

Managing Violence: Lessons In Irregular Warfare From India

Description

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In February 2020, the United States and the Afghan Taliban negotiated a seven-day [reduction in violence levels](#). As part of the deal, the two sides agreed to a series of rules and exceptions that governed the places and circumstances in which the parties reserved the right to resort to violence. Following this agreement, the United States did not suffer a [combat death](#) in Afghanistan until August 2021. Yet during this period, the Taliban successfully set the conditions for a rapid transition of power. The United States found itself managing the seams between war and peace during a negotiated ceasefire—with an ultimately disappointing strategic result.

This is a situation in which the United States and its partner forces will find themselves again in future engagements. Analysts of [irregular warfare](#) have drawn attention to the gray areas between [war and peace](#), where both state and nonstate adversaries are increasingly [comfortable operating](#). But the United States remains uncomfortable in this space. Today, the idea that [“where peace ends, war starts, and when the war is over, politics resumes”](#) pervades strategic thinking. Most doctrine focuses on the “war” end of the spectrum—the battle to win the support of the population, establish control over the territory, and secure the state’s monopoly over the use of force. Yet as the political scientist [Paul Staniland argued in 2014](#), interactions with insurgents do not always reflect this aggressive and decisive process of monopolizing state power. In fact, they sometimes entail more limited campaigns of what he describes as “violence management,” containing or managing violence within certain political thresholds while coexisting, cooperating, or at least adhering to certain red lines with armed groups.

While ceasefires are valuable opportunities to reduce violence in civil wars, [not all ceasefires are equal](#) in depth and scope; they can [have a range of military and political consequences on the ground](#). Interim or aspirational ceasefires can leave ground rules vague and open to interpretation and strategic manipulation by either the state or the insurgent. In these situations, security forces can find themselves engaged in modified, low-level, or rule-governed forms of counterinsurgency in which operations continue, but below the threshold of all-out conflict. Fighting may continue on a limited basis and may be geographically confined to certain districts or areas. Security forces may find themselves

dealing with members of ceasefire signatory groups in ways that police major violations and cap insurgent activity without undermining agreements at the leadership level.

One of the most instructive examples of how these dynamics can play out in practice is the Indian government's management of a sustained ceasefire in the northeastern Naga region. Since the 1950s, the Indian government has been waging a counterinsurgency against Naga militants—and for at least twenty years, that counterinsurgency has coexisted with a sustained ceasefire. While the ceasefire has been in effect, Naga militants have circumvented key elements of the agreement to recruit, tax the local populace, carry arms, and clash with rival Naga factions, occasionally even engaging security forces. In response, security forces have adopted a range of approaches. At times, they have held back from policing ceasefire violations altogether; at others, they have conducted light-footprint arrests rather than direct interventions. On occasion, they have conducted full-scale counterinsurgency operations.

US irregular warfare practitioners would do well to study the Indian state's experience waging limited counterinsurgency against Naga militants. The protracted ceasefires in the Naga areas of northeast India offer an illustrative case study in how to operate within the gray areas between war and peace. In particular, they underline the importance of responding flexibly—showing restraint and accepting tradeoffs at times, while applying pinpoint military pressure at others.

Competition and Conflict within the Naga Ceasefire

The Naga demand for independence from India began almost immediately after Indian independence, as the Naga people—a cluster of ethnic groups native to the India-Myanmar borderlands—feared political and cultural assimilation into the new Indian union. In the mid-1950s, armed mobilization began; today, the Naga insurgency is by far [India's longest](#). Following decades of conflict, tens of thousands killed and displaced, and violent [factional competition](#) and failed peace deals, in 1997 the Indian state struck the first of a number of bilateral ceasefires with the main Naga armed factions. These ceasefires have (with one important [exception](#)) endured. Outright warfare has declined. But rather than ending conflict entirely, the ceasefires have created an [alternative arena for armed conflict](#), in which the formal and informal rules are continually shifting and subject to reinterpretation.

Ambiguous Ceasefire Rules

The Indian government and the two main factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, the largest Naga militant groups in the region, agreed to multiple sets of [ceasefire](#) ground rules to [restrict and regulate](#) behavior and movement in the state of Nagaland. Armed groups exploited the ambiguous space between war and peace from the outset. Armed outfits continued to recruit, carry arms, tax the

local population, and run parallel governments from their designated [ceasefire camps](#) while jockeying for political influence with rival armed groups and the state. Reduced security force pressure opened the space for dramatic increases in the extent and scope of these activities.

Further complicating the situation, different localities are subject to different formal ceasefire rules and different informal conventions. The states adjacent to Nagaland, fearing irredentist aspirations to unify the Nagas under one political body, resisted attempts to extend the ceasefire beyond Nagaland. As a result, the ceasefire is technically restricted to the state of Nagaland, despite a large and active Naga militant presence in the neighboring states of Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh. The region's largest armed group, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim's Isak-Muivah faction (NSCN-IM), continued to expand into these neighboring states, allowing it to strengthen the demand for Naga unification (having changed its name to "Nagalim" for example to reflect this demand), though it has occasionally provoked [localized counterinsurgency](#) efforts from threatened state governments. For New Delhi, maintaining the ceasefire is vital, but so too is keeping the means with which to check armed group influence.

Recalibrated Counterinsurgency Tools

As peace talks have ebbed, flowed, and stalled over the twenty-four years of ceasefire, the armed game of cat and mouse between state forces and ceasefire rebels has often closely resembled that of wartime counterinsurgency operations. Particularly in areas where the ceasefire technically does not apply, such as in Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, Indian Army and paramilitary forces deploy "counterinsurgency grid" operations, in which security forces convey their presence in areas of known insurgent influence through "area domination" patrols and "flag marches," and employ raids, arms seizures, and camp destruction. Armed clashes are not unknown: in [2018 and 2019](#), as [tensions arose in the peace process](#), there were twenty-four standoffs, clashes, raids, and ambushes between security forces and ceasefire signatory groups. [Civic outreach activities](#), such as running medical camps and distributing computers to schools, remain common as part of the army's "hearts and minds" campaign, known as Operation Sadbhavana and Operation Good Samaritan, which reflects the state's continued efforts to gain popular support and erode that of the insurgents.

These recognizable practices of counterinsurgency, occurring below the threshold of outright conflict, take place within a set of formal and informal rules and understandings. In my recent article in [International Peacekeeping](#), I identify several approaches state actors have taken to manage violence. These include creating local *faits accomplis*, such as using military operations during the ceasefire negotiations in a bid to secure favorable conditions once the ceasefire takes effect. Security forces have also exercised restraint to avoid undermining the ceasefire agreement. For example, when several hundred members of two ceasefire groups clashed with mortars and rocket-propelled grenades

in 2006, security forces simply [set up barricades](#), using follow-up arrests to convey presence but largely delegating the management of factional violence to local civil society.

Security forces have also attempted to probe the extent of armed groups' influence. There are formal rules and informal conventions that govern how this plays out. In Nagaland, the main armed groups operate a fixed number of [designated camps](#) that are off limits to security forces; smaller informal camps, however, are fair game. In Manipur, where the ceasefire rules technically do not apply, there are no official [designated camp](#) protocols, but a similar two-tiered system of legitimate and illegitimate camps exists. Major NSCN-IM camps are [taken note of](#), informally mimicking Nagaland's [designated camp](#) arrangement to prevent provocative operations against NSCN-IM strongholds, while others are deemed informal and remain fair game for security force operations. As a result, while clashes, raids, and standoffs are common, red lines are generally drawn around core areas such as the NSCN-IM's self-styled capitals, Camp Hebron in Nagaland and Ukhrul in Manipur, where much of the group's leadership originates.

These clashes and standoffs tend to be clustered (see [this map](#)) around non-ceasefire areas such as Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh, indicating that the red lines differ according to the local context. As a host of both ceasefire and non-ceasefire groups populate Manipur's hills, clashes become more likely and the probing more aggressive than in Nagaland. Eastern Arunachal Pradesh, meanwhile, both provides the insurgents with an access corridor into Myanmar and offers lucrative opportunities for armed groups to tax coal and timber operations, making it a site of competition between security forces and a host of armed groups. In one incident in 2020, for example, Indian security forces killed six [NSCN-IM militants](#), a year after the local NSCN-IM unit was implicated in a [deadly ambush](#) on the convoy of a member of the state's legislative assembly (MLA), killing eleven including the local MLA, his son, and personal security. During the early 2000s, local politics led to a temporary counterinsurgency operation in Arunachal Pradesh, technically in violation of the ceasefire rules.

Despite these varying approaches, the ceasefire remains intact. At the leadership level, it has required that the Naga factions and the Indian negotiators understand the challenges on the ground and the political pressures facing either party, to ensure that fallout and pullback from the peace talks are temporary and do not jeopardize the ceasefire. At the local level, operating in these subthreshold forms of counterinsurgency requires a deep understanding of situational nuances to assess [where you need to pull things in and where you need to give a loose rope](#).

Lessons for the US Way of Warfare

As the dust settles on the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the question of strategic patience in counterinsurgency—and whether [away teams](#) are ever truly able to exercise such patience in

expeditionary campaigns¹ has resurfaced. Indeed, India's position as the "home team" in this particular case is a clear point of contrast with the US experience. With [both the watches and the time](#), India has been able to play the long game and act flexibly in managing violence in the northeast. As a politically peripheral region, India has far greater flexibility in rewriting rules, accepting trade-offs, pushing the envelope, and devising work-arounds with insurgents in [the northeast than it does in priority areas](#), such as Kashmir. In this sense, its approach is insulated from the [lurches between surge and total withdrawal](#) that characterized US policy in Afghanistan.

Yet the Naga case nonetheless offers important lessons for US irregular warfare practitioners. As the ceasefire progressed, the rules of violence management quickly moved away from New Delhi's preferred model of clearly defined ceasefire ground rules applicable across the region. But Indian practitioners adapted and devised new ways of competing with Naga insurgents within a broader framework of managed violence, recognizing insurgent influence and exercising restraint in certain areas while pushing back in others. The ability to adapt to and manage fluctuations in violence and *faits accomplis* on the ground is therefore a key prerequisite for sustained violence management. Adopting a flexible approach, and knowing exactly when and where to deploy the levers of force, restraint, and localized bargaining, requires that both political decision makers and military commanders have a deep understanding of the local context and an ability to read relations with armed actors at both the local and leadership level. It is this depth of understanding that has allowed New Delhi to play the long game, tiring insurgencies over time, demonstrating the effectiveness of overt and publicized restraint² calibrated with pinpoint military pressure³ in successfully managing insurgencies in this way.

Today, the United States and its partners are likely to continue facing an array of possible threats from militias, armed groups, and criminal factions. They will have to manage a [spectrum of relations](#) spanning from all-out hostility to forms of armed coexistence, containment, and crackdown. If the United States aspires to success in the long game of irregular warfare, it would do well to develop the tools and concepts for navigating the seams between war and peace⁴ and one way to begin would be to look abroad for lessons.

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