajkhowa, Chetia and Pradip Gogoi told the Union Government that they would have to travel to Bangladesh to talk to Paresh Baruah. The Union Government obliged and gave them safe passage from Delhi. But it was only a ruse to flee India and join Paresh Baruah in Bangladesh. By the end of March 1992, the three had slipped out of India to Bangladesh - not to return.

⁹ Bhushan, "Bhutan's army launched first attack in its history to help India" Pakistan Defence, September 06, 2010, available at <http://defence.pk/threads/bhutans-army-launched-first-attack-in-its-history-to-help-india.71854/>, accessed on April 10, 2016

Ceasefire by ULFA

In June 2008, 'A' and 'C' Companies of ULFA's 28 Battalion offered unilateral ceasefire and renamed themselves ULFA (Pro-Talk) or ULFA (PT). In February 2011, ULFA agreed to unconditionally participate in talks with the Central Government and in September 2011, ULFA (PT) signed a tripartite agreement for Suspension of Operations (SoO) with the Centre and State Government. Peace talks between ULFA and the Government suffered a setback in August 2012, when Paresh Barua expelled Arabinda Rajkhowa and appointed Abhijit Barman as the chairman of his outfit and, rechristened the outfit as ULFA (Independent) or ULFA (I).

ULFA (I) Struggling For Relevance

ULFA (I) has lost its support base in Assam and is presently struggling to gain relevance. There are reports that people have refused to pay tax and extortion money to ULFA (I). To remain relevant, the outfit has aligned with the Gorkha National Liberation Army (GNLA) and other northeast terrorist groups. There are reports of forceful recruitment and cadres being confined to camps by coercion.

Issues and Policy Recommendations

Anup Chetia Factor

Extradition of ULFA General Secretary, Anup Chetia's (alias Golap Barua's) by Bangladesh and his eventual release on bail in December 2015 has created a positive impact on the peace process in Assam. Chetia was one of the founding members of ULFA in 1979 along with Paresh Baruah, the so called C-in-C, and Arabinda Rajkhowa among others. The move to release Chetia is expected to boost the ongoing peace process between ULFA and the Indian Government. The peace negotiations are already underway with the pro-talk ULFA leaders like Arabinda Rajkhowa and Pradip Gogoi, among others¹⁰.

¹⁰ Udidipta Ranjan Boruah "Prospect of Peace in Assam", Economic And Political Weekly, February, 20, 2016 available at <http://www.epw.in/journal/2016/8/reports-states/prospects-peace-assam.html>, accessed on April, 15, 2016

Extradition of Paresh Baruah

Paresh Baruah and his group continues to be a potent threat. Talks may be futile without him or without neutralizing his threat potential. He has remained adamant that he would only participate in the talks with the Indian Government if sovereignty of Assam and the North-East is accepted as the "core issue". In a recent interview given to a local TV channel, Paresh Baruah once again reiterated that talks with the Government of India can only be held in the context of "Independent Assam". It appears that there are the following compulsions which are holding back Paresh Baruah¹¹ :-

- a. Paresh Baruah is a trusted man of many intelligence agencies in the neighbouring countries and giving up that nexus may turn out to be difficult, if not an impossible proposition.
- b. There are also reports that he is running businesses in neighbouring countries. Thus his business interests and large personal finances are at stake which may also be a reason to remain away from talks.
- c. He has also joined hands with the other rebel groups from the North-East that have camps in Myanmar, to remain relevant. Baruah was the mastermind in the formation of a new alliance called the United National Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFWSEA) in April 2015.
- d. The Bangladesh Government has found evidence of his involvement in the Chittagong arms haul of 2004 and there is a death sentence against him in that country.

Obviously, for peace to prevail in the region, requisite diplomatic pressure may have to be exerted for the arrest and extradition of Paresh Baruah.

¹¹ Rajeev Bhattacharyya "Why ULFA chief of staff Paresh Baruah will never come for talks with Indian government' The Economic Times, January 24, 2016, available at http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2016-01-24/news/70036423_1_paresh-baruah-ruili-talks accessed on April 16, 2016

Grant of Schedule Tribe Status

A major cause of consternation in Assam is the objections raised by the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) and the Tribal Affairs Ministry to the demand that six additional communities be granted tribal status. ULFA has demanded that the Moran, Tai Ahom, Sootea, Koch-Rajbongshis and 36 Tea tribes -- currently listed as Other Backward Classes (OBC) -- be granted tribal status as part of an initiative to protect the indigenous people of Assam. Grant of tribal status to these six communities will also, after fresh delimitation, lead to a significant increase in the number of Scheduled Tribe (ST) seats in the 126-strong Assam State Assembly, making it a tribal-dominated State - the Assembly currently has 16 ST seats. However, Government sources say that the NCST has raised concerns that granting tribal status to these communities would eat into the quota for the existing STs. Also, the STs seem to be getting agitated on this issue and have been protesting against such a step by the Government as it would encroach into their domain. ST status to six communities would result in addressing the core issue of dissent, especially within ULFA. However, it need to be ensured that while granting the ST status to the six communities, interests of existing tribals are protected and fair reservations within these six communities is ensured¹².

Update of Citizen's Register

The process to update the citizen's register -- by asking people to prove their citizenship by establishing their domicile in Assam till 1971 - was launched in the second week of May. Success of the process would depend on its conclusive update, which must be followed with identification and deportation of illegal immigrants from the State. Deportation of illegal migrants and their acceptance by Bangladesh will be a challenge. One of the options may be to allow them to stay without voting rights and focus on checking future illegal migration from Bangladesh by effective border management.

¹² Devesh K Pandey, "Peace talks with ULFA hit a snag", The Hindu, May 29, 2015, available at <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/peace-talks-with-ulfa-hit-a-snag/article7257409.ece>, accessed on May 20, 2016

Effective Border Management

The success of recent talks with Bangladesh and signing of Land Border Agreement have proved beyond doubt the effectiveness of bilateral initiatives. A similar action plan with Myanmar is also recommended to be followed. Northeast's long Borders with neighbouring countries, which are quite porous, have been a boon to extremist outfits of the region, who traditionally received support in the form of funds, arms, safe havens and training from foreign intelligence agencies and other terrorist organisations. The porous nature of the international borders negates the gains made by successful counter-terrorist operations in the hinterland. Fencing along the International Borders (IB) with increased domination of riverine borders with Bangladesh needs to be expedited. Management of borders with Bhutan needs to be streamlined. Checking illegal immigration and containing illegal immigrants, through identity, disenfranchisement and denial of citizenship even to their offspring's, despite electoral concerns, is crucial to the State's security.

Current dynamics of each of these countries are given in the succeeding paragraphs.

- a. Fencing of the IB with Bangladesh needs to be expedited by resolution of border alignment with magnanimous give and take along the ever shifting river flats.
- b. Fencing of Indo-Myanmar border is also a necessity to regulate the move of personnel while maintaining the Free Border Regime.
- c. The Seema Shashatra Bal (SSB), which is the lead agency for management of the borders with Bhutan, needs to establish monitoring posts closer to the IB with smaller gaps to show visible presence.
- d. Raising of additional Border Management Battalions should be resorted to.
- e. There needs to be complete synergy and coordination between border guarding and counter-insurgency operations.

Economic Steps to Deal with Illegal Migrants

As a response mechanism to the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migration into Assam, work permits need to be issued at the border posts on the India-Bangladesh border by a separate body like a 'Work Permit Issuance Authority' which should work in close co-operation with the Border Security Force (BSF). A more lasting and effective solution would be through economic development of northern areas of Bangladesh. India should invest heavily in ventures in this region to make it prosperous and remove the motivation behind trans-border migration. This money will be worth spending and will contribute immensely to the national security in the long run. Reviving road and rail routes through Bangladesh, shut since Independence, and thereby cutting the travel distance by a thousand kilometres will be mutually and economically beneficial for both the countries.

Closure of Militant Camps in Myanmar

There has been a positive diplomatic and political progress with Bangladesh in recent times due to the friendly Government of the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina. Most of the Camps of ULFA in Bangladesh have been dismantled and the terrorist infrastructure and bases have been controlled considerably. However, Myanmar continues to be a safe haven for most terrorist organisations active in the North-East including ULFA (I). Inputs have revealed that there is a clear nexus between all the North Eastern terrorist groups in these camps, where sharing of facilities is common. Diplomatic efforts to seek cooperation of Myanmar to deny such safe havens to the terrorists should be undertaken at this stage. There is a case for a strong diplomatic action to dismantle militant camps from the North East located in Myanmar.

Joint Operation with Neighbouring Countries

India has been proactively engaging all her eastern neighbours and has established considerable influence over these countries. Relations with Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar are presently at their best. There are inputs regarding terrorist training camps and hideouts across the IB inside

these neighbouring countries. Two recent examples which highlight the need for joint operations are given below:-

- a. Operation 'All Clear' was a military operation conducted by RBA against Assam separatist insurgent groups in the southern regions of Bhutan between 15 December 2003 and 3 January 2004. It was the first operation ever conducted by the RBA. This operation was immensely successful and has impacted the psyche of the insurgent groups camping in Bhutan. Similar operations with Myanmar are required to flush out militants which would send a message of strong bilateral resolve to combat insurgency in the North East.
- b. Hot pursuit of militants by the Indian Army along Indo-Myanmar border after the attack on Indian security personnel on 04 June 2015, in Chandel, Manipur caused significant casualties on the militants, and as a consequence, threat to our civilian and security forces have been averted¹³.

Joint operations are the need of the day. It is a well established fact that militants from North-East India are running their camps in Myanmar. Paresh Baruah has been giving interviews to media person from neighbouring countries. A strong joint response is necessary for the peace and prosperity of the region. While respecting territorial integrity, peace and tranquillity along the border, any threat to security and national integrity should call for a strong joint response.

Closure of Ceasefire and SoO Camps

There are a large number of Cease Fire and SoO camps in the area. Experience has shown that these are taken as a license to legalise extortion. Strict measure should be initiated to curb such illegal activities. It is important to manage these camps effectively and to implement ceasefire ground rules to ensure that inmates of these camps do not indulge in illegal activities. The most important relief for the surrendered terrorists is to

¹³“ Indian Army's Myanmar operation: 10 insider facts” Indian Today, June 10, 2015, available at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/indian-army-myanmar-operation-details-indian-air-force/1/443455.html> , accessed on May 20, 2016.

have a successful rehabilitation programme including enrolment in police and para-military forces, while ensuring smooth integration of these cadres into the national main stream.

Delays in commencement of talks with certain groups have led to disgruntlement amongst the cadres. Talks with all terrorist outfits need to follow a consistent policy with definite timelines. The SoO and ceasefire agreements must be conditional with quid pro quo response from the militant outfits in terms of number of cadres and weapons being surrendered, besides exercise of leverage on splinter groups for future negotiations with the Government.

Encouraging Development Activities

With peace returning to the Assam, the Government needs to encourage industries and Multi National Companies to invest in Assam. This will usher-in prosperity in the region and create employment for the youth to wean them away from militant groups. The surrendered and cease fire cadres may also be employed in security related jobs in these companies.

Raising of Territorial Army (Ecological)

Assam is facing the problem of deforestation, leading to the climate change and frequent floods. There is an urgent need to focus on this aspect to maintain ecological balance. Territorial Army (Ecological) is best suited to address this aspect. Assam has two such battalions raised to carry out reforestation of the dead and fallen forests. These are doing yeomen service to the nation by upholding 'Green India' mission. These battalions are affiliated to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. There is an urgent need to raise three to four more such battalions for ecological as well as wild life protection, to be funded by the State Government. Along with the ex-servicemen of the state, cadres who are awaiting rehabilitation in Ceasefire and SoS camps may form part of these battalions. This will serve the dual purpose of providing meaningful employment to cadres and wean them away from illegal activities, besides protecting wild life and to check ecological imbalance.

Employment of Army in Counter-Insurgency Operations

There are differing views on employment of army in counter insurgency operations. One view is that prolonged, large-scale employment of the Army for counter-insurgency operations has considerably eroded its conventional deterrence capability, as it has affected operational preparedness, hampered training for conventional operations and slowed down the Army's modernisation plans¹⁴. The other view is that conventional wars may or may not happen as economic compulsions and global integration of economies and societies increasingly inhibit acts of aggression in today's world, whereas threat from non-state actors, externally sponsored and otherwise, to economic institutions and internal fabric of nations is here to stay¹⁵.

Should we hold back this potent force when internal conflict is transforming into hybrid threat? This question needs deliberation. It is a well known fact that troops undertaking counter-insurgency operations get live exposure and training required for actual combat. That the army formations which were moved from counter-insurgency operations performed exceptionally well in Operation 'Pawan' and Operation 'Vijay', substantiate this fact. Employment of army in counter-insurgency operations is likely to continue which will keep the troops operationally oriented and in turn will lead to reduction in security related expenditures by limiting the raisings of additional forces for internal security.

Presence of the Army and other forces in Assam at this critical juncture is a necessity, more so when the political leadership is changing. With the changed security and political environment, the population has pinned in a lot of hope on growth and development. This aspiration can fructify only if peace and security is maintained in the State at current levels, for the Government to bring about transformational changes.

¹⁴ Gurmeet Kanwal "Counter Insurgency Force" CLAWS, available at http://www.claws.in/images/journals_doc/507774436_GurmeetKanwal.pdf , accessed on June 04, 2014

¹⁵ Pathikrit Payne "The Complex dynamics of Internal Security : Challenges Ahead" Special Stories, available at http://securitywatchindia.org.in/newswi/ReportPdf/SWISecurityReportSpecialStories_Oct.pdf , accessed on June 05, 2016

Role of Unified Command

Acting on a request from the Assam government, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), in January 4, 1997, accepted the move to bring the Army, the State police and the paramilitary forces under a single umbrella of command. For operational purposes, a Unified Headquarters was set up under the chairmanship of GOC IV Corps. Subsequently, the Governor of Assam issued a notification on the constitution of the Unified Headquarters, placing the three forces under it. What emerged was a three-tier structure: the Strategy Group, the Operational Group and the District-level Coordination Committee (DLCC). While the Strategic Group is headed by the Chief Secretary and the Operational Group works under General Officer Commanding 4 Corps, the DLCC is headed by the Deputy Commissioner¹⁶.

Success of counter-insurgency operations can be attributed to the efficient and effective functioning of the Unified Command Structure in Assam. With most of the militant groups including ULFA (I) being marginalized, Assam is moving towards peace. Do we need The Unified Command Structure to continue? The answer is – ‘Yes’; with a renewed focus of maintaining peace, harmony and extending development to remote areas. Unified Command structure has served the State well and hence it will be prudent to let the system continue.

Conclusion

Keeping various current factors in mind, as well as the background of ULFA terrorists, it is imperative that the visualized changes in policy is incorporated at the earliest. This shall not only bring the warring factions of the ULFA(I) on the peace table but will also set the stage for other outfits to follow suit. The peace potential in the region will get a tremendous boost and new economic ventures would have substantial impact on the lifestyle of the local populace including those living in border areas. Thus, to ensure long lasting peace and a flourishing economy in the region, it is essential that outfits like ULFA (I) be brought to the peace table, if necessary by coercive force to the benefit of the masses.

¹⁶ Wasbir Hussain “Multi-force operations in counter terrorism A view from the Assam theatre” SATP, available at <http://www.satp.org/satporgrp/publication/faultlines/volume9/Article2.htm> , accessed on June 05, 2016

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