

Resolution of the Assam-Meghalaya border dispute and challenges ahead

Hypothesis: Examining the long-standing border dispute between Assam and Meghalaya in the context of the historical agreement.

Introduction

On 30 March, a historic agreement was signed between Assam and Meghalaya to resolve the existing border dispute in six of the 12 areas, where the border discord has persisted for decades. Border disputes between the states in the Northeast of India have been a recurring phenomenon since the 1960s with the present-day states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram being carved out of an undivided Assam. The commentary seeks to explore the basis of the long-standing dispute, and how the agreement is just a starting point in solving the inter-state border conflicts in the region.

The long-standing dispute

The state of Meghalaya was carved out of undivided Assam as an autonomous state in 1970 and was given full statehood in 1972. The border dispute stems from the fact that the Meghalaya government refused to accept the Assam Reorganization (Meghalaya) Act of 1969. The state governments had identified 12 points of contention along the state border, which spans an area of 2,765.14 sq. km.

With the border dispute intensifying and taking a violent turn with ethnic clashes between Garo and Rabha tribes in the East Garo Hills of Meghalaya and Goalpara district of Assam. As clashes started to erupt in the disputed region, most notably in 2010 when the conflict had rendered close to 30,000 civilians homeless, and more than 30 villages in the border area were

burnt down. Clashes like this, show how inter-state conflicts in the northeast, and even within communities have an ethno-nationalistic element to them.

Another major point of contention has been the Langpih district in the West Garo Hills of Meghalaya, which borders the Kamrup district in Assam. Formerly, a part of Assam but post-independence it became part of Meghalaya, but Assam has maintained its stance that the area is part of the Mikir Hills. However, despite incessant clashes in the region, this would take a turn for the worse after 14 May 2010, when clashes erupted between the Nepali, Khasi and Garo communities. This would lead to the Assam Police personnel opening fire upon the people, which led to the demise of four Khasis and wounded 18 others.

It was in 2011, that the Meghalaya assembly passed a resolution, requesting the Union government to intervene and constitute a boundary commission for diffusing the conflict. In response, the Assam government passed a resolution mowing doing the move of the Meghalaya government. However, with efforts from the Union government both the state governments had appointed nodal officers to resolve the border dispute.

The historic pact

The pact comes two months after the Chief Minister of Assam, Himanta Biswa Sharma and his counterpart, Conrad Sangma agreed to a draft resolution on 29 January to partially resolve the dispute. The signing of the agreement on 29 March, will end the dispute in six contested areas which has also set the stage for resolving the dispute in the six remaining areas, as the ruling government urges the states in the Northeast to resolve the existing border disputes by 15 August 2022. The draft resolution between the two states points out that the agreement covers the six disputed areas of Tarabari, Gizang, Hahim, Boklapara, Khanapara-Pillangkata and Ratacherra. The inking of an agreement is a testament to a give-and-take approach to resolving the sensitive inter-state boundary dispute which has plagued the two states.

The agreement which has been deemed to be a 'historic one' is a testament to the political will of the Chief Minister of the two states, that has taken into account the recommendations made by regional panels for dividing the disputed 36.79 sq. km between the two states. While Assam has been awarded 18.51 sq. km of the disputed area, Meghalaya would be given the remaining share of 18.28 sq. km of the disputed region.

The pact despite being a beacon of hope for solving the inter-state disputes in the northeast, and resolving a dispute that has been festering for 50 years as of now. However, this will to resolve the border dispute might not necessarily lead to the cessation of border tensions among the states in the region.

The dilemma of inter-state border disputes in the northeast

First, the inter-state border disputes in the Northeast have persisted for a long time with occasional flare-ups of violence on both sides. The central government-brokered agreement sets the tone for bringing in a new political will for solving the existing disputes at various levels. History playing cupid, and a growing resentment when it comes to ethnicities has rendered any mechanism of conflict resolution arbitrary. The land is a fraught issue in the region and will remain one as demand for states gains traction on ethnic lines.

Second, gains made in the Assam-Meghalaya border dispute resolution are significant and have laid down a roadmap toward creating a stable region in the long run. However, there are inherent contestations and stresses surrounding manufacturing conflict mechanisms that would allow the fault lines to stop widening.

Third, the persistent conflicts though being manifested through the Assam-Mizoram border clashes and the Assam-Nagaland flare-ups at the border have shown that resolving the border disputes will remain an uphill task, despite efforts to brokering peace.

Conclusion

The historic resolution serves as a starting point, but despite the developments, there is a long way to go towards solidifying this agreement. Thus, it has become incumbent on the part of the political leaders to become advocates for peace and engage effectively with different stakeholders. It brings us to the cusp of coming up with solutions, which would allow the region to fit into the critical juncture of India's 'Act East Policy' and the proximity to the ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian nation) countries. Ethnicities become a critical point when it comes to dealing with disputes in the region, that have historically been centered around ethno-nationalistic sentiments.

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