

## KEEP TALKING

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Issues and Challenges Pertaining to the Federal Structure, Dispute Redressal Mechanisms, and the Centre-State Relations

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More than three years since Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) announced the signing of a historic framework agreement with the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (IM) leadership, a deal to end India's oldest insurgency seems far. A recent statement by the Forum for Naga Reconciliation (FNR), a civil society platform, has indicated that the talks between insurgent groups and the Centre have reached a dead-end. The deadlock has pushed the FNR to call for re-imagining the Indo-Naga Peace Process. The Centre seems to have erred in believing that the framework agreement was as good as a peace deal.

The details of the framework agreement have not been revealed by the government. But indications were that both parties had agreed on some of the substantial issues that kept the dispute alive. The Centre had agreed to accept the unique history of the Nagas and promised a solution within the framework of the Indian Constitution while recognising their distinctiveness. However, the Centre failed to seize the momentum that prevailed in Naga society then and persuade the Naga groups to give up some of the more contentious claims. The government's interlocutor, R N Ravi, has indicated that the talks are stuck on some symbolic issues such as a separate flag demanded by Naga groups. The Naga issue is a complex matter that has outlived many peace agreements, including the Shillong Accord of 1975, though a ceasefire involving the Indian Army and Naga insurgents has been in place since the 1990s. In recent years, pressure from the Naga civil society on the rebels to settle for peace had created an atmosphere for dialogue and a possible peace deal. The moment, however, may have passed. The Centre's backing for the citizenship amendment bill has turned the Northeast restive. It may not be easy now to discuss contested issues like territorial claims advanced by Naga groups — the Nagalim envisaged by NSCN (IM) includes parts of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and even Myanmar — that call for redrawing the present state boundaries. The heightened sense of nationalism in the country, an outcome of BJP's own aggressive campaigns, makes it difficult for the Centre to concede ground on symbolic issues — flag, constitution, the place of religion in society etc. — to the rebels.

However, both parties need to stay invested in the dialogue process. The immediate step should be to rebuild trust in the peace talks. Negotiations, of course, are not an end in themselves but part of a long-drawn out process to find a middle ground and transform the ceasefire into a peace agreement.

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