

## Northeast India strategy for growth in terms of conflict resolution and conflict management: A strategic review

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### Abstract

*This article depicts to examine vast diversities of ethnic-tribes in the northeast India region that made ethnic conflicts between and among them. The article highlights in detail the regard ethnic conflicts of various tribal people of northeast peripheral states claimed for recognition and self-determination that considered peace and stability by union-core government, which depicts what crucial and major steps taken by union government initiated to resolve the ethnic conflict. It also discussed the Indian laws and policies that flawed the ethnic conflict of tribes, which is still not resolved through armed forces having special power. Even recognised and accommodated ethnic tribal community autonomy nevertheless promoted peace and stability; therefore, union-core moved to dovetail within and across ethnic tribal communities. Finally, the article discusses the conflict resolution process and manages the conflict through different approaches of union providing land resources to these tribal groups, but at the same time, diverse ethnic tribal groups must also share power within and across the tribal and non-tribal groups for growth and development of the northeastern region.*

**Keywords:** Northeast India; ethnic-tribal conflict; Armed Forces Special Powers Act; Union-core; State-peripheral; Peace; Development.

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### I. Introduction

Northeast India has diverse groups in language, ethnicity, culture, identity, race, etc. As according to Roy, “the nation starts from below,” which means each and every ethnic group creates their own identity and makes the identity at the national level that creates ethical conflict because majority ethnic tribes try to make dominance over other small ethnic groups through creating differences and discrepancies in identities and interests. The Indian government used violence innumerable times as a part of armed forces exceptional powers during presumed situations of emergency (**Bhattacharyya, 2016**). As a result, ethnic conflict, outbursts, and reluctance between them have made this region unstable for many decades. Violence in northeast India is not a new concept, as insurgency and ethnic conflict make such a situation (**Borkakoti**). The Indian government tried to eliminate the involvement of armed forces with special and exceptional powers, called the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958. This paper seeks to determine the power of AFSPA, which is used excessively according to the situation, or whether it is the natural power of armed forces (**Borkakoti**). The Indian-hostile militants of ethnic groups made illegal and heinous crimes. Indeed, AFSPA is an exceptional power dichotomy to the Indian Constitution of Articles 21 and 22, which provide life and protection against deliberately detention and arrest (**Bhattacharyya, 2016**). Ethnic armed groups protested against this act; even local tribal people supported such groups and demanded to repeal this act. As insurgency spread to other states of the Northeast, militarisation spread. In the 1960s, Tripura, Manipur, and Mizoram militarised; after that, Assam in the 1980s, and finally, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya (**Goswami, 2010**). During the 1960s and 1970s, the secession movement was at its peak, and armed forces had a special power called impunity. Armed forces suppressed the secession movement while doing many inhumane and immoral activities like arrest without warrant, killings of thousands of dissidents, extrajudicial killings, gunned down to mere suspicion, torture, rape, and many fake encounters of tribal innocent people. Under the impunity of AFSPA, security personnel killed thousands of innocents just on suspicion. People of the northeast continue demanding and protesting to punish Indian forces (**Ngaihte, 2015**). During the 1990s, AFSPA eliminated the secession movement, but they were dominant over civilians, and exceptional impunity power led to criminal activities, which are inexorable because of union legislative law protection to paramilitary forces deployed over the northeast region for many decades. Centre-periphery conflicts are only one kind of conflict that the Northeast has seen (**Goswami, 2010**). The core-union government, not interested in repealing the act, given the reason of ethnic conflict in northeastern India, especially Meghalaya and Nagaland, made the act imposition more strongly. This draconian and inhumane law made vulnerable situations of tribal people in daily life. The Indian President promulgated an ordinance on 22 May 1958 called Armed Forces (Assam and Manipur) (**Ngaihte, 2015**). Instead of making peace, stability, and maintaining

law and order in the northeast, AFSPA's inhumane action made tribal people violent and made ethnic armed groups violent against Indian armed forces. The core-union government needs a different approach to make peace and stability through dialogue directly with Indian-hostile militants and also resolve ethnic conflict between ethnic tribal people, giving autonomous protection to minorities. AFSPA is not the "only and ultimate solution." Growth and development of the northeast begin with conflict management and the peacemaking process; if it happens, repeal of AFSPA will gradually reduce and be removed in the future.

## **II. Background of the study**

AFSPA is necessary during the 1950s and 1960s, when the secession movement was at its peak. Military forces have absolute impunity to act without fear and without question against perpetrators as per Section 6 of AFSPA (McDuié-Ra, 2009) (Arora, 2020). Northeast Indian states have been struggling with tribal autonomy, conflict, violence, and identities between heterogeneous tribes (Brahmachari, 2019). This act provided impunity to armed forces for arrest without warrant, shot down on mere suspicion, illegal activities, and extrajudicial killings of thousands of innocent civilians. The government denied repealing the act because of internal ethnic violent conflict between different tribal groups. Even today, the government is not ready to repeal AFSPA in northeastern parts of the region. There are many critical ethnic conflicts: Mizo-chin ethnic violent conflict in Mizoram, Meitei-Kuki ethnic violent conflict on schedule tribe status in Manipur, and Naga-Kuki ethnic tribal conflict on land and ownership rights in Nagaland. The union-core government still did not achieve long-lasting peace in these peripheral states; it made the situation "Grey Zone Path," where compromise solutions in adequate form of conflict management and resolution for growth and development. Violent insurgent groups have established camps and operate guerrilla warfare training in Myanmar's soil (Kshetrimayum, 2010). In 2005, the government constituted a committee called the Justice Reddy Committee to review the act. The committee recommended repealing it because draconian and inhumane laws kill the lives of thousands of local civilians. The term 'Impunity' under Section 6 of AFSPA means exempt from any kind of punishment for the violence and thousands of killings (Bhattacharjee, 2015, p. 5) (Arora, 2020). Actually, impunity power provides full freedom to kill anyone during operation against ethnic armed groups who are Indian-hostile militants, and such ethnic tribal groups have violent conflict with other tribal groups in such a complex situation. AFSPA is still alive to reduce conflict to durable peace, but it has failed since long decades. Local civilian livelihoods were affected through armed forces; in such a case, iconic protester Irom Sharmila, who has been fasting for 16 years, appealed to repeal the act. However, the Indian government arrested many times on the charges of suicide while protesting, but the local district court released iconic lady Sharmila and said that peaceful protest is a fundamental right of every citizen. The separatist movements and ethnic insurgencies in India's northeastern region have been an internal security challenge for India since many decades ago. There are separatists and insurgent groups that are operating safely in Myanmar border areas of hills and thick jungle, like ULFA, Manipuri People's Liberation Army, NSCN-Khaplang, and NSKN-Isak Muivah (Brahmachari, 2019). The Union-core government said that it is necessary to maintain AFSPA because Northeast ethnic-hostile groups demanded new statehood, but today situation is mostly controlled, and most ethnic tribal communities left the demand of secession and came up with ceasefire agreements on terms and conditions of territorial autonomy, respecting and preserving ethnic identities with the Union-core government. On the other hand, the Indian government provides autonomy to ethnic groups on terms of following ceasefire agreements, maintaining peace, respecting other ethnic identities and cultures, and conflict resolution through peaceful means. However, the union government still has not repealed or even denied to discuss the issue in parliament.

## **III. Objectives**

1. To understand and examine the role of union legislative law AFSPA in Northeast India.
2. To discuss about Union-core government and state-peripheral governments policy conflict over AFSPA and developmental process of northeast region.
3. To understand and analyse ethnic-tribal violence conflict and seek to find out alternative ways to resolve prolonged conflict as a strategy for northeastern growth and development.

## **IV. Research methodology**

The research paper studied northeast India ethnic conflict based on descriptive and exploratory research based on using past events and analytical-historical methods that analyse deeply ethnic-tribal conflict and find out different ways to resolve violence conflict that moved in a positive direction for growth and development for the people of whole northeast India. It also discussed and understood armed forces relations with ethnic-tribal groups, what are union government roles to resolve conflict, and assess government policies for the development of tribal groups. The study is mostly qualitative in nature, and secondary data is used in it. There are various journals, articles, websites, and secondary qualitative data utilised for the study of tribal conflict and envisaged conflict resolution and management.

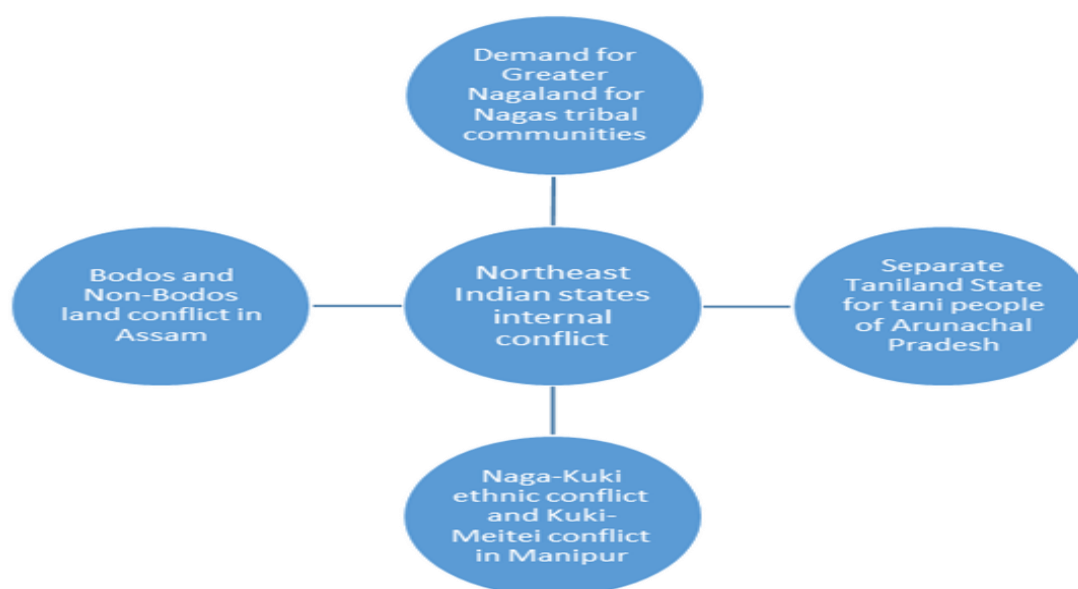
### **Conceptual framework for development and conflict**

Northeast India region's society, culture, and politics are the internal conceptual thoughts. National policies, laws, and thoughts of India are as external thoughts. As in this way, the general theoretical framework was set up to determine the Union-Core role of the government to intervene in peripheral states of northeast India for conflict resolution and socio-economic development of peripheral northeast states. After the Independence of 1947, in the 1950s and 1960s, the state intervened to reduce ethnic conflict and eliminated the secession movement in Assam and Manipur. Many identities of tribes are distinct in nature and share some common characteristics, but each tribal group's rights over land are overlapping, like Mizo, Mara, Lai, and Zomi (McConnachie, 2018). During the 1980s, the movement was at its peak in all over the region. The union government used the armed forces, having special power of impunity under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958. The Indian government always made the convincing and persuading statement that "the secession movement and increased activities of ethnic-armed groups forced the government to establish AFSPA," which is external control of the union government. The ultimate aim of AFSPA is to eliminate secession movement and to reduce or remove ethnic conflict so that it helps to socio-economic development of the northeastern region. But such a strategic aim is not achievable till now because the external-core union government deliberately denied the inhumane and heinous violence of armed forces against the local civilians and tribes who had not had any kind of contact, involvement, or participation with insurgent groups. Thousands of innocent people were killed in fake encounters and mere suspicion by paramilitary forces. The local civilians demanded long-awaited political autonomy and the repeal of draconian law AFSPA as internal development of peripheral states of the northeast. The victim, "innocent indigenous people," faced a conflict-ridden situation where armed forces committed inhumane acts such as arrest without warrant, extrajudicial killings, shooting, raping, torture, suspicion killings, etc. Three states—Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram—have been hit through guerrilla warfare; states share boundaries with Myanmar (Gottschlich, 2015). All such acts granted under AFSPA provided impunity to military forces, which made the situation more complex and complicated. It created conflict-incitement instead of conflict-resolution. If the core-union external government really desires to make internal development of peripheral states, it has to accept the northeast demand of political autonomy and repeal AFSPA. The majoritarian civilian demanded autonomy and the removal of AFSPA as the first stage of internal development in terms of peace, stability, and law and order; after that, socio-economic development in terms of investment in infrastructure and welfare development. The Government of India has declared many parts of the North-East as 'disturbed areas' under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958. The northeast states of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and parts of some Arunachal Pradesh (Singh, 2013). But the external-core union government has the opposite role in the developmental stage, where peace, stability, law and order, and protection of innocents from ethnic conflict are achieved through the existence of AFSPA. AFSPA has two roles: one is protection of innocents from ethnic-armed groups conflict and resolution of the ethnic conflict, and the other is encounter with Indian-hostile ethnic groups. Northeast insurgency involved many separatist groups and Indian-hostile militants that operated secretly through warfare training and weapons training in dense forests and porous land of north-eastern states that connect India through the 23-km narrow siliguri Corridor (Ayob, 2023). When the maintenance of peace is established and the government manages the conflict, it moves forward for the development process with a gradual reduction of AFSPA. This is the external government strategy of the north eastern region.

### **Internal ethnic conflict and internal developmental level in Northeast India**

The ethnic conflict mostly happened between majority-ethnic tribal people and minorities-ethnic tribal people. The division between them has existed since the British era, who divided the tribal people in many ways, such as geographical division, ethnic division, and language division. Such division was even not resolved by the core-union government after independence in 1947. The government provided political autonomy to civilians in the north eastern region after the long decades of denying and undermined the fundamental human rights of the local people, but still people sought to enhance political and socio-economic rights. Union-core intervened in northeast India as a general view and theoretical interpretation regarding development in this region, which is helpful for internal India and outside India (Deori, 2023). The level of internal development in the north eastern region is lacking. Since independence, the core-union government has deliberately overlooked the development of the north eastern region. After the 1992 economic reform and extended neighbour foreign policy passes through the geographical development of northeast India. Albeit, the union government tried to resolve ethnic conflict through various economic developments, but a draconian and inhumane law called AFSPA is the main hindrance and intricate in the process of internal development in the northeast. In the case of Assam, Bodos tribes demand autonomy, preserve identity, and voice for separate statehood for Bodos tribal people only, which is called Bodoland. Three accords (1993, 2000, and 2020) have been signed as temporal compromise solutions but have given nothing fruitful result (Hausing, 2021). The tribal people in the border area of the northeastern region share a common India-Myanmar border that connects and shares a common ethnic culture, like the Naga tribal people living in both countries. Ethnic-armed groups share common identities that share common interests; even ethnic

families and relatives are living in border areas of two countries. Ethnic-armed groups of Indian-hostile militants get trained and practice guerilla warfare tactics under the soil of the Myanmar military regime. These groups easily crossed over the Indian border, with local ethnic tribes providing shelter to them. Both common ethnic-tribal groups have interests in war against armed forces. These groups used unconventional guerilla warfare tactics and ran away for protection under the Myanmar border. India and Myanmar have porous, deep forests and difficult mountain terrain borders, which helps insurgent groups easily enter Indian borders. The Indian government has till now not repealed AFSPA completely, even after economic reform and open markets. Draconian and inhumane legislative law AFSPA has undermined human rights, which goes against the democratic values and ethos of this country. Even the imposition of armed forces for a long period is unable to protect national and strategic security (Ngaihte, 2015). Internal development of northeastern states is necessary, but at the same time, protection of civilians is also important. Ethnic conflict is the main barrier and prolonged hindrance for northeastern development. The government strategy for northeastern growth simply says civilian security development is the first priority after that, socio-economic development. The Indian government provided socio-economic development to the tribal and non-tribal people but without resolving ethnic conflict and security issues that had been pending for a long time. This internal complex and complicated situation must be resolved only in two ways: development in security and socio-economic development. The government must repeal AFSPA gradually in many phases, according to the situation, while providing socio-economic development.



**Figure 1** Northeast India ethnic tribal violence conflict.

### **Government strategy for maintain peace and manage conflict**

The union government tried many efforts to establish peace. Peace and development are both linked with each other and interdependent. Without peace in the northeast, developmental processes are not successful at achieving pace and speed. There was a ceasefire agreement between the government and ethnic-armed groups; even violence has decreased enough since the 1990s. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, should be repealed. The Indian government appointed a committee to review AFSPA and recommended amending the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, for usefulness and helpfulness for armed forces deployment. Insert chapter VIA in UAPA in the northeast region (Ngaihte, 2015). But the government unable to make peace for the long term. Negotiation and persuasion to rebels happened many times, but still, the Delhi government requires different approaches to make peace and stability in the northeastern states of India. Continuity of the AFSPA is not the permanent and long-term solution. The AFSPA came into force to eliminate the secession movement during the 1960s and 1970s. Ethnic violence is high in north-eastern India, in eight states from Assam to Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. Northeastern states of India have diverse ethnic groups, which likely have 75 major, sub-major, and minor ethnic tribal groups; all these have their own identities and languages (Deori, 2023). Today's situation is different, not about secession but internal ethnic conflict among tribal groups. Ethnic conflict is the main barrier that AFSPA has continued to rule over abysmally since long years. AFSPA provides protection to those innocent who are not involved and supported by Indian-hostile militants. Armed forces killed thousands of innocent victims just because of mere suspicion; therefore, local tribal people demanded to repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958. The government did not repeal; it thought restoration of democracy and peace only through coercive armed forces, but the result reflected

protest, aggression, and outbursts against government policies, and civilians felt insecurity against the Indian army. Iconic Manipuri protester Irom Sharmila has been fasting for 16 years for the repealment of AFSPA and has fought for rights and liberties for daily survival and livelihood. Paramilitary forces used impunity powers in wrong, heinous, and inhumane ways. Ethnic violence is high in northeastern India, in eight states from Assam to Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. People in these states have their own identities and interests, mostly land rights and autonomy, which overlap and contrast with other tribal communities, hence the deployment of security personnel in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, and some parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Cognisant people opprobrium union legislature and armed forces. Finally, local innocents perforced to take up arms against the military. Instead of establishing peace and stability, armed forces made complex instability; there must be a be a need to amend legislative law. The government needs a different approach to establish peace in the ethnic-tribal conflict. The first step is peacebuilding; the government must start dialogues and discussions with ethnic insurgent groups so that to contain and reduce violence. In the process of peacebuilding, several activities include preventing violence, conflict management, and resolution. In the peacebuilding process, both parties must allow each other each other to follow and support each other's demands and desires; there must not be one win and one loss formula. In the present situation, the free movement regime is reduced to 16 km within both Myanmar and India borders (since February 2024, the Modi government abolished the free movement regime), but there is a clash of proposal conflicts between the union-core government and state-peripheral governments, which rejected the union proposal (McConnachie, 2018).

It must be a negotiation in order for both parties to have some win-loss situation; if one is totally won and the other is totally lost, such a situation eventually becomes dangerous moving in the opposite direction, as a result violence happened again and an ethnic group of insurgents was again active in guerilla warfare against armed forces. Peacebuilding is the beginning process to initiate peace for a short-term goal where preventing violence and conflict management is the first goal; after that, peacemaking is a long-term goal. But unfortunately, the Indian government is still in the peacebuilding process, unable to carry out the out the process at the next stage called peacemaking. The Indian government is still in negotiations and bargaining with ethnic tribal groups for managing conflict; therefore, ethnic conflict is a complex issue that has till now not been resolved properly. Hence, AFSPA is still present to prevent violence in the northeast region.

Northeast States of India	Ethnic tribal conflicts and issues	AFSPA imposition
Assam	Land disputes between Bodos tribal and Non-bodos	Non-withdrawl in disturbed areas of district
Nagaland	Demand of Greater Nagaland by NSCN(IM), conflict with union government	Non-withdrawl of AFSPA in sensitive districts.
Manipur	Ethnic tribal conflicts between Nagas-kukis and Kukis-Meiteis	Non-withdrawl of AFSPA in Manipur districts
Arunachal Pradesh	Demand for separate state Taniland for Tani tribal people	Non-withdrawl of AFSPA in critical districts
Meghalaya	Ethnic tribal conflict resolved	Complete withdrawn in 2018
Tripura	Displacement and conflict issues almost resolved	Complete withdrawn in 2015
Mizoram	Migrants issue and violence conflict almost resolved	Complete withdrawn in 1980s and 1990s

Source: Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/modi-govt-decides-to-reduce-disturbed-areas-under-afspa-in-northeast-amit-shah/article66660544>. Table 1

### State policies and assessment: Review of the government policies

The external development of the “core-central government” in the northeast region is based on the human rights and liberties of the indigenous tribal people, who are not involved in insurgent activities against armed forces. Since the 1990s, secession movement in the northeastern region has been under controlled, and the threat of secession was also eliminated completely by the union government. Ethnic-tribal violent conflict resolution is not achieved internally. Therefore, India and Myanmar conducted joint military operations against ethnic guerrilla groups. (Myint-U 2012: 71) (Gottschlich, 2015). The further future policies of union government to security protection and socio-economic development of northeast states. The core-external government realised that common ethnic armed groups on the India-Myanmar border have common interests and identities. Many ethnic tribal groups are residing and guerilla warfare training under the Myanmar soil. The porous and difficult terrain borders of India-Myanmar made it easy for Indian-hostile militants to take shelter in the Myanmar border. These Indian-hostile militants used the practice of weapon-use training, guerilla warfare training, and silent-killing training. Till the 1990s, India openly supported pro-democracy movements and provided shelter and security to political refugees, protesters, and tribal groups (naga identity tribal groups of Myanmar) against the Myanmar military coup (Egreteau 2003 121–124; Haacke 2006: 34) (Gottschlich, 2015). AFSPA is still active and present to eradicate such armed groups who are against socio-economic development, and these groups do not want peace

and stability. Hence, the Indian government used “double approaches” in the northeastern region: first, the continuation of AFSPA for killing such Indian-hostile militants at the same time; second, providing security and socio-economic protection to the local indigenous tribal people, like political autonomy, land ownership, protecting their customs, identities, interests, and cultures, and economic investment in infrastructure. This second approach is very difficult to implement because the continuity of both approaches makes the situation deep-dense, complex, and complicated. The local tribal people still demand repealed AFSPA; whether the core government invested in socio-economic development or not, local tribal people and innocent victims are suffering from inhumane and draconian legislative law AFSPA. Armed groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland Khaplang (NSCN-K) and the United Liberation Front of Assam forayed against military personnel during the 1980s and 1990s (Gottschlich, 2015). The government shows reluctance to repeal or amend impunity powers of paramilitary forces; even the union government policy of “double approaches” is unsuccessful in northeastern states due to geographical location, diverse-ethnic conflict, and many Indian-hostile groups such as the United Liberation Front of Assam. These groups desired an unstable and conflict-ridden situation; actually, those ethnic groups are in majority and want to dominate over minorities in natural resources, properties, forestlands, and cultural identities. The separatist movements and ethnic insurgencies in India’s Northeastern region have been an internal security challenge for India since many decades ago. There are popular ethnic armed groups such as Manipuri People’s Liberation Army (PLA), ULFA, NSCN-Khaplang, and NSCN-Isak Muivah that have their operating camps and training of warfare in dense forests and hill areas of Myanmar that share borderland with India (Ayob, 2023). It is the main cause of ethnic conflict between the groups, and the government has till now failed to make conflict management and resolution between them. Dominant-majority ethnic insurgent groups are against both the government and other weaker and more vulnerable minorities. It is urgently needed to assess the policies and laws of government; after all, the main goals and objectives are to maintain peace and stability. If peace and stability continue to go on in the future, AFSPA abrogation in the future can be possible. But in the in the presence of a conflict-ridden situation, the core-union government has a has a role to manage conflict for the slow growth process in the northeastern region. Managing the conflict is a way towards peacebuilding. This strategy for growth and development takes time, but it is the only way to resolve ethnic conflict.

Year	Incidents	Extremist Arrested	Extremist Killed	Arms Recovers
2012	1025	2145	222	1856
2013	732	1712	138	1596
2014	824	1934	181	1255
2015	574	1900	149	897
2016	484	1202	87	698

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) Annual Report (2016-2017, 20) Table 2

## V. Conclusion

As per conclusion concern, the paper concluded that peace and stability in northeast region require long-term goal, vision, critical strategy, and sustainable development of all ethnic groups in a fair and reasonable manner. Quagmire and critical conditions are still in northeastern states; ethnic insurgent groups forayed Indian forces through guerilla warfare tactics. These dominant insurgent groups broke out ceasefire agreements many times and denied cooperating with the government on peace and stability. There must be an urgent requirement of conflict resolution on a permanent basis. Albeit, the core-union government tried to persuade ethnic-armed groups to comeback on the agreement that made conflict management so that peace and stability could be established for a short-term period, and at the same time, the Indian government deployed armed forces to provide protection to local, innocent tribal people from ethnic insurgent groups. The conflict management is a short-term goal, but it is the initiative strategy to move towards the peacebuilding process. If the process continues to achieve the short-term goal, it brings to carry a long-term goal called the peacemaking process, which AFSPA repealed permanently. The local tribal people still distrust, threat, and suspicion from the government. people have only one crucial and prolonged protesting demand to repeal AFSPA, but it is a compulsion for the government to impose it. Moreover, the Delhi government requires other methods and measures for conflict resolution. The hostile groups of ethnic armed groups residing on Myanmar borderlands that share Indian border territory illegally crossed border territory to attack guerilla war on Indian paramilitary forces. The Delhi government also needs to have dialogues and discussions with the Myanmar government on border protection. Peace and stability in the northeast can be possible through all angles, which is one of the foreign border security relations that make stability and internal security in the whole northeast region possible. After all, security, development, and investment are urgent needs and aspirations of people in northeast India. Peace, stability, human and sustainable development all can be possible and achievable by different approaches, like India's effort on a peaceful ceasefire agreement, reduced imposition of AFSPA, and initiating dialogue with Myanmar on the illegal cross-border of

ethnic armed groups. These variable activities search out ways to make conflict resolution for the growth and development of northeast India.

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