Naga Peace Talks

Part of: GS-III- Internal security NE-NAGALIM (PT-MAINS-PERSONALITY TEST)

Four years after the government inked the Naga peace accord in 2015, the Centre has now said that the process had almost concluded, despite the fact that the talks had hit a roadblock in its final stages.

Why is it being delayed?

It is mainly because of unrealistic demands. NSCN I-M has issued statements in the past claiming that it wanted a separate Constitution, flag and integration of all contiguous Naga-inhabited areas under Nagalim (Greater Nagaland).

Government of India’s stand:

A mutually agreed draft comprehensive settlement, including all the substantive issues and competencies, is ready for inking the final agreement. Respecting the Naga people’s wishes, the Government of India is determined to conclude the peace process without delay.

How old is the Naga political issue?

Pre- independence:

1. The British annexed Assam in 1826, and in 1881, the Naga Hills too became part of British India. The first sign of Naga resistance was seen in the formation of the Naga Club in 1918, which told the Simon Commission in 1929 “to leave us alone to determine for ourselves as in ancient times”.
2. In 1946 came the Naga National Council (NNC), which declared Nagaland an independent state on August 14, 1947.
3. The NNC resolved to establish a “sovereign Naga state” and conducted a “referendum” in 1951, in which “99 per cent” supported an “independent” Nagaland.

What are the Naga peace talks?

- The talks seek to settle disputes that date back to colonial rule.
The Nagas are not a single tribe, but an ethnic community that comprises several tribes who live in the state of Nagaland and its neighbourhood. One key demand of Naga groups has been a Greater Nagalim that would cover not only the state of Nagaland but parts of neighbouring states, and even of Myanmar.

Rise of Naga nationalism

- The British had annexed Assam in 1826, in which they subsequently created the Naga Hills district and went on to extend its boundaries.
- The assertion of Naga nationalism, which began during British rule, has continued after Independence, and even after Nagaland became a state.
- Along the way, the unresolved issues gave rise to decades of insurgency that claimed thousands of lives, including of civilians.

How has the Naga assertion played out historically?

- The earliest sign of Naga resistance dates back to 1918, with the formation of the Naga Club.
- In 1929, the 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.
- The referendum got overwhelming majority in support of an independent Naga state.
- By the early 1950s, the NNC had taken up arms and gone underground.
- The NNC split in 1975, the breakaway group being the NSCN, which split further in later years, most prominently into the NSCN(I-M) and NSCN (Khaplang) in 1988.

And how have the peace talks played out in recent years?

Before the ongoing talks, which followed a framework agreement in 2015, there were two other agreements between Naga groups and the Centre.

1975:

- A peace accord was signed in Shillong in which the NNC leadership agreed to give up arms.
- Several NNC leaders, including Isak Chishi Swu, Thuingaleng Muivah and S S Khaplang refused to accept the agreement and broke away to form the NSCN.
- In 1988 came another split, with Khaplang breaking away to form the NSCN(K) while Isak and Muivah headed the NSCN(I-M).

1997:
The NSCN(I-M) signed a ceasefire agreement with the government in 1997, preceded by rounds of talks since 1995. The key agreement was that there would be no counter-insurgency offensive against the NSCN(I-M), who in turn would not attack Indian forces. The NSCN(I-M) had then announced to “every citizen of Nagalim wherever they may be”, that a ceasefire agreement was entered into between India and the outfit to bring about a lasting political solution.

2015:

- In August that year, the Centre signed a framework agreement with the NSCN(I-M).
- PM Modi described it as a “historic agreement” towards settling the “oldest insurgency” in India. This set the stage for the ongoing peace talks.
- In 2017, six other Naga armed outfits under the banned of the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs) joined the talks.

What was in the framework agreement?

- The government has not yet spelt out the details in public.
- Following the agreement, the government had said in a press statement: “The Government of India recognised the unique history, culture and position of the Nagas and their sentiments and aspirations.
- The NSCN understood and appreciated the Indian political system and governance.
- On the other hand, the NSCN(I-M) issued a statement earlier this year which said that Nagaland State does and will not represent the national decision of the Naga people.
- The statement was in opposition the proposal for a Register of Indigenous Inhabitants of Nagaland (RIIN) in the state of Nagaland.

Where does the territorial demand currently stand?

- The accord being finalised “does not change the boundary of states; provides autonomous Naga territorial councils for Arunachal and Manipur; a common cultural body for Nagas across states.
- It provides for specific institutions for state’s development, integration and rehabilitation of non-state Naga militia and the removal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.
- The map of Greater Nagalim in the NSCN(IM) vision, on the other hand, covers a 1,20,000 sq km sprawl across the Northeast and Myanmar — the area of Nagaland state itself is only 16,527 sq km, a fraction of this vision.
- Amid the anxiety this has caused among citizens in neighbouring states, state governments have assured them that their respective states’ territorial
integrity would not be compromised.

What are the other issues?

- The government and the NSCN(I-M) have failed to agree on issues relating to a separate Naga flag and a constitution.
- In its latest statement, the NSCN(I-M) has said it will not budge from the demand for the flag and the constitution — and that it is looking for a lasting solution.
- However the NSCN(I-M) has adopted a procrastinating attitude to delay the settlement raising the contentious symbolic issues of separate Naga national flag and constitution.

Where could the disagreement lead to?

- The statement from the Governor’s office has given rise to speculation that the government is ready to sign a final peace agreement with other groups without the NSCN(I-M), the largest group.
- Civil society groups in Nagaland are divided in their opinion.
- Some have said the talks should be wrapped up with whatever is offered now and keep other issues open for later negotiations.
- Others believe all issues should be settled and the NSCN(I-M) should be on board, even if it takes longer than the deadline.