

## **Democratization, Conflict and ‘Act East’ Policy: Challenges to Mediate Non-State Armed Actors of Northeast India in Southeast Asia**

*Athikho Kaisii<sup>1</sup>*

**ABSTRACT—**: Non-state actor in Northeast India is a pre-independence phenomenon, and with the exception of Assam, the seed of institutionalizing violence was sown prior to the formation of the states. In course of time non-state actor has turned into non-state armed actor. Experience has proved that the formation of states as the process of democratization is yet to soothe the conflict in the region. With this salient reality, “Act East” seen as a path-breaking policy with a multi-prong strategy aiming to overhaul the image of the Northeast through rebuilding India’s historical ties with Southeast Asia, needs to embed a viable action-oriented democratic mechanism to mitigate the conflict. This paper aims to address how an ambitious approach to “Act East” is crafting a conducive milieu to alleviate the issue of the non-state armed actors in the region.

**Keywords :** Action-oriented, alternative administration, democratic mechanism, Southeast Asia

---

<sup>1</sup> **Athikho Kaisii** is currently an Assistant Professor in the Centre for Culture, Media & Governance, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

## **Introduction: Situating the Context**

With the consolidation of India's territory in the wake of British withdrawal in 1947, Northeast India as a distinct geographical region became salient in Southeast Asia. Mostly shared with and surrounded by international borders, the region became territorially marginalized and was left connected with mainland India by just a narrow strip of landmass popularly known as "Siliguri Corridor". Accordingly, the region that served as India's gateway to Southeast Asia was altered, and its historical ties with it redefined. Henceforth, the region has begun to focus habitually on the perspective of security, and is often referred to as a "dark side" of the country.

In the hope to provide a strategic approach in the Northeast, the "Look East" policy was initiated during the regime of P.V Narashimha Rao (1991-92). Since then, successive governments have continued to build its momentum. Indeed, to fortify the policy. Within months of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led NDA (National Democratic Alliance) coming to power after the successful 16th parliamentary general election, Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, in his maiden speech at the 12th ASEAN-India summit held in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar on 12th November, 2014, announced the transition of the policy from "Look East" to "Act East" (Chairman's Statement, 2014). It is regarded as a path-breaking policy with multi-dimensions that aims to revamp the image of Northeast through rebuilding India's historical ties with Southeast Asia. The policy was summed up as a "programme related to restoring the pre-Independence connectivity, which the North East believes was key to its prosperous past" (Bose 2019, 336). Taking the policy to a new height with concrete objectives is commendable, which is a clear indication of a shifting approach towards the Northeast in the post-Independence India. Besides being geographically peripheral, the Northeast is a distinct diverse cultural region in which social taste, culture and ways of life are different from mainland Indians. Culturally, the people of the region are closer to Southeast Asia, for which the "Act East" policy is an ideal approach that is intended for all-round development.

Furthermore, the objectives of the transition to “Act East” are linked with greater geographical scope of the policy and its strategic depth (Palit2016, 83) through an expanded definition of “East” to include Japan, South Korea and Australia (Lee 2015, 68).

## **Problems, Objectives and Methodology**

The past democratization processes and policies that tried to refurbish the region’s image had often ended up in a blame game as “security-centric” became the dominant strategy for the region. Subsequently, the nature and process of democratization has taken its processes as a justified approach in appropriating violence in the state itself. In due course of time, the existing conflict subliminally gave birth to one of the longest-running insurgency movements in Southeast Asia, in the form of the Naga movement. This was followed by Mizo rebellion in 1966.<sup>2</sup> Proliferation of armed conflicts include 1970’s conflicts in Assam<sup>3</sup> and Tripura<sup>4</sup>, the 1980’s conflicts in Manipur followed by Meghalaya in the 1990’s. Although in Arunachal Pradesh the state’s non-state actor is relatively inactive, Naga militants are active in the districts of Changlang, Lohit and Tirap. Thus, with the exception of Sikkim, “conflict” becomes a paradigm to describe the region leading to a strain between the state and the people.

Nonetheless, the Northeast is not at all homogeneous, but

---

2 With the signing of Mizo Accord in 1985 between the Mizo National Front and the Government of India, which led to the formation of statehood, Mizoram has relatively become peaceful.

3 Unabated migrants from mainland India and influx of Bengali-speaking Muslims from across the border coupled with the sense of bitter experience in the wake of India’s withdrawal in India-China War of 1962 had culminated in the rise of conflict movement in Assam.

4 The growth of insurgency in Tripura is unique in a sense this is the state in India where the indigenous tribal people have been reduced to a minority in their own land.

comprises eight states, inhabited by different communities and tribes, speaking various languages and following different cultural practices and religious beliefs. On account of a huge diversity and complex problems, intra-state conflict is intricate, partly as a result of colonial baggage. For instance, ongoing inter-state boundary disputes, the Naga imbroglio and the current turmoil in Manipur are largely related to colonial legacy. Understanding the complex problems in the region, the focus of the paper will be limited to Manipur and Nagaland. The paper attempts to address concerns like why the binary forces of the state actor and the non-state armed actors continue even after the formation of states? In what way “Act East” is considered as a milestone democratic policy and can mend the conflict situation? In the midst of the institutionalization of violence how “Act East” policy as an ingenious democratic process can restore democratic space? To effectively materialize the grand objectives of “Act East”, it is imperative to embed a constructive action-oriented conflict management mechanism within the policy to mitigate conflict in the region. This study is based on qualitative methods of narrative, observation and critical review.

### **Conceptual Clarification: Non-State Armed Actors**

The term non-state armed actor has been appropriated from Scott’s formulation of a non-state space, where he has elaborated it in some of his well-known works. State spaces according to him are where:

The subject population was settled rather densely in quasi-permanent communities, producing a surplus of grain (usually of wet-rice) and labour which was relatively easily appropriated by the state.

But in non-state spaces:

The population was sparsely settled, typically practiced slash-and-burn or shifting cultivation, maintained

a more mixed economy (including, for example polyculture on reliance on forest products), and highly mobile, thereby severely limiting the possibilities for reliable state appropriation (Scott 1998,186).

Something similar to that of Scott's proposition was a "stateless society", a theory propounded by Clastres. In his famous work *State Against the Society*, he argues that "primitive societies are societies without a State" (1989, 159). But he does not mean to say that the primitive societies are bereft of a political dimension. The difference is that "the thing whose very absence defines primitive society, hierarchical authority, the power relation, the subjugation of men—in a word, the state" (1989, 203). In a "stateless society", the members are relatively equal and follow communitarian principles where they are almost devoid of the notion of masters and slaves.

The framework of Scott's non-state spaces to state spaces involves imposing order on societies that will be controlled through transforming from "illegibility" to "legibility". As Scott writes, "Legibility is a condition of manipulation. Any substantial state intervention in society ... requires the invention of units that are visible. The units in question might be citizens, villages, trees, fields, houses, or people grouped according to age, depending on the type of intervention. Whatever the units being manipulated, they must be organized in a manner that permits them to be identified, observed, recorded, counted, aggregated, and monitored" so that the state can possibly appropriate the best out of it (1998, 183). The state will attempt to maximize the appropriability of production and labour in designing state spaces in order to minimize the cost of governing the area. Popular theory and conjecture over times, propagate that such an attempt has been undertaken in the hope of "civilizing the uncivilized" through institutionalization of democratic institutions as an agent of governance. Non-state spaces have not only been considered primitive, uncivilized and weak but also undemocratic, not conducive for healthy governance.

Governance is considered difficult in the absence of minimal functional democracy. Democracy is believed to be *par excellence* to any other regime. The only way to attain democratic governance is thus to create and institutionalize democratic institutions. Accordingly, the ultimate purpose of transforming non-state space into a state space is for better administration (from the state's perspective), which results in good governance. Hence, with democratized zeal the non-state spaces have gradually been transformed into state spaces across the world. Transforming non-state spaces into state spaces in turn has taken on different forms such as colonialism, imperialism, decolonization and so forth. To contextualize the paper under study, as a part of a colonialism process, the British had formerly annexed Northeast India in Southeast Asia in 1826.<sup>5</sup> Until then not much was known about the region which constituted in Scott's "Zomia" construction of non-state spaces (2009). Prior to the colonial domination, whatever governing systems existed in the region was relatively limited to ethnic and community-based, where the locals themselves ruled. In Northeast, the conversion of non-state spaces to state spaces through the process of democratization and centralization has institutionalized the non-state armed actors. In general, non-state armed groups referred to those groups that were "armed and used force to achieve their objectives and are not under state control" (ICHRP 1999, 5).

### **Democratization and Conflict: Brief Sketch**

Irrespective of the consequences, in any violence related problems, democratic strategy has been advocated to mitigate the situation. Yet, with the exception of the relatively stable nations with strong and long tradition of democratic practice, democ-

5 Though British interest in the North East Frontier (Northeast India) particularly, Assam had commenced in the seventeen sixties, intensity has increased with the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo.

ratization is often mired with violence. Thus, although democratization is considered as an important democratic approach to mitigate conflict, not every scholar is enthusiastic about the idea that it can eventually alleviate the risk of it. Among others for instance, Mansfield et.al (1995) argued that democratization can be a violent process especially in the transitional stage, as democracy doesn't become mature overnight. The initial phase of democratization can be a potential factor for conflict, and Snyder (2000) suggests two conditions that would favour such a possibility. Firstly, political elites would exploit the situation for their own ends, and secondly, the central government often tacitly allows the political elites to follow a fragmentation approach. Such a situation will then allow the elite political actors (state actors) to manipulate the dividend of democratization for their own ends. Indeed, in such a transitory situation, when "actors find it difficult to know what their interests are, who their supporters will be, and which groups will be their allies or opponents" (Karl 1990, 6), conflict is not ruled out.

It is a situation as Savun et al. noted, "the political elites have difficulty in trusting each other's intentions and promises" (2011, 234) thereby hindering peaceful transitions. Interestingly, some scholars even suggest that "the relationship between conflict and democratization remains unclear and resembles the ancient dilemma about the chicken and the egg" (Mirimanova 1997, 87). Evidently, "the transitions to democracy have occurred under different scenarios, with peaceful transitions in some, and with transitions accompanied by openly violent social conflicts in other case" (Cervellati et al. 2011, 1). Democratic transition is a crucial stage that may eventually lead towards the process of democratization, but its process is not always free from conflict, though it is expected to create a condition of peaceful democratic governance.

More importantly, how the transitional period has led to the growth of democratic institutions will have persistent effects in its democratic practices and functioning. As Rakner et al. point out:

Democratization often entails diffusing power more evenly across a greater number of actors both within and outside government, whilst strengthening state capacity may call for greater centralization of power and autonomy in the decision-making process. State-building requires, above all, the strengthening of state institutions and the consolidation/centralization of state power, while democracy promotion calls for the substantial diffusion and redistribution of state power. Thus, while the good governance agenda tends to assume that ‘all good things go together’, some tensions are glossed over (2007, 2).

This is because democratization means that the state distributes power, but for it to do so needs to acquire the power first. When the process itself is at times self-contradictory, a certain amount of conflict is bound to happen, which can act as a catalyst that could intensify the tension between state actors and non-state armed actors. Democratization processes as a short-term conflict-inducing phenomenon can be protracted “is when democratization catalyzes widespread social or political violence—either by incumbent governments seeking to retain power by force, or among clashing social forces vying for influence or control” (IIDEA 2006, 9). When an appropriate and systematic device is not in place to deal with the post-democratizing conflict, but allows the same to perpetuate, democratization and conflict can operate in parallel. To make the democratizing process truly a democratic, it is imperative to comprehend the issue from all angles while devolving the process of democratization so that its own consequences will encompass measures to contain conflict.

In Northeast India, democratization in the form of the creation of state allows the institutionalization of violence to continue. Democratization in the region happened along with excessive presence of security forces to assist the state. When democratization in the form of the formation of state was not functioning as expected, perpetuating or even abating violence was alleged to deploy through centrally backed state leaders. In this

regard, it is not out of place to note that as a counter-insurgency measure, violent culture has been institutionalized in the form of *AFSPA* (Armed Forces [Special Powers] Act, 1958) prior to the formation of states, with the exception of Assam. However, to address the Act was not made as a part of the democratic exercise that led to the creation of states. In a way, violence is embedded within the democratization process as the newly created states has not been empowered to address the Act. Whatever the states have recommended on the Act, the ultimate authority to repeal the Act has rested with the Central government.

On the issue of the Naga movement, according to Vaniak “the Indian government’s carrot and stick policy of pouring in development funds, consolidating a Naga elite and carrying out sustained and brutal repression has been largely successful in reducing the political aspirations of more and more Nagas from independence to autonomy and centre-sponsored development within the Indian Union” (1988, 2282). The states were created as a means to resolve the conflict but when the causes of the conflict are not properly diagnosed and pragmatically dealt with, conflict perpetuates. With the proliferation of coercive apparatus of the state, Mathur notes that “failures of legitimization of state power and inability to resolve political conflicts do not appear to be consequences of poor economic performance alone. They lie at the very root of the historical and social processes of state and nation building” (1992, 349). After years of confrontation, the Government of India and NSCN (IM) entered into a ceasefire in August 2007, which itself was an acknowledgement that the issue of non-state armed actors is yet to be resolved with the creation of Nagaland and Manipur states. As a reflection of the inadequacy of the formation of Nagaland to create peace, Chief Minister of Nagaland, Neiphiu Rio asserted that “unless there is a settlement, (unless) there is solution, there is no perfect peace in our land and artificial peace is there and there is no peace of mind” (Morung Express, 15 February, 2022).

## **Democratization, Conflict and Fragmentation**

In Northeast India, before the formation of states as a democratization process, there was a non-state actor within the realm of non-state spaces. Well before the formation Nagaland and Manipur as states, the Naga Club as a non-state actor had stated its aspiration to the visiting colonial's Commission under the chairmanship of John Simon with Clement Attlee and E. Cadogan in Kohima on 10<sup>th</sup>January 1929 (Franke, 2009) that their territory should not be included within the proposed territorial reorganization. Though the submission came to naught, it set the ball rolling of non-state armed actors in the region. The Naga National Council (NNC), formed in 1946, which was an outcome of the Naga Hills District Tribal Council constituted in 1945 by the then Deputy Commissioner, Kohima C R Pawsey, carried forward the legacy of the Naga Club. NNC as a non-state actor was turned into an armed group in 1955 with the failure to implement the 9-Point Agreement of June 1947, and after declining to participate in the 1952 election.

As compared to other states in the region, the formation of Nagaland and Manipur had altogether a different tale. In essence, Nagaland is an outcome of the Naga movement, and it was created through an agreement, and not based on the State Reorganization Act. It was instituted basically out of a political exigency. However, an agreement that led to the formation of Nagaland was not an agreement between the non-state armed actors (meaning NNC) and the Government of India. Instead, the Naga People's Convention (NPC), formed in 1957, whose actual purpose was to act as the facilitator between the NNC and the Government of India, turned out to be the negotiator and final arbiter when Nagaland was formed. By not making the leaders of the NNC a stakeholder in the agreement, they continue to operate as the non-state armed actors. The failure to comprehend the Naga movement that spread across the sub-region of India but limited the formation of Nagaland to the recommendation of NPC 16 points alone, resulted in continuation of non-state armed actors. With this development, the Na-

gas have been fragmented into followers of NPC who eventually played the role of state actors and those who have continued their allegiance with the NNC as non-state actors. Such fragmentation has changed the landscape of conflict from between the Nagas and the Government of India to within and among the Nagas. Besides, those excluded sections of the Nagas from Nagaland are kept as a perpetual minority in other states thereby making them dependent on the majority community for their overall socio-economic and political development. In turn, the fragmentation strategy of the Nagas has propelled the idea that the Nagas meant those who inhabited Nagaland, and the rest have joined as a part of expansionist policy.

The birth and growth of the factional fighting in the Naga movement is thus not free from the role of the state actors (Kumar, 2007, 27). Though the intensity of factional killing has been reduced significantly, fragmentation within the Nagas proliferated, both at the level of non-state armed groups and civil society. In the first cease-fire (1964), there was only one single non-state armed actor (the NNC), but in the 1997 cease-fire, though it covered the Naga Socialist Council of Nagalim-Isak Muivah (NSCN-IM) faction, there were other non-state armed groups that the Government of India had to deal with. The policy of inclusive solution in an eventual settlement by taking all the factions onboard is the product of factionalism. The then Government of India's Interlocutor to Naga peace-talks, R.N Ravi's expressed views that "there will be only one peace process and one agreement for the Nagas" is not different (Nagaland Post, 2017). Some of the recent fragmentations have happened right at the door of peace-talks, which is seen as a process of democratization seeking for a lasting solution. When a cease-fire was signed in 1997 between the NSCN-IM and the Government of India other than factions of NNC and NSCN-K, there were no other factions. Today, besides those groups who are outside the purview of the peace-talks, those engaging in the talks are broadly divided into NSCN-IM and 7 NNPGs (Naga National Political Groups). Recently, the NSCN-K faction led by Niki Sumi has announced a cease-fire, as the organization

has resolved to strengthen and support the peace process (Saha, 2020). Furthermore, in November 2021 within the 7 NNPGs, the NSCN (R) was split into two different groups and the newly formed faction declared a “unilateral ceasefire” with the Government of India. On December 31, 2023, again three Naga Political Groups (NPGs)– NSCN/GPRN (Akato), Z Royim-led NNC (Parent Body), and Khango-led NSCN (K)– decided to have a “joint political venture” and engage in political talks with Government of India.

At the level of civil society with some apex bodies such as Naga Hoho, Naga Students’ Federation (NSF), Naga Mothers’ Association (NMA) from some years back, today, Naga society is mired with many organizations like Nagaland Tribes Council (NTC), 14 Tribal Hohos, CNTC (Central Nagaland Tribal Council), etc. Of course, there are other exclusive Naga bodies such as United Naga Council (UNC), All Naga Students’ Association, Manipur (ANSAM), etc. in Manipur and in other states also but all these organizations have been in existence prior to the cease-fire. The Nagas in different states have every right to form their own organizations but it shouldn’t weigh down the larger interest and hinder the functions of the apex organizations. Instead, different organizations can work in the wings to strengthen the apex organizations. As a consequent of the growing number of civil society groups that jeopardized the function of the apex bodies, R.N Ravi, Centre’s Interlocutor to Naga peace-talks was alleged to have divided the Naga society into “primary stakeholders” and “secondary stakeholders” (The Northeast Today, 2019). There is an apprehension that the democratization process of inclusiveness is a contrivance to divide and dictate to the Nagas.

At this fragile moment there is a fear that if an evolving trend is not embarked upon sensibly, it may lead to further fragmentation of the Nagas while rolling a piecemeal solution, of which, the Nagas have had a bitter experience beginning with the Akbar Hydari Agreement or the 9 Point Agreement 1947, the 16 Point Agreement, 1963 to the Shillong Accord, 1975. In

what way “Act East”, is seen as a people-oriented policy that aims to overhaul the image of the region, will cope with such a crucial issue, has been keenly watched. The policy as India’s transforming foreign policy to re-engage Southeast Asia (Bajpayee 2017) will be inadequate to meet its goal without taking care of the home front. In fact, “Look/Act East” is India’s strategic foreign policy in the era of post “cold war” and growing emerging globalized world, from the domestic dimension, it aims at overcoming the region from its handicap of geographical isolation while lagging behind the rest of India in development, and suffers from widespread insurgency movements (Sikir, 2009, 136). To bring to a logical conclusion with mutually acceptable terms of the Naga issue will certainly be a remarkable achievement of the “Act East”. Not to mention the people in Northeast India but the neighbouring countries are also watching the Naga peace-talks, which can form a decisive part of the “Act East” policy. Reaching an amicable solution with the Naga issue will be indubitably a roadmap towards normalcy in the region, and to rebuild India’s ties with Southeast Asia.

When it comes to Manipur, the state was created by combining both the valley and the hills of the region, irrespective of the people’s aspirations. Such an arrangement was in sheer contradiction with the formation of other hill states like Meghalaya and Mizoram, since these states were carved out of Assam as per the wishes of the hill people, although their formation had its own history of struggle, not at all free from conflict. Tensions between the people of the hills and the valley have manifested in various forms since the formation of state in Manipur. The latest was on May 3, 2023, in which the people in the hills called for a “tribal solidarity march” in protest against the demand of the Meiteis in the valley for a scheduled tribe (ST). To become a scheduled tribe is based on certain specific criteria, and whether the Meiteis have met those parameters is not the focus of the paper. Suffice to now at this juncture be that the tension remains fragile and abound with mistrust between the people from the hills and the valley. The “march” and counter-bandh have resulted in a war- like situation losing more than 180 precious

lives and property worth rupees thousands of crores destroyed, and the situation is still far from over. On account of the current ethnic conflict there is almost total separation between the Kuki-Zo of the hills and Mete is in the valley. Even after eight months of turmoil in the state no serious discussion was held either in the State Assembly nor in the Union Parliament. Record show that in the ongoing ethnic clashes around 4800 weapons were looted in various police stations and armories. Lt Gen Rana Pratap Kalita, the then Eastern Army Commander commented that the turmoil in the state is a “political problem” and until the looted weapons are recovered, sporadic violence will continue (The New Indian Express, 21 November,2023).Something “Act East” policy needs to take into account to bring its desired goal to fruition is to manage the complex relationship between the hills and the valley people with determined political will. Without a suitable pragmatic democratic mechanism to address the protracted conflict between the valley and the hills, the violent situation can impair the objective of the policy.

In Manipur, be it social, economic, or political, there is hardly any mutual shared and common interest between the hills and the valley people, save for formation of a state that has brought them together in one administrative unit. Such a sheer marriage of convenience, which was done essentially for political exigency, does not work at the level of people to people. Democratization, in the form of Manipur state, further heightened the social divide and fragmentation between the hills and the valley people. The creation of state has resulted in legitimizing the hegemonic domination of the Meiteis. It leads to further intensification of the tension between the state actors and the non-state armedactors, who, to safeguard each ethnic community’s interest, have nurtured their own armed groups.

### **Act East Policy: Challenges to Mitigate Conflict**

It is a hard fact that Northeast India has been infested with

various armed rebel movements, with demand, ranging from autonomy, homeland to self-rule, making the region violence ridden. Nonetheless, for India to play on a level field as a global player through building a strategic tie with her Southeast Asian neighbours, internal disturbance should not derail its prospect. To rebuild an age-old historical connection with her Southeast Asian neighbours will then require giving a due importance to the region. And for any people oriented pragmatic approach towards healing the region, it would be costly to overlook the demand of the people within the Indian federal system.

Since the formation of Nagaland and Manipur states lack adequate and systematic democratic devices to deal with the non-state armed groups, the democratization process and conflict operate in parallel. The "Act East" policy has yet to find strategies to overcome this deadlock, despite all its appreciations, and is considered as a people-centric milestone approach. Other than generating a certain amount of academic interest, coupled with the media hype, for the locals who have been living under the spectacle of violence for all these years, not much has changed at ground zero. The Government of India, through its Ministry of Development of Northeast region (DoNER) is trying hard to connect the region with the rest of the country. It has been viewed that the Modi government has taken path-breaking decisions for the development of the Northeast through DoNER. However, by focusing on economic development and connectivity alone, and lacking acknowledgement of the distinct culture and ways of life with democratic constitutional protections, "Act East" will be found wanting to change the image of the region; to "mainstream" the region, upholding cultural diversity is imperative. Besides economic and connectivity strategy, DoNER in tandem with "Act East" needs to formalize a democratic mechanism that will uphold the distinctive cultural aspects of the region.

When the symptom of conflict is well entrenched within a democratization process that led to the formation of states, there is a need to revisit the effectiveness of the states as a means to conciliate non-state armed actors. Given the condition that the

democratization mechanism through the formation of state is unable to neutralize the non-state armed actors, “Act East” policy needs to evolve a suitable alternative democratic mechanism to mitigate the conflict. A solution could be to develop an alternative structure of democratic administration. Every complex issue requires a unique model to be solved. To bring about an alternative administrative system of governance, an option that can be explored, is a state within a state administration. Without upsetting the territorial boundary, as territory has emerged as a bone of contention, particularly in the state of Manipur, devolution of powers through dual systems of governance directly financed and monitored by the Central government suitable to the federal principle of India can be considered.

The centrality of territory is obvious in a state, as the state cannot be created out of a vacuum. At the same time, it is the people who own the territory and not the people who belong to the territory. Territory and land belong to the people. Although no state's territorial boundary is so sacrosanct that it cannot be touched, such an approach is highly emotionally charged at the moment. Unconventional deterritorialized alternative administrative systems of a state within a state can be considered. An “out of box” approach of the devolution of powers mechanism, in which the community who own the territory is made to control the governing system, may help to mediate the situation. Democratic structure of deterritorialized administration and a state within a state mechanism can somehow deal with the competing and contrasting concepts of territorial integration and territorial integrity.

Territory cannot be recreated. It is fixed and immovable, yet the boundary can be reorganized. So, also, institutions, organizations and legislations can be modified and deconstructed depending on the situation. Based on nature, function and requirement, the structure of administration can transcend territories. In today's world, every independent nation-state is bound by various multilateral organizations and legislations beyond its territory to make it functional. Deterritorialized administration

and a state within a state mechanism will not only help to contain the non-state armed actors but also can facilitate the normalization of the situation in the region. Such an alternative approach of conflict management will be a viable democratic mechanism to curb the movements of the non-state armed groups, which are running parallel '**governments**' to **formal** governments.

Moreover, the existence of the non-state armed groups cannot be seen in isolation of ethnic tension, which was manifest even before the creation of states, particularly, in Manipur and Nagaland. Since non-state armed groups have been nurtured by the respective ethnic communities, various stakeholders ought to express their views. The government as a dominant player through the "Act East" policy may demonstrate its determined dynamic role to bring together different conflicting ethnic groups to a common platform. Likewise, it is imperative to have sustained and healthy communication at the level of people to evolve an atmosphere of mutual respect. No confrontation can change an inherent neighbourhood and co-existence. However, when the perpetuation of territorial *statusquism* is one of the legitimate reasons for continuation of non-state armed actors, it is expected that all the stakeholders spell out the options to redeem the conflict situation. Without exploring the options but just beating the drum of the *status quo* will be as good as stimulating the conflict.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis has unfolded that non-state armed actors in Southeast Asia of Northeast India is a pre-state issue and the formation of states as means of democratization has been unable to curb their activities. The astringent consequence of democratization is essentially due to a top-down approach, since the democratic arrangement that led to the formation of states does not address the issue of institutionalized violence. So, the democratic states continue to function in a well militarized environ-

ment, where large scale deployment of security forces is considered as a necessity to contain the non-state armed actors. Hence, in the wake of the compelling contemporary realities, along with the government's commitment to bring about a facelift of the Northeast through the "Act East" policy, it is appropriate that a sincere alternative democratic system of governance needs to be considered. To prevent the region from deteriorating and to make the "Act East" policy truly people centric, the government needs to muster political will to come out with an alternative system of democratic governance. In this regard, the Naga resistance movement being the forefront of the non-state armed actor movements in the region, reaching a mutually agreeable solution, with flexibility of mind, for peaceful co-existence with it will have far reaching consequences. The conclusion of the ongoing Naga peace talk will surely provide an opportunity to revisit the process of democratization in the region, which would be a milestone achievement of the "Act East" policy.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by author

## References

Bajpayee, Chietigj. 2017. "Dephasing India's Look East/Act East Policy." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39 (2):348-372.

Bose, PratimRanjan. 2019. "Connectivity is no Panacea for an Unprepared Northeast India." *Strategic Analysis* 43: 335-342.

Cervellati, Matteo and Sunde, Uwe. 2014. "Civil Conflict, Democratization, and Growth: Violent Democratization as Critical Juncture." *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 116(2): 482-505.

Chairman's Statement of the 12th ASEAN -India Summit (12 November 2014), Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar. Accessed August 5, 2021. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/25th-Chairman-Statement-ASEAN-India-Summit.pdf>

Clastres, Pierre. 1989. *State against the Society: Essays in Social Anthropology*. New York: Zone Books.

Franke, Marcus. 2009. *War and Nationalism in South Asia: The Indian State and the Nagas*. New York:Routledge

International Council on Human Rights Policy (ICHRP). 1999. *Ends and Means: Human Rights Approaches to Armed Groups*, Geneva.

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IIDEA). 2006. *Democracy, Conflict and Human Security-Policy Summary: Key Findings and Recommendations*, Stockholm, Sweden.

Karl, Terry Lynn. 1990. "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America." *Comparative Politics* 23 (1):1-21.

Kumar, B. B. 2007. *Problems of Ethnicity in the North-East India*.

New Delhi: Concept Publishing.

Lee, Lavina. 2015. "India as a Nation of Consequence in Asia: The Potential and Limitations of India's 'Act East' Policy." *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 29(2): 67-104.

Mansfield, Edward. D. and Snyder, Jack. 1995. "Democratization and the Danger of War." *International Security* 20 (1): 5-38.

Mathur, Kuldeep. 1992. "The State and the Use of Coercive Power in India." *Asian Survey* 32 (4): 337-349.

Mirimanova, Natalla. 1997. "Democratization and Conflicts in Russia and the Newly Independent States." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 552(1): 86-97.

Morung Express. 2022. "No peace unless there is solution: Neiphiu Rio." 15 February. Accessed February 21, 2022. <https://morungexpress.com/no-peace-unless-there-is-solution-neiphiu-rio>

Nagaland Post. 2017. *Centre May Soon Invite NNPGs for Talks: R.N Ravi*, 5 September. Accessed May 15, 2023. <https://nagalandpost.com/index.php/centre-may-soon-invite-nnpgs-for-talks-rn-ravi>

Palit, Amitendu. 2016. "India's Act East Policy and Implications for Southeast Asia." *Southeast Asian Affairs*. 81-92.

Rakner, Lise, Menocal, Alina Rocha and Fritz, Verena. 2007. "Democratisation's Third Wave and the Challenges of Democratic Deepening: Assessing International Democracy Assistance and Lessons Learned." ODI, *Working Paper 1*, Overseas Development Institute, London.

Saha, Abhishek. 2020. "NSCN-K faction announces ceasefire, signals return to peace talks." *Indian Express*. 24 December.

Savun, Burcu and Tirone, Daniel C. 2011. "Foreign Aid, Democratization, and Civil Conflict: How Does Democracy Aid Affect Civil Conflict?" *American Journal of Political Science* 55(2): 233-246.

Scott, James, C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. London: Yale University Press

Scott, James, C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Conditions have failed*. London: Yale University Press.

Sikir, Rajiv. 2019. *Challenge and Strategy: Rethinking India's Foreign Policy*. New Delhi: Sage.

Snyder, Jack. 2000. *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict*. New York: W.W Norton.

The New Indian Express. , 21 November, 2023, "Political problem in Manipur, political resolution needed: Eastern Army Commander." 21 November. Accessed January 8, 2024. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2023/nov/21/political-problem-in-manipur-political-resolution-needed-eastern-army-commander-2634977.html>

The Northeast Today. 2019. "Naga Talks: Civil Orgs 'unhappy' over exclusion, NSF shoots memo to PM Modi." 23 October. Accessed August 10, 2021. <https://thenortheast-today.com/states/nagaland/naga-talks-civil-orgs-unhappy-over-exclusion-nsf-shoots/cid2531841.htm>

Vanaik, Achin. (1988), "Is There a Nationality Question in India?" *Economic and Political Weekly* 23(44): 2278-2289.