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Blending Force and Consent: India's Counter-Insurgency Dilemma in the Northeast

The internal and external reactions to the Indian Army's recent strike against suspected insurgents, in the wake of a deadly attack on soldiers in the state of Manipur, underscore the need for a harmonious blend of national security concerns and sensitivity towards the interests of the affected population.

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The Indian Army launched a surgical strike against insurgent groups in response to the killing of 18 soldiers in the state of Manipur. While the Army released a statement confirming the conduct of operations in the Indo-Myanmar border areas, two ministers of the Indian Government briefed the media about a “hot pursuit” that extended into the border region of Myanmar itself. While these Indian media reports do not confirm the territorial penetration of the pursuit, a statement from the President of Myanmar's Office refuted the story that the Indian military strike was carried out within inside the sovereign territory of Myanmar.

The operation, which followed what was described as one of the worst militant attacks in India in recent years, evoked adverse reactions in the country's northeast and among the

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South Asian neighbours, besides jeopardising the negotiation to end insurgency and violent protest in pockets of India's border regions.

Militants, suspected to belong to the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Khaplang), NSCN-K, ambushed a convoy of soldiers from the 6 Dogra Regiment in the Chandel district of Manipur bordering Myanmar. NSCN-K, a breakaway faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) group, with which the Indian Government is holding negotiations, is a recognised armed ethnic outfit fighting against India and Myanmar since the 1960s, seeking independence from both. In 2012, the group entered into a five-point ceasefire accord with the Myanmar Government, and only a few months ago revoked a 15-year truce with the Government of India. Analysts have suggested that this was the result of frustration over the lack of progress, and New Delhi's dismissive attitude towards the group which was left out of the talks between the Government of India and the NSCN (I-M)².

Over the last year or so, the Khaplang group has also collaborated with other rebel groups to form a coalition under the banner of the United Liberation Front of West South East Asia that includes the Paresh Barua faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa), besides a faction of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, and the Kuki Liberation Army (Jibon).³ These groups are widely believed to be based in camps on the Myanmar side of the border regions.

Stabilising the Border Regions

In 2003, India assisted the Royal Bhutan Army in launching an offensive called, Operation All Clear, to dismantle camps believed to have been used by militants who were active in India's northeast. And, in 2011 Bangladesh conducted a major crackdown on Indian rebel groups operating from within its border region.

India and Myanmar have also worked together to stabilise the restive border regions where irredentist movements carve out safe havens on both sides of the border, taking advantage of the dense forests and harsh terrain there. In 1995, a joint military operation - Operation Golden Bird - was launched along the Mizoram border following the signing of a

² <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/veteran-naga-general-recent-attacks-on-india-after-being-sidelined-by-new-delhi/article1-1358660.aspx>

³ <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/the-tortuous-road-to-naga-peace/article7319620.ece>

Memorandum of Understanding for the maintenance of peace and tranquillity in the border areas. Thirty eight rebels were killed while 118 were caught with weapons. But the operation was disrupted after Myanmar's military rulers pulled out of the joint operation to protest against the Indian Government's decision to confer on Aung Sang Suu Kyi, Myanmar's pro-democracy leader, the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding.⁴ Finally, India and Myanmar signed a landmark agreement on security cooperation in May last year, providing for coordinated patrolling and intelligence sharing.⁵

Soon after the latest anti-militant operation was conducted, the Indian Army released a carefully-crafted statement confirming the offensive in the India-Myanmar border region. This was, however, followed by assertions by two Indian Ministers that the operation involved "hot pursuit" into the territory of Myanmar and that this was a message to all other terror groups across the region. This was taken as a hint to the militant groups allegedly based in Pakistan.⁶

Reacting to these statements, the Office of the President of Myanmar said: "According to the information sent by Tatmadaw (Myanmar Army) battalions on the ground, we have learned that the military operation was performed on the Indian side at India-Myanmar border".⁷ Further, the Myanmar Foreign Ministry website carried an excerpt from its Constitution (Chapter 1, Article 41 & 42) which states that "no foreign troops shall be permitted to be deployed in the territory of the Union".⁸

The claim of an unprecedented unilateral action by the Indian Army drew sharp reactions from across the region, most notably from Pakistan. Federal Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan warned India against mistaking that it could do in Pakistan what it did in

⁴ 'Operations All Clear & Golden Bird: India's past campaigns on foreign soil', One India, 10 June 2015. <http://www.oneindia.com/india/operations-all-clear-and-golden-bird-indias-past-operations-on-foreign-soil-1773008.html>.

⁵ 'How MEA helped Army set stage for strike in Myanmar', *The Indian Express*, 11 June 2015. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/cross-border-operations-how-mea-helped-set-stage-for-strike/>

⁶ PM Modi ordered the 'hot pursuit' of terrorists behind Manipur ambush: Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, CNN-IBN, 10 June 2015. <http://www.ibnlive.com/news/india/pm-modi-ordered-the-hot-pursuit-of-terrorists-behind-manipur-ambush-rajyavardhan-singh-rathore-1004111.html>. And Myanmar Operation Will be a Lesson to Terror Groups: Prakash Javadekar, NDTV, 10 June 2015. <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/myanmar-operation-will-be-a-lesson-to-terror-groups-prakash-javadekar-770460>

⁷ 'Myanmar Says operation on militants was on Indian side of border', *The Indian Express*, 10 June 2015 <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/myanmar-denies-indias-claim-of-killing-rebels-inside-its-territory-afp/>.

⁸ 'Govt. plays down 'hot pursuit' claims', *The Hindu*, 12 June 2015. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/govt-plays-down-hot-pursuit-claims/article7306707.ece>

Myanmar. He added that “our armed forces are fully capable of responding to any foreign aggression, and Indian leaders should stop daydreaming”.⁹ Pakistani lawmakers also passed a resolution against what was termed a ‘vitriolic’ outburst by Indian politicians.¹⁰ Separately, an Indian military official was quoted by in a report as saying that the Myanmar operations could not be replicated on the border with Pakistan.¹¹

While the Chinese Foreign Ministry did not comment on the incident, scholars at several state-run think-tanks refuted any link between the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) of China and the insurgent groups, something bandied about in some Indian media reports.¹² Several commentators in India also noted that the success of an operation such as that conducted and of the future ones would depend on secrecy, and that details must not be revealed to score political points.¹³

Reaction in India’s northeast

Within the northeast, the triumphant tone of the Indian Army and the ministers was received with caution. For a large number of the population who have been affected by both insurgencies and the excesses of the Indian Army, such massive operations bring into sharp focus the contentious Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).¹⁴ The attack by the insurgent groups and the consequent strengthening of the military presence are seen as strengthening the case for the AFSPA precisely at a time when the campaigners against the Act had mounted intense appeals for its revocation.

⁹ ‘Pakistan is not Myanmar, will respond to foreign aggression, Nisar tells India’, *The Dawn*, 11 June 2015. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1187363>.

¹⁰ How statements on India's Myanmar strike made headlines in Pakistan, *Hindustan Times*, 12 June 2015. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pak-passes-resolution-condemning-hostile-statements-from-lesser-known-indian-politician/article1-1357713.aspx>

¹¹ ‘Govt. tones down rhetoric’, *The Hindu*, 12 June 2015’. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/govt-tones-down-rhetoric/article7307385.ece>

¹² ‘After Myanmar strike, China denies PLA links with Manipur attackers’, *The Indian Express*, 10 June 2015. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/china-denies-pla-links-with-manipur-attackers/>

¹³ ‘Govt. tones down rhetoric’, *The Hindu*, 12 June 2015’. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/govt-tones-down-rhetoric/article7307385.ece>

¹⁴ See, for example, linking of the attacks and the role of the AFSPA by Binalakshmi Nephram, an activist from Manipur: ‘Roots of Manipur insurgency’, *DNA*, 10 June 2015. <http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-roots-of-manipur-insurgency-2094038>.

Social media also saw a spike in the dissemination of an article titled, *Air attacks in Mizoram, 1966 - our dirty, little secret*.¹⁵ This has heightened public interest in the provisions of the AFSPA, its impact, and India's 'heavy use of military might' on its own citizens.

As for the latest operation, Manipur's Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh told media persons that "the State government is in the dark about the ground reality of the surgical operation conducted in the aftermath of the Chandel ambush, and as such it is hard to comment on the issue".¹⁶ Nagaland's Chief Minister T R Zeliang said that the state government was not consulted before the abrogation of the ceasefire. While the ambush by the militants was condemned, it was also suggested that the counter-attack by the Indian Army could derail the peace process.

If New Delhi's intention was to send a strong signal to the rebel groups with bases outside India's borders, it succeeded in displaying the political will to act. However, this has come about at a time when India is reaching out to its South Asian neighbours to assure them of its benign rise to power. So, one might ask, where was the need to open a new Pandora's Box of diplomatic challenges and to reassure India's neighbours, all over again.

A close look at the reactions within the Northeast region reveals popular circumspection in supporting the Indian Army while there has been no condoning of the militant attacks either. This episode brings to the fore the type of tightrope-walk that New Delhi will need to do to allay concerns in India's northeast and in the South Asian region while dealing sensitively with what is already a complex situation. Perhaps, a mixed strategy, conflating strategic use of force and meticulous negotiation with the stake-holders would yield optimum results in the long run. A strategy combining continuous, effective negotiation and communication rather than covert, ad hoc, sporadic action is the best way forward for India.

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¹⁵ Air attacks in Mizoram, 1966 - our dirty, little secret, *The Economic Times*, 19 February 2013. http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-02-19/news/37179679_1_mna-chhinga-veng-air-force

¹⁶ 'State in the dark: CM Ibobi' Kangla Online/ Imphal Free Press. 11 June 2015. <http://kanglaonline.com/2015/06/state-in-the-dark-cm-ibobi/>