



India's Myanmar Strike: The China Factor

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On 4 June 2015, India witnessed one of the most severe attacks on its soldiers in its Northeast (NE) in years. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland- Khaplang (NSCN-K) along with the Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP) and the Meitei Kanglei Yawol Kunna (KYKL) ambushed an Indian army convoy, killing 18 soldiers and injuring a few more, in the Chandel district of Manipur (Roy 2015). This attack was third in the series of previously minor attacks that took place in Arunachal Pradesh on 2 April 2015 (DNA 2015a) and in Nagaland on 3 May 2015 (DNA 2015b). The NSCN-K was actively involved in all of these attacks as it broke off a ceasefire agreement with the Indian Government and decided to take up arms (DNA 2015a).

In response, the covert operation conducted by Indian para-commandos inside Myanmar during the early hours of 9 June 2015, which inflicted severe damage to the NSCN-K and the KYKL, has been assumed by some to

have been a 'revenge operation'. However, the official statement made by the Indian Army, stated that the strike was a 'necessary response' in view of an 'imminent threat' (Press Information Bureau Government of India 2015).

Parts of NE India along with the adjoining northern region of Myanmar have been a witness to several conflicts, making the region among the most volatile parts of Asia. The region has been home to various insurgencies, civil unrest and now with the renewed Indian allegations of China's involvement with NE Indian militants it might become another front for Sino-Indian rivalry.

This paper seeks to analyse the Chinese responses to India's Myanmar strike and also shed some light over past Indian reports of China's involvement in NE Indian insurgencies.

Northeast Indian Militancy and Chinese Involvement

One can trace China's involvement with the NE Indian insurgents back to 1967, when Thuingaleng Muivah who was the general secretary of the Naga National Council (NNC), reached Yunnan along with a few of his associates, seeking patronage from China.¹ The Chinese support for insurgency in India was at a high from 1967-1975 when China's foreign policy advocated the spread of 'revolution' around the world.² During this time various insurgent outfits from NE India travelled to China, seeking training and supply of arms from them. The Chinese were accused also of occasionally providing safe havens for its Indian insurgent leaders.

Deng Xiaoping's rise to power and his adoption of the reforms and open door policies led to the suspension of Chinese support for insurgencies and revolutions and a non-ideological approach to diplomacy.

The Chinese support for the insurgents however, declined in the late 1970s. Deng

¹ Members of the NNC, Thuingaleng Muivah, Thinoselie Medom Keyho and an Angami Naga from Kohima, had travelled across the Naga Hills of Myanmar reaching Yunnan in January 1967 seeking support from the Chinese for their cause. This could be marked as the beginning of the Chinese involvement in Northeast India. See Linter 2012.

² MLM Study Group "Chinese Foreign Policy during the Maoist Era and its Lessons for Today", as cited in Manoharan 2012. The Chinese support was, however, not always based on ideological leanings. Most of the NE Indian insurgency outfits imbibed the Maoist guerrilla tactics of war but not necessarily the ideology.

Xiaoping's rise to power and his adoption of the reforms and open door policies that opened up the Chinese economy to the outside world, led to the suspension of Chinese support for insurgencies and revolutions and a non-ideological approach to diplomacy (Ahlbrandt, et al. 2008). In a 2007 article, the present National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval stated that, the Chinese support for the Indian rebels also experienced a 'lull' during the mid-1980s but that there was, of late, 'increasing evidence' of China's revival of its 'covert offensive' in the region. Doval further pointed out that Anthony Shimray, in charge of foreign affairs for the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Issak Muivah (NSCN-IM), met with the Yunnanese intelligence chief Lee Wuen and other officials near Kunming in October 2007 and handed over a letter by Muivah that named Kholose Swu Sumi as their "permanent representative" in China (Doval 2007). When Shimray was arrested in 2010, it was reported that the NSCN-IM was allegedly given the opportunity to purchase surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) by representatives of Chinese intelligence (Morris 2011).

In 2011, a Chinese woman apparently disguised as a journalist for the Hong Kong-based Phoenix television was caught and detained in Dimapur after she was suspected of being a Chinese spy. Later, during her interrogation the woman confirmed her association with the People's Security Bureau of China and that she had held a four-hour long meeting with the NSCN-IM general secretary Thuingaleng Muivah (Dholabhai 2011).

Besides the Nagas, Doval points out, other rebel groups of NE India such as the Mizo, Meitei, Kuki and Assamese insurgents also have links with the Chinese (Doval 2007). Following “Operation All Clear” conducted by the Royal Bhutanese Army (RBA) in December 2003 in Bhutan (Tsering 2014), the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) rebels were chased out till the Sino-Bhutanese border and the ULFA chief requested the Chinese to allow them passage into China (Sharma 2014). Although the Chinese apparently refused them then, Doval writes that ULFA’s anti-talks faction chief Paresh Baruah in 2010 led a group of 80 strong cadres to China, which received training and weapons in Yunnan (Doval 2007).

The issue of the Chinese support for the NE insurgents has also been raised during high-level Sino-Indian talks. It was reported that evidence of Chinese engagements with the NE insurgents was presented by India during the meeting between the then NSA Shivshankar Menon and the Chinese special representative Dai Bingguo from 16-17 January 2012. However, the Chinese continued to maintain they were not involved (Baruah 2012).

A Chinese connection to the 4 June attacks has also been drawn as there are reports claiming that the Indian intelligence agencies intercepted calls between S.S. Khaplang and officers from China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) (*The Indian Express* 2015). The NSCN-K had a ceasefire pact with the Indian Government, which it revoked allegedly on the suggestion of Paresh Baruah who was following the directives of the PLA (*The Times of India* 2015).

The Chinese may not have been directly involved in the recent attacks on the Indian Army, but the connection between NSCN-K and the United Wa State Army³ which is a major supplier of arms to the insurgents, again brings a China connection to the light. The UWSA has a close relationship with China. The Chinese Renminbi (RMB) is widely used as currency in the areas controlled by the UWSA and the people residing there are more comfortable in using Chinese as a lingua-franca than Burmese.

Some Chinese analysts have blamed New Delhi’s policies towards the NE states as being responsible for the region’s instability and conflicts.

The Chinese have supported the UWSA in building up their army and it has been reported that the latter is constructing a ‘radar and missile base’ in partnership with the Chinese company Liao Lian (Lintner 2014). Thus, it is logical to assume that a connection with the UWSA also implies a link to Chinese state agencies.

Chinese Responses to Indian Allegations

With regard to the Indian allegations of China’s involvement in NE India, the *Huanqiu Shibao* ran a piece in which it interviewed some Chinese scholars and

³ The UWSA is the military wing of the United Wa State Party, of Myanmar and is the largest non-state army in Myanmar. The UWSA is mainly engaged in drugs and arms trade to China, Thailand and Northeast India and was classified as a narcotics trafficking organisation by the American government in 2013. See Kuppuswamy 2013.

experts on South Asia seeking responses to the accusations (*Huanqiu Shibao* 2015). One of the interviewees, Zhao Gancheng, Director of the Asia-Pacific Center, Shanghai Institute for International Studies, said that the issue of NE India was very ‘complex’ (复杂, *fuzha*) and it was partly because of the ‘influence’ (影响, *yingxiang*) of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), but that ‘China had no role to play in it’ (但跟中国没有关系, *dan gen zhongguo meiyou guanxi*).

The few articles in the Chinese media on the 9 June operation conducted by the Indian Army have been noteworthy.

With regard to the accusation of the insurgents communicating with the Chinese officials and their use of Chinese weapons, Wang Dehua Director of the South Asian Studies Center, Tongji University said that the calls could have been fake ones and that there was no proof of any link between the insurgents and China. Chinese weapons, he said, were all available at the international market, thus, the insurgents could have very easily smuggled them.

The Chinese scholars have also blamed India itself for the NE issue. Zhao pointed out that NE India was highly underdeveloped, the people there did not follow Hinduism and were quite distinct from the rest of India and these together were responsible for the insurgencies. Some analysts according to the piece in *Huanqiu Shibao* blamed the Indian Government’s policies such as Armed Forces (Special Powers) Acts (AFSPA) towards the NE states as being responsible for the conflict (*Huanqiu Shibao* 2015).

Chinese Perspectives on India’s Myanmar Strike

It is important to note that the Chinese have had a close relationship with the Myanmar until the opening up of Myanmar in 2011, after which the latter started to drift away and move closer to the West. China sees the increasing proximity in the relationship between Myanmar and the West as a threat to itself. For instance, an article by Dai Yonghong, a professor at Sichuan University, pointed out “Myanmar’s strategic geographical location means it is an ideal place from which to pose a threat to China. The United States and Japan seem to be planning to use Myanmar as a wedge between China and India in order to provoke a struggle for profit between the two countries.” China also has economic and energy interests in Myanmar, as Myanmar provides China access to the Indian Ocean (Dai 2015).

The warming of Indo-Myanmar cooperation indicated by the 9 June operation and the souring of Sino-Myanmar ties after the shelling of Lincang,⁴ might have added to China’s vexation. Against the backdrop of Sino-Indian competition for regional dominance, the likelihood that China may lose its grip on Myanmar while India strengthens its linkages, would not just change the dynamics of China’s relationship with Myanmar but also of China’s ambitions in Southeast Asia. It is possible to argue that keeping the insurgencies along the India-Myanmar borders alive could be seen as beneficial to China as it will keep the Indians engaged in the conflict and would

⁴ On 13 March 2015, as bombs dropped by the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar Armed Forces) fell on Chinese territory in the city of Lincang, Yunnan province and took the lives of four Chinese peasants as well as damaged property. See Buckley 2015.

help China maintain its influence over Myanmar.

There have been few articles in the Chinese media specifically, on the 9 June operation conducted by the Indian Army in Myanmar, but those that came out were noteworthy. One piece in the *Sina Mil Forum* was titled “Does India have the legal right to take over the British legacy by annexing Myanmar?” where the writer viewed the 9 June raid as an attempt by the Indians to annex Myanmar. The piece talked about how Manipur was an ‘independent city-state’ (独立城邦, *duli chengbang*) for more than two thousand years and the Indian state after the withdrawal of the British had no right to take over the control of Manipur. It further asked if India could take over Manipur from the British could it also now take over Myanmar? The writer suggested that India still saw itself as the ‘heir’ (继承人, *jichengren*) to its ‘British masters’ (英国主子, *yingguo zhuzi*) (*Sina Mil Forum* 2015a).

Another interesting *Sina Mil Forum* article was titled ‘India Teaches China a lesson through the cross-border attack in Myanmar’, and praised the Indian Army’s raid. It suggested that like India, China too ought to be more assertive towards those who were hurting its interests (*Sina Mil Forum* 2015b).

Conclusion

Indian suspicions of Chinese involvement in the NE conflict have existed for nearly half a century now. The alleged support for the insurgencies began in the 1960s as a Chinese policy of supporting revolutions across its borders. It now appears to be transformed into a form of shadow boxing between China and India for regional influence.

Keeping all suspicions aside, however, the Indian operation can also be assessed as an effort towards promoting regional stability and a common win. Also the signing of the landmark Naga peace accord between the Government of India and the NSCN-IM on 3 August 2015 is another step towards stability of the region. With the signing of the accord, the Indian government has been able to make the NSCN-IM agree on giving up its sovereignty demand, ending one of India’s longest armed rebellions (Jain 2015; Laskar 2015).

The Chinese should also lend a helping hand towards India and Myanmar for the stability in this region, as it is not only beneficial for India and Myanmar but also for China, and especially for the proposed Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC). The Chinese too have expressed concern over this issue with one Yunnanese scholar also calling for the four countries involved in the project to establish a security cooperation mechanism (Ren Jia of the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, cited in *China News* 2015).

Thus, keeping in view that stability in NE India and northern Myanmar is beneficial for all three countries, a cooperative measure for tackling sources of instability like insurgencies, the arms and drugs trade and other border problems, seems to be the demand of the hour. ■

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