Asian Journal of Peacebuilding Vol. 14 No. 1 (2026): 1-35
doi: 10.18588/202605.00a670 Research Article

How Multiple Rebel Groups Affect Peace Pathways: Lessons from Nagaland and the Chittagong Hill Tracts

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This article explores how divisions within rebel groups affect the outcomes of civil war. Based on two case studies—the Indian state of Nagaland and the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh—and using the method of structured, focused comparison, the study demonstrates that the existence of multiple rebel groups can increase the risk of protracted insurrection because they create an anarchic order in which there is no central authority to enforce an agreement. It suggests that governments' divide-and-conquer policy toward rebel groups can block the pathway to peace, as it reproduces a spiral of violence. The article contends that policymakers should reframe counterinsurgency policies, emphasizing the reintegration of rebels and tribal populations rather than exploiting their historical enmities.

Keywords insurgency, rebel groups, peace pathway, Nagaland, Chittagong Hill Tracts

Introduction

Intra-state wars are more challenging to end than inter-state wars, as armed conflict within a state's borders produces some structural elements of war-fighting that provide incentives to continue the violence and disincentives for compromise. The parties in inter-state wars typically retreat to their own territories, formally ending the fighting, while in intra-state wars, the belligerents must live side by side in a common territory after the fighting stops.

Scholars have found that negotiated settlements have led to renewed warfare within five years in about 50 percent of cases of intra-state conflict (Johnson 2023). Why do insurgencies usually last longer than inter-state wars? Alternatively, why do peace pacts break down in most cases? Conventionally, peacebuilding literature argues that the greed component of insurrection (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), the nature and preferences of regimes (Staniland 2021), the attitudes of

ISSN 2288-2693 Print, ISSN 2288-2707 Online

separatist leaders (King 1997), foreign involvement (Stein and Cantin 2021), and the failure to implement a peace pact (Call 2012; Khan 2022) contribute to extending intra-state war. Nevertheless, much of the literature on civil war (e.g., Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Walter 2006; Waterman and Holt 2025) provides very few clues to explain the impact of this intra- and inter-rebel fighting in the peace process. Instead, the conventional literature on civil war tends to frame intra-state armed conflict in relatively simplified terms—namely, as either a dyadic struggle between the government and rebels or as violence between two ethnic communities. The extant literature hardly addresses the complex structure of contemporary insurgency wars induced by what I term the "rebels against rebels syndrome," defined here as the phenomenon in which rival rebel groups fight each other within the same secessionist movement, despite the frequent presence of multiple competing rebel groups within such movements. Although several recent studies (Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012; Duursma and Fliervoet 2021; Johnson 2023; Robinson and Malone 2024; Walter 2006) emphasize factional politics within rebel organizations, they do not sufficiently explain how such internal conflicts shape pathways to peace, given their different research foci. These studies primarily focus on three aspects: first, the causes of internal disputes among rebel groups; second, whether and how peace negotiations exacerbate divisions among rebels; and third, why governments choose to negotiate with or confront particular rebel factions. Against this backdrop, this article asks: How do internal divisions among rebel groups negatively affect peace negotiations, the implementation of peace agreements in post-settlement contexts, and the escalation or diffusion of violence?

To answer this question, the article examines two relatively understudied South Asian cases that have experienced prolonged violent conflict: the Indian state of Nagaland and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh. Employing a qualitative approach and the structured, focused comparison method, the study analyzes the effects of multiple competing secessionist groups and the roles they play in hindering peaceful conflict resolution. Civil wars are primarily classified by two broad characteristics: power-sharing and self-determination or secession. This article focuses on secessionist rebels rather than resource- or power-seeking insurgents. Traditionally, the literature on civil wars has highlighted sub-Saharan countries where ethnic armed conflicts are driven by the quest for natural resources or central power. This article, however, aims to explore the influence of multiple secessionist groups, as secessionist struggles are common in Asian countries, including Myanmar, Indonesia, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka. On the one hand, the article will help us understand the structural complexities of the persistence of multiple rebel groups and their impact. On the other hand, common lessons drawn from the two case studies can be compared with most-similar system designs across different regions, enriching the literature on peacebuilding. Nagaland and the CHT have both been trapped in

a spiral of violence for over five decades. The Bangladesh case—the conflict in the CHT—examines why the region continues to experience violent conflict even three decades after the signing of a peace accord. This article also explores why the regional power, India, despite maintaining one of the world's largest military forces, has been unable to halt ethnic violence in the small state of Nagaland. Therefore, these cases are particularly valuable for understanding protracted secessionist wars and the peacebuilding challenges arising from rebel factionalism.

The article proceeds in four parts. First, it focuses the research gap that is competition among rebel groups, such as rebels fighting against rebels. It sets out the dual contest framework for analyzing the effect of fragmentation in the secessionist movement and develops an argument against the divide-and-conquer governmental policy toward rebels. Then, I explain the research method, the selection of the case studies, and the reason for adopting the data analysis method of *structured, focused comparison*. Following this, I briefly examine the origins and growth of the insurgency movements in Nagaland and the CHT as background to the conflicts. In the fourth part, the study discusses the two selected cases to assess the impact of factionalism and rebel leaders' motivations in the peace process. The concluding section presents the findings and policy implications.

Knowledge Gap: Rebels versus Rebels

Armed conflicts within and between rebel groups are ubiquitous. For example, insurgencies in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nagaland, Myanmar, Rwanda, Liberia, and Sudan are marked by multiple armed groups. The literature on insurgencies, however, primarily focuses on differences between the government and the rebels, which is a simplistic approach to understanding peaceful conflict resolution. Conversely, this article emphasizes the need to explore the role of various factions within rebel groups that significantly influence the outcome of protracted conflicts, seeking to fill a crucial gap in peace research.

In recent years, literature on peacebuilding has garnered significant attention, exploring various facets of peace, particularly how to cultivate lasting peace. Some scholars (e.g., King 1997; Walter 2006) argue that decisive victory produces more durable peace than agreements reached through negotiation, while others contend that peace pacts that include clear power-sharing provisions and third-party security guarantees are essential conditions for sustainable peace (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Werner 1999).

Almost two-thirds of insurgency movements are internally divided. For example, since the 1960s, only about 37 percent of self-determination movements could be considered unitary actors with one clear leader (Cunningham 2011,

275). Despite this reality, most studies on civil war termination largely consider rebel groups as unitary actors and pose simple recommendations for lasting peace. Scholars (e.g., Werner 1999; Call 2012) present four explanations for the failure of peace settlements: (1) the failure to resolve the issues in dispute and the persistence of violence (Fearon 2004; King 1997; Schlichte 2009; Werner 1999); (2) the problem of implementing the original settlement (Bala 2022; Panday and Jamil 2009); (3) inadequate provisions for power-sharing arrangements (Call 2012; Plank 2017); and (4) the absence of a third-party security guarantee in implementing peace agreements (Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Licklider 1995; Driscoll 2012). They do not, however, consider multiple rebel groups and their antagonistic demands within secessionist movements involved in civil war. We often see multiple armed groups in intra-state war, and numerous rebel groups are a potential obstacle to durable peace (Asal et al. 2012; Cunningham 2013; Johnson 2023; Rudloff and Findley 2016). Peace is more likely to endure if all belligerent parties are included in the settlement process. Even if a single splinter group is excluded and continues the armed conflict to attain its demands, it can destroy the peace process because it could destabilize the rebels who have signed the peace pact. Hence, this article stresses the importance of inclusiveness in the settlement and argues that excluded parties can jeopardize peace, not only by generating violence as outsiders to the accord but also by inducing a *commitment problem* among the parties. The violence originating from factionalism is not merely idiosyncratic but can break down the peace settlement. Unfortunately, this factor is ignored by the mainstream civil war literature.

Addressing this research gap, Fjelde and Nilsson (2012) suggest that rebels are conceptualized as a unitary actor, leaving no room for inter-rebel dynamics. Yet this unitary-actor assumption hardly reflects the empirical realities of most intra-state wars in which rebels are divided into multiple groups. By treating rebels as a unitary actor, most literature on civil conflict fails to consider the complexity of intra-state war. Therefore, violence between rebel groups persists and remains poorly understood. Although Fjelde and Nilsson (2012) explain the causes of armed conflict between rebel groups within some civil conflicts, they do not discuss the impact of these rivalries on the peace pathway. The literature suggests that peace processes increase the likelihood of rebel fragmentation, but there are few qualitative studies that empirically examine how rebel disintegration blocks or threatens pathways to peace. This article attempts to fill this gap by addressing the underdeveloped and theoretically inadequate analysis of the impact of factionalism. In the following section, I examine the existing theories that discuss the fragmentation of rebels and the determinants of peace and continued war. The following section also outlines the theoretical framework employed in this article.

Theoretical Arguments

Traditionally, it has been believed that tiny splinters do not play a significant role in ending armed conflict, because weaker parties lack the power to influence outcomes (Cunningham 2011; Fjelde and Nilsson 2018). This article, however, argues that although factionalism weakens a rebel group and creates weaker splinter groups, even small subgroups can block peace by causing commitment problems, mistrust, or violence. In recent years, an increasing number of civil war studies (e.g., Duursma and Fliervoet 2021; Robinson and Malone 2024; Rudloff and Findley 2016) have recognized that rebel fragmentation is very common in civil war. These studies assert that peace processes certainly enhance the prospects for resolving armed conflict. At the same time, they also suggest that negotiated settlements can increase the risk of rebel fragmentation and violence. As discussed, rebel groups are rarely united; they usually comprise multiple factions aligned around a common goal. A key argument of this article is that negotiating peace with such fragmented groups risks prolonging conflicts and creating an unintended deadly consequence—a death trap for both civilians and military personnel—as new splinter groups often emerge to undermine settlements. The greater the number of rebel groups, the more likely conflict and instability are to persist. It has been argued that divisions among the rebels obstruct both peace discussions and the implementation of peace agreements (Cunningham 2013). The government often fails to accommodate all rebel leaders within a power-sharing framework and acknowledge their divergent demands. Governments can only strike power-sharing agreements with a few leaders, which automatically excludes other groups from the peace negotiations.

Although mainstream literature has not adequately focused on rebel politics, some recent studies have included this topic in their discussions of peace negotiations. The theories and arguments raised in those studies primarily revolve around three explanations. The first explanation is that peace pacts and third-party mediation increase factional politics, as a negotiated settlement exacerbates pre-existing structural and substantive divisions within rebel organizations, and in many cases, rebels regard the terms of such agreements as less significant than their demands (Duursma and Fliervoet 2021; Johnson 2023; Lounsbery and Cook 2011; Rudloff and Findley 2016). For example, Johnson (2023) shows that around half of African rebel parties—46 of 101 cases in the sample —returned to war in the post-settlement period due to rebel group splintering. Duursma and Fliervoet (2021, 5) identify that different conflict dynamics—ranging from a peace process to organizational structure—can interact to cause rebel fragmentation.

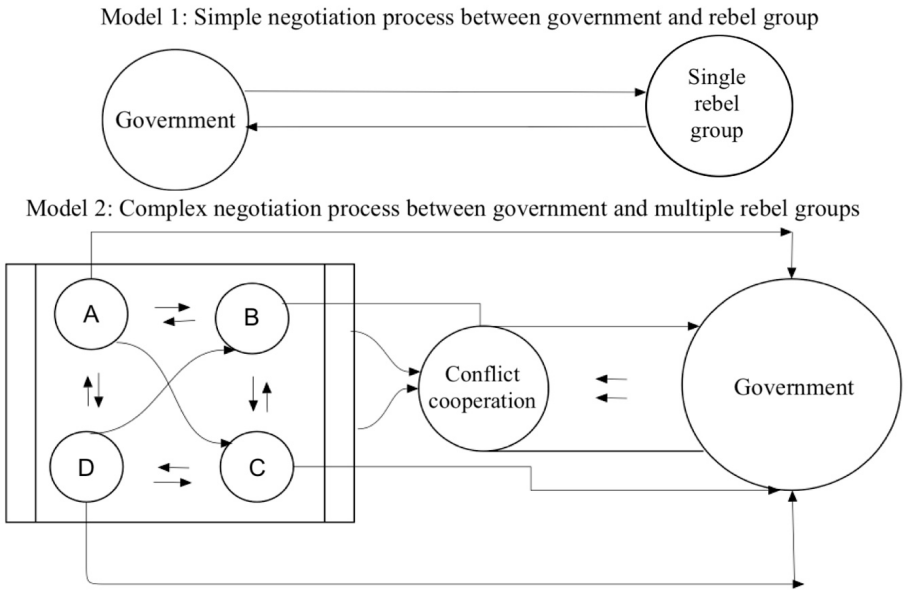
Second, factional politics create commitment problems, or what Stedman (1997, 5) refers to as *spoiler problems*, for rebel leaders as they are unable to implement the terms of the agreement in the rebel-held territories. The third explanation raised in recent studies suggests that governments follow a policy of

dividing rebels as part of their military strategy to undermine their chances of a clear victory (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2019; Cunningham 2011; Fjelde and Nilsson 2018; Pischedda 2020; Plank 2017). These studies argue that the internal strife among the numerous rebel groups for power provides the government with an opportunity to pursue a divide-and-conquer policy against the insurgents. By incentivizing specific groups and leaders, the government institutionalizes the politics of division among rebels and fragments their capacity for military success.

Civil war literature theorizes that rebels conduct their wars with two types of objectives: (1) to seize greater or complete power within the state structure or over natural resources (these are center-seeking or resource-seeking rebels), and (2) to achieve independent territory or greater autonomy by breaking away from the state (such as separatist rebels) (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Cunningham 2011; Walter 2006). Lewis and Widmeier (2022) assert that a country's geographical size influences whether emerging rebel groups seek to take control of central power or struggle for self-determination or secession from the state. They further argue that separatist wars tend to be prolonged because governments have limited options for splitting territory or granting greater autonomy to regions within their national borders. The two cases presented in this article are primarily secessionist wars as the rebel groups demand self-determination or regional autonomy. Among theorists, there is consensus that separatist wars rarely conclude through peace pacts, since there is little opportunity for rebels and governments to compromise (Call 2012; King 1997; Walter 2006). On the other hand, in power-centric wars, rebels can compromise because they do not wish to separate due to the limited size of the territory. Some scholars have claimed that the distance between the center and the conflict zone is a crucial factor in rebels' success in war or the implementation of peace agreements (Buhaug, Gates, and Lujala 2009). These factors (the complexity of secessionist war and center-to-conflict-periphery distance) may have a significant impact on peacebuilding. However, they cannot explain what role factionalism plays in ending war, despite the fact that both types of intra-state wars are often marked by multiple rebel groups—a "war within a war" dynamic.

The peace process does not solely depend on rebels; governments' treatment of rebels and their readiness for compromise play a crucial role in determining the path to peace. Walter (2006) claims that a government's peace policy or its discussions with the rebels hinges on its consideration of future risks. If a government considers that its compromise may give rise to multiple similar challenges across the country or different territories, it will build "a reputation for toughness," which can send a message of a non-compromising attitude towards secessionists (ibid., 313). Walter's reputation-building theory, however, cannot explain how multiple rebel groups and their factionalism affect peace negotiations in settings where the government is willing to sign a peace agreement.

Figure 1. Simple and Complex Negotiation Processes between Government and Rebel Group(s)



Source: Author's compilation.

Note: Figure 1 presents two models, or dual contest scenarios, of peace negotiations. The first is a simple linear model where a single rebel group is active in conflict, creating an opportunity for the government to continue negotiations with the rebel leadership. Such a situation was observed in the CHT, which is discussed in detail in the case analysis. In contrast, when multiple rebel groups (such as A, B, C, and D) operate in a conflict zone, peace negotiations become more complex and tend to follow a dual path of conflict and cooperation. In such situations, some groups may support peace initiatives, while others obstruct discussions. In response, the government typically adopts a cooperative stance towards the supporting groups and employs a confrontational strategy against those opposing the peace process. As a result, the presence of multiple rebel groups complicates the establishment of peace and increases the likelihood of prolonged violence.

This scholarship and these theories have not yet adequately addressed how multiple rebel groups obstruct the path to peace and why violence induced by factional politics endangers the lives of both rebels and the insurgent populace. Therefore, this article develops a theoretical framework to clarify why and how the presence of multiple rebel groups undermines the peace process. Figure 1 outlines this theoretical framework, presenting two models corresponding to different peace settlement scenarios. The core argument is that when rebels fragment into multiple groups, they create dual contests: one against the state (rebels versus government) and the other among the rebel groups (rebels versus rebels), which arise due to counterinsurgency, ideological/preferential differences, or group-based rivalries (Models 1 and 2 in Figure 1).

If one or two factions agree to a settlement, the remaining factions declare that they will not lay down arms without having their demands fulfilled. This situation makes peace more vulnerable since it undermines the peace between the government and the rebel group. In many cases, the peace-seeking group is attacked by other rebel groups who want to continue the war. Sometimes, the belligerent group compromises with other outlier groups to escalate the conflict with the government and undermine the initial success of the peace agreement. Such a situation has been seen at least twice in Nagaland. However, where rebels are united under a single rebel leader, it creates a linear negotiation between the government and the rebel party that at least produces an opportunity for successful peace, since it will not be vigorously challenged by other rebel groups (Model 1).

Conventionally, governments follow a divide-and-conquer logic to weaken rebel groups or self-determination movements (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2006). Internal divisions weaken rebels because they can no longer use their total strength against the government. Fractious groups find themselves torn by competitive violence and leaders' parochial interests that weaken their fighting capability and *esprit de corps*. Consequently, this is seen as an opportunity for governments to defeat rebels without offering concessions or power-sharing. For example, factions in the Sri Lankan Tamil Movement or the Chechen struggle in Chechnya (Russia) weakened the potential threat those movements could pose to their parent state. Internally divided separatist movements lose their overall strength because their splinters and subgroups do not work together to attain the goals for which they originally took up arms. They may even directly challenge the other groups' success or negotiation attempts. As a result, in many cases, they fail to force the state's power institutions to compromise. As Cunningham (2011, 276) argues, such rivalry between splinters decreases the fighting abilities of belligerents, distracting attention and effort away from challenging the state.

It is assumed that unified movements threaten the state more seriously than divided movements (Cunningham 2013; Doctor 2020). However, this policy is counterproductive as different factions make different demands to the state and compete with one another; in most cases, their competition is a zero-sum game. The emergence of several rebel groups makes peace very precarious as fragmented efforts cannot make credible commitments, which is one of the necessary conditions for an acceptable settlement. In addition, the leaders of the splinter groups indulge in personal and hereditary enmities that fuel them to continue violence. Therefore, this article argues that the fragmentation can not only inhibit negotiations but can also stimulate the collapse of agreed peace settlements. Even in relatively successful cases, breakaway factions among the belligerent parties can significantly delay the implementation of the peace pact.

When insurgents initiate armed conflict, they naturally deny the state's monopoly on arms and establish authority over the areas they control. The

situation becomes more complicated when multiple rebel groups compete because no sovereign institution in the war zone can compel rebel groups to implement agreements. While the government makes agreements with some groups, others continue to fight. Despite having the same goals, factions prefer to maintain their autonomy from one another and differ markedly in the strategies they employ. In most cases, neither the state nor the rebel factions know what kind of negotiation would resolve their violent conflict. Moreover, several groups can hinder negotiated settlements because there is a fear that some factions will continue the armed fight (Cunningham and Sawyer 2019). Violence may increase a faction's popularity among hardline community members. Some scholars (Kalyvas 2006; Schlichte 2009) suggest that factions use violence to establish their nationalist credentials and legitimacy, leading other factions to resort to violence. Therefore, as I argue, intra-state wars are resistant to positive outcomes due to inherent structural characteristics. One of them is the complex internal politics of warring rebel groups, which reproduces more violence, prolongs the insurgency, and affects the peace-making process. The factional politics of rebel groups is an underexplored phenomenon as it emphasizes dual contests—one with the government and the other among several splinter groups adhering to varied goals or ideologies. This concept of dual contests makes an insurgent movement extremely volatile and complex, and it consequently deserves careful attention.

Research Method, Data, and Case Selection

The research questions of this study have been approached with a qualitative comparative methodology. The study follows the structured, focused comparison approach, which is a systematic comparison method designed by George and Bennett (2005). They claim that through this method, researchers can precisely identify research gaps and appropriate theories, pick out the cases to be compared, and construct and apply a set of standard questions to each case. As the title implies, the method reflects two main characteristics: structured comparison and focused assessment.

The method is focused as it examines specific aspects of the cases being examined. At the same time, the approach is structured in the sense that the researcher fixes "general questions that reflect the research objective," and this set of questions acts as a guide and data collection strategy that ensures a systematic comparison (ibid., 67). This method can counter the drawbacks of a single case study; a single case study cannot address all the critical aspects of an event (ibid.). To apply this method in this study, I identified the research problem and two cases (the CHT and Nagaland) for analysis. Then, I developed a theoretical framework. After that, I formulated a standard set of criteria for comparison across each case and applied them to the CHT and Nagaland for data collection.

The issues compared were designed around the principal research question, which investigated four interlinked categories: (1) incentives and disincentives (idiosyncratic or personal motivations) that inflame factionalism within rebel groups; (2) how factionalism hindered peace negotiations before the peace pact was signed; (3) how factional politics reshaped post-conflict settings and the fate of the peace agreement; and (4) the nature of the violence and the primary targets of factionalism-driven conflict and its impact on peace.

I chose this method because, using a focused set of general questions, the role of rebel factionalism in peace settlements can be systematically examined and compared across the cases. Moreover, when we have only a few cases, this method is an effective tool for comparison and analysis. Since I am dealing with two cases and my study is qualitative, the structured, focused comparison method provides a useful framework for data collection and analysis because the use of a set of general questions can ensure the attainment of comparable data in comparative studies, which may help develop a specific explanation for answering the question (ibid., 69). I collected data from secondary sources, including rebel groups' statements, leaflets, and press releases, publications by rebel leaders and indigenous people, peace accords, interviews with rebel leaders (available on social media and television), newspaper articles, the websites and blogs of the rebel groups, and datasets provided by the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP).

A very valid question asks why this study adopted a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative approach, reflecting a dominant trend in peace and conflict studies. I chose the qualitative comparative case study method because I wanted this study to focus on the *why* and *how* questions that require narrative analysis. The adopted approach is suitable for understanding *how* rebel factional politics spark and block the peace pathways and *why* some splinters support peace negotiations while others oppose the process. Qualitative research is often regarded as particularly valuable for peace studies because peace and conflict are deeply human, context-dependent, and shaped by meaning, identity, and lived experiences, which can vary significantly from one setting to another (Gleason and Corlew 2019). My aim was to explore in depth the impact of rebel factions on CHT and Nagaland peace negotiations, rather than to generalize findings; for example, how and why the fragmentation of rebels negatively affects peacebuilding after a peace agreement is signed. Moreover, peace research has overwhelmingly focused on quantitative data and statistical modeling, comparing large datasets across many cases. While quantitative approaches are valuable for identifying patterns (such as correlations between peace pacts and the emergence of new splinters, relapses of armed conflict, and ceasefire violations), qualitative explanations offer rich, contextual insights, allowing in-depth investigation of complex issues. Bryman (2012) asserts that qualitative research is a data collection approach that allows researchers to explore deeper insights into research problems. Simply put, qualitative methods in peace research help

us understand, interpret, and explain the complex affairs of rebel governance and peacebuilding, though they draw from fewer cases than statistical methods. The approach is widely used for developing new conceptual and theoretical frameworks, understanding the tensions between different theories, and refining extant theories (Creswell and Poth 2018).

Reasons behind Case Selection: Convergence and Divergence Issues

The underlying factor that influenced my selection of the two case studies was my intention to examine two developing countries within the same continent or region, located outside of Africa, that exhibit different outcomes. Peace research has been overwhelmingly dominated by African cases (e.g., the DRC, Sudan, Rwanda, Somalia, Nigeria), which have experienced prolonged and violent ethnic conflict. Focusing on peace research in South Asian countries redirects conventional trends in conflict studies and attracts greater scholarly attention to the region, which mainstream peace research has largely overlooked due to the low intensity of violence. The findings of this study contribute to a broader dialogue between South Asian and sub-Saharan countries, fostering comparative and cross-regional qualitative analysis. However, this article draws on only two cases—two South Asian secessionist movements—with a qualitative research approach; no other civil wars inside or outside South Asia are examined. Therefore, the findings inherently face threats to external validity; for example, the results of this study cannot be generalized or applied to other cases. Even accepting this limitation, common lessons arising from the two case studies can be compared with most-similar system designs across different regions.

To effectively address the research questions and objectives, this study requires the inclusion of both a failed case and a successful case. I chose the CHT case as it has successfully maintained peace without large-scale violence since 1997 (Bala 2022). On the contrary, Nagaland presents a failed peace case, since the Indian state is still experiencing armed conflict. The framework of a peace deal was signed between the Indian government and a rebel group in 2015, but most of the rebel groups remain outside the peace settlement, and violence continues (Waterman 2020).

Moreover, these cases present points of convergence and divergence. When considering their similarities, both cases have British colonial legacies, under which they had substantial autonomy, which shaped their secessionist demands. For example, the CHT was ruled by the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation, 1900 (known as the CHT Manual), while Nagaland was part of a special administrative region, segregated from mainland India.

Furthermore, insurgents in Nagaland and the CHT have fought for self-determination and independence and have signed peace pacts with the govern-

ment. Both have similar areas and populations. The areas of Nagaland and the CHT are 16,579 square kilometers (Government of Nagaland, n.d.) and 13,344 square kilometers (Bala 2022, 4), respectively. The indigenous population of Nagaland is approximately 1.9 million, while in the CHT, it stands at 845,541 (ibid.). Lastly, both territories are hilly and situated on the peripheries.

However, the CHT and Nagaland also have differences. First, Nagaland had at least six rebel groups at the time of its first peace accord in 1975 (Bhaumik 2009), while the CHT had only one rebel group—the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF)—which signed the peace accord in 1997 (Jamil and Panday 2008). Second, insurgents in Nagaland largely identify with one Naga sub-tribe identity, as intra-ethnic conflict is very high in the region (Wouters 2018). In contrast, insurgents in the CHT are not based on any specific sub-tribal identity. UPDF members, for example, come from multiple sub-groups, such as Chakma, Marma, Lerma, and Tripura (Mohsin 2003).

Third, although peace pacts were signed in Nagaland in 1975 and 2015, the armed conflict has not ended. While the Indian government has made agreements with several fragmented factions, other rebel groups have not yet spurned the path of armed struggle (Waterman 2020). In contrast, violence in the CHT and the number of rebel groups are low. The peace agreement in Nagaland has not been effectively implemented, and over time, both violence and the number of rebel groups have increased (see Table 1). Finally, although the CHT and Nagaland share some similar features, they exhibit different outcomes regarding peace and violence. Nagaland is still recognized as a troubled zone due to the widespread violence of various rebel groups (Waterman and Holt 2025). On the other hand, although debate persists between the government and the rebel group regarding the implementation of the peace treaty in the CHT, armed conflict there has not relapsed.

Insurgency in Nagaland and Chittagong Hill Tracts: A Brief Prelude

Nagaland is a hill state in northeastern India, with a population of about two million recorded in the 2011 census that is religiously distinct (Baptist Christians) from India's dominant Hindu population. Nagaland claimed independence from British colonial rule two decades before India's independence. Even on the day before India gained independence, Naga leader Angami Zapu Phizo repeated the declaration of Nagaland's independence (Staniland 2021). Naga nationalist leaders claim that Nagaland was independent before British colonization and was never part of India at any point in history; for example, Nagaland was neither part of ancient India's Maurya Empire nor the Mughal Empire. Even during British rule, Nagaland enjoyed full autonomy. A separatist war, however, has raged in the region since 1956, as the Indian government ignored Naga leaders' demands for

autonomy and self-determination (Subramaniam 2021).

The problem of Nagaland is complex; the Nagas are divided as inhabitants of the two bordering countries in the region—India and Myanmar. The Naga people live throughout the vast hilly areas of the four Indian states of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh (Waterman and Holt 2025). That is, the former territory of Nagaland is divided into two states and four provinces within India, which were carved up by British colonizers and nationalist leaders of India. The Nagas are historically (and notoriously) known as "head-hunters" and are not a homogeneous ethnic group (Goswami 2020, 171). The forty tribes and sub-tribes living in the Naga hills are commonly known as Naga tribes. They have been engaged in protracted inter-tribal conflicts that have influenced the formation of their clan-based areas and contemporary rebel formations and insurgent activities. A peace agreement was signed between the Government of India and the Naga National Council (NNC) in 1975, almost two decades after the start of the separatist war, but it failed to bring peace. Instead, it gave rise to bloodshed among the rebels. Although a ceasefire has been declared in Nagaland since 1997, state-rebel and inter-rebel armed conflicts continue.

The CHT is a troubled periphery of Bangladesh, accounting for about 10 percent of the country's total area and one percent of its population. The indigenous population is divided into eleven sub-ethnic groups distinct in religion, tradition, and language from the larger population of Bangladesh, Bengalis (Jamil and Panday 2008). These indigenous groups, known as Jummas and Paharis, possess ethnocultural affinities with the Sino-Tibetan ethnic group (Chakma 2024, 534). The CHT was transferred from British India to Pakistan when the British colony dissolved and the states of India and Pakistan emerged. The CHT had enjoyed autonomy in British India, but that autonomy was abolished during the Pakistan period, and a large indigenous population became refugees as a result of various development projects by Pakistan (Chakma 2017, 223). When Bangladesh gained independence after its separation from Pakistan, the CHT region was connected to Bangladesh for geographical reasons based on the borders of East Pakistan (Chakma and D'Costa 2013). To the nationalist leaders of independent Bangladesh, the hill tribes presented a four-point demand for their autonomy: (1) recognition of their separate identity and tribal community; (2) autonomy for the CHT; (3) formation of their own legislative council; and (4) a ban on the migration of Bengalis to the region.

Contrary to the indigenous peoples' claims of separate nationality, the new constitution of Bangladesh referred to all those living within its borders as Bengalis, thereby giving rise to fragmented citizenship in the far periphery. To protect their political rights, the tribal groups formed the political organization, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Janahati Samiti, in 1972. Ethnic tensions in the hills erupted into direct conflict when the military seized power in Bangladesh in 1975 and launched a crackdown on separatists in the name of state integrity. Under

state patronage, poor Bengalis migrated to the hills in large numbers, while victims of military operations and frightened tribal populations fled to India. As a result of the Bengali population transplantation program, in 1991 Bengalis comprised almost half of the total population in the hills region, compared to only 2 percent in 1947 when the British left the region (Alauddin 2017). In 1997, after two decades of armed conflict, a peace accord was signed between the Bangladeshi government and the rebels, which remains in place with various tensions and disputes over its non-implementation.

Development of Factional Politics in Nagaland

Nagaland's insurgent politics is characterized by factional conflict and tribalism, which have made peace talks very uncertain. Table 1 demonstrates that, between 1954 and 2020, at least fifteen rebel groups have emerged in Nagaland.

Although the ethnic groups Angami and Sema jointly initiated the Naga insurgency in the 1950s, by the 1960s, conflict between the two groups was apparent (Baruah 2020). The Naga National Council (NNC) was formed under Phizo's leadership and first split over tribalism in 1968. The Sema tribal group formed a new splinter group, the Revolutionary Government of Nagaland (RGN), to challenge the Angami tribal group, though they unconditionally surrendered to the government the following year (Wouters 2018). From that point, Phizo led the Naga movement single-handedly until 1975. After the Shillong Accord between the NNC and the Government of India, three influential leaders of the Naga rebels (Thuingaleng Muivah, Isak Swu, and S. S. Khaplang) opposed the accord and reorganized their allies into a new rebel group called the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), which split yet again in 1988 when Khaplang left the NSCN to form a new armed group, the NSCN-K (SATP 2025). Over time, the NNC split into two more factions due to ideological and power clashes. The rebels engaged in further armed warfare among themselves and spawned several new sub-groups when a ceasefire was declared in 1997. At least seven more factions emerged between 2015 and 2022 when the Government of India approached with liberal offers to give peace a chance. A large number of factions remain outside the framework agreement (see Table 1).

The factional politics of Naga insurgent groups is heavily determined by tribalism (inter-tribal conflict). Scholars (e.g., Hussain 2011; Wouters 2018) have shown that, historically, Naga tribes have engaged in bloody struggles against each other over land and regional dominance. The British strengthened and institutionalized tribalism by creating separate administrative areas for different Naga groups (Goswami 2020). Naga leaders sometimes speak against tribalism, but it appears to be lip service as the factions recruit cadres from specific ethnic communities, and tribal connections are the power base of their leaders. Table 2

Table 1. Factional Divisions of Rebels in Nagaland and Their Interactions with the Government

Group Name and Abbreviation	Group from Which It Was Formed	Year Formed	Involved in Peace Pact/Dialogue
Naga National Council, NNC	Parent Body	1954	Cooperation
Revolutionary Government of Nagaland, RGN	NNC	1968	Cooperation
NSCN (Isak Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah), NSCN-IM	NNC	1980	Cooperation and conflict
NSCN (Khango Konyak), NSCN-K2	NSCN		Cooperation and conflict
NNC (Non-Accordist), NNC-NA	NNC	1990	Cooperation
NNC (Government Democratic Republic of Nagaland), NNC-GDRN	NNC	1990	Cooperation
NSCN (Kitovi Neopak), NSCN-NK	NSCN (KK)	2017	Cooperation and conflict
NSCN- Reformation, NSCN-R	NSCN (K)	2015	Cooperation
Naga Nationalist Political Groups, NNPGs	NSCN and NNC	2019	Cooperation
Zeliangrong United Front, ZUF	NSCN (IM)	2017	Outside of ceasefire and peace pact
NSCN (Khaplang), NSCN-K	NSCN (IM)	1988	Outside of ceasefire and peace pact
NSCN (Khole-Kitovi), NSCN-KK	NSCN (K)	1997	Outside of ceasefire and peace pact
NSCN-K (Khango Konyak), NSCN-K-KK	NSCN (K)	2017	Signed ceasefire agreement, but refused peace pact
NSCN-K (Yung Aung), NSCN-K-YA	NSCN-K-KK	2018	Outside of ceasefire and peace pact
NSCN-K (Nikki Sumi), NSCN-K-NS	NSCN (K-YA)	2020	Signed ceasefire agreement, but refused peace pact

Source: Author's compilation, from SATP (2025), Staniland (2021), Waterman and Holt (2025), and Wouters (2018).

Note: Six different factions of the NSCN and NNC joined under the banner of the NNPGs.

demonstrates that all rebel factions consist of certain Naga sub-tribes. For example, NSCN-IM rebels are ethnically from the Ao and Manipur-based Tangkhul clans, while Khaplang rebels' roots are in the Konyak, one of the largest sub-tribes of Nagaland.

Table 2. Insurgent Groups and Their Members' Tribal Affiliations

Faction/Group	Main Leaders	Leader's Sub-tribe	Members' Ethnic Base
RGN	Kaito Sema	Sema	Sema
NNC (Adino)	Adino Phizo	Angami	Angami and Chakesang
NNC (Khodao)	General Khodao	Lotha	Lotha
NSCN-IM	Isak	Sema	Ao, Sema, Manipur-based Tangkhul and Zeliang
	Muivah	Manipuri Tangkhul	
NSCN-K	Khaplang	Konyak (Burmese)	Konyak
ZUF	Kamson	Zeliangrong	Zeliangrong
NSCN (KK)	Khole Konyak	Konyak (Nagaland)	Konyak and Zhimomi
	Kitovi Zhimomi	Zhimomi	

Source: Author's compilation, from Goswami (2020), Staniland (2021), and SATP (2025).

The two prominent leaders of the NSCN-IM, Isak Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, are members of the Tangkhul Nagas of Manipur and the Sema Nagas of Central Nagaland, respectively. The Naga tribes have different languages and histories of living in separate areas; they consider tribal identity more important for protecting their interests and identities than exclusive Naga nationalism (Baruah 2020, 107). Moreover, the intervention and counterinsurgency by the Indian Army and intelligence have fueled the creation of dozens of rebel splinters over time (Goswami 2012). In most cases, the Naga rebels split during or after a ceasefire or accord.

Bhaumik (2007, 10) reports that India's counterinsurgency strategy in Nagaland was based on three fundamental principles: (1) splitting the NNC (rebels) by utilizing the contacts established during the negotiations; (2) negotiating with faction chiefs and tribal leaders to ensure the submission of the rebels by exploiting historical tribal enmity; and (3) blocking Pakistan-China support and entry and exit routes for the guerrillas. During the first ceasefire (1964-1972), the NNC was divided, and at least half a dozen splinter groups emerged after the peace arrangement in 2015 (see Table 1). Naga leader Phizo blamed India's intelligence for the group's breakup (Swu 2013). Even the Federal Government of Nagaland leader Scato Swu (2013) admitted in his autobiography that he had received support from government agencies to form the new group and to surrender and rehabilitate 1,500 of his followers.

Again, NSCN-IM leaders Swu and Muivah alleged that the Khaplang faction, with the help of the Indian Army's weapons and planning, attacked their camp in 1988 and killed hundreds of rebels (Swu and Muivah 1989). To include more rebels in the peace talks after 2015, the Indian government helped create

numerous factions among the rebels and brought them into the agreement framework through various undisclosed terms and offers (see Table 1). For example, the NNC broke into multiple factions, while the hardline Khaplang was kept out of the agreement, but the army managed to get its various factions to agree to a ceasefire. The government has already formed a peace alliance of seven factions—the Naga National Political Groups (NNPGs), which are negotiating with the government on conflicting agendas (SATP 2025). More recently, the Indian government has mobilized various marginalized ethnic groups in East Nagaland (e.g., Eastern Nagaland People's Organization [ENPO]) against the elite Naga leaders in West and Central Nagaland as they demand a separate settlement for the East (e.g., an autonomous East Administrative Region), challenging the dominance of advanced Naga tribes such as the Angami, Sema, Ao, Lotha, and Manipuri Tangkhul (Yhoshü 2023).

Consequences of Factional Politics in Nagaland

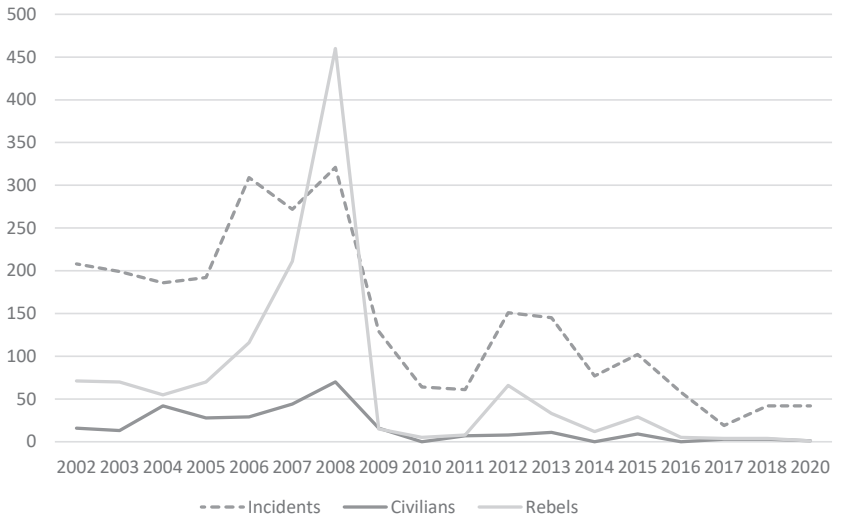
The factional politics and internal hostilities of the rebels pose severe challenges to any peace settlement. Every time an agreement was reached, it created expectations among the Nagas for an enduring peace, be it the Naga Akbar Hydari Accord of 1947, the Sixteen Point Agreement of 1960, the Shillong Accord of 1975, the Indo-Naga Ceasefire Agreement of 1997, or the Peace Agreement of 2015. All peace attempts, however, failed to generate a long-lasting pathway to peace due to internal competition among the rebels. If one faction agreed to a peace accord or ceasefire, another faction declared an armed insurgency to pursue its demands. After the first ceasefire in 1964, for example, leaders of a section of the NNC participated in peace talks; Phizo, however, declared that the struggle would continue. Again, two decades after the 1975 Shillong Accord, a ceasefire was signed between the NSCN-IM and the Government of India in 1997. The NSCN-K, however, opposed the ceasefire because it lacked provisions for a Greater Nagaland and Naga sovereignty (Goswami 2017). Once again, a peace accord was signed between the NSCN-IM and the Government of India in 2015. Due to sensitivity, the Indian government did not disclose the terms and conditions of the peace accord.

Although the rest of the rebel factions initially refused to accept the peace accord, seven factions eventually signed the pact between 2016 and 2021. However, this is just one side of the coin; the opposite side shows that rebels have continued to form new factions to oppose the deal (Table 1). Leaders like Phizo and Khaplang opposed the new accord, saying that those who signed the accord would be betraying the Naga movement. The rebels played a similar card after the Shillong Accord in 1975; that was when the NSCN emerged from the Naga National Council (NNC) (Swu 2013).

Since the 1980s, multiple rebel groups have emerged in Nagaland. As a result, the rebels have lost much of their ability to exert collective pressure on the government to pursue their demands (Staniland 2017). The success of the government's intelligence and military has reinforced its strategy of avoiding direct confrontation with united guerrillas on the battlefield, reflecting the British colonial policy of divide and rule. However, the divide-and-conquer policy of the Indian government is simultaneously a harmful counterinsurgency strategy in rebel governance. The presence of numerous rebel groups makes it extremely difficult to bring them under the banner of a peace settlement; multiple splits have reproduced violence and created further fragmentation. For example, six factions still oppose the 2015 agreement (see Table 1). Although excluded rebels have declared an ineffective ceasefire, they continue to engage in counterattacks. Most alarmingly, the signatory parties—the NNPGs comprising seven rebel splinter groups—have already accused the Indian government of following the historical path of deception and announced that there would be bloodshed and war if the government modifies *the framework agreement* through fabrication (SATP 2025).

As Muivai, the general secretary of NSCN-IM, reaffirmed in a press release, the Government of India has recognized the Nagas' right to self-determination, autonomy (shared sovereignty), reunification, and their own constitution and flag in the treaty. Yet the government, Muivai continued, now refuses to accept these terms, stating that the Government of India tried to offer a new edited version of 16-Point Agreement (16-PA) at the cost of betraying the framework agreement (Talukdar 2024). Consequently, Muivai warned that the future of peace is uncertain as the government does not compromise under the Indian Constitution. The worst is that some factions of this alliance want the Naga areas of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam to be outside Nagaland. The government has tied different groups to different strategies and promises, conflicting with the basic demands of diverse groups, which has compelled the government to keep the pact framework private. Waterman (2020) suggests that the agreement has become deadlocked as NSCN-IM is stubborn about a separate constitution and flag for the Nagas. In addition, the state parliaments of Manipur and Assam have univocally decided not to hand over the Naga areas, a serious challenge to the demand for a greater Nagalim. The Shillong Accord (1975) and recent peace dialogues suggest that a peace settlement without political and constitutional recognition of the Nagas' problem may lead to further divisions among the rebel groups. For example, the NSCN emerged from the NNC, as the split opposed a settlement that did not include autonomy and the reunification of Naga land. Again, the Khaplang group of the NSCN attacked the Muivah group to interrupt peace talks with the Indian government. The risk of fragmentation and conflict between rebel groups discourages rebel leaders from accepting a reasonable peace settlement.

Figure 2. Insurgency-Related Killings in Nagaland (2002-2023)



Source: SATP (2025) and Union Ministry of Home Affairs (2019).

Moreover, different rebel groups make it difficult to build effective peace, as it is impossible to reconcile the conflicting and multifaceted demands of the rebels. For example, one faction of the rebels wants a solution to the Nagaland issue with full or partial autonomy within the present Nagaland boundaries. Some other groups have demanded the establishment of a new state called Nagalim constituting the greater Naga-inhabited areas spread over the Naga hills with recognition of their new constitution (Goswami 2017). An arrangement with just one faction will rarely lead to a resolution of the problem, since factions outside the settlement would continue fighting. King (1997) argues that rebel leaders continue to struggle to achieve a military victory despite a low probability of success because leaders may worry that a negotiated peace be used by rival factions within their own camp as a pretext for unseating them. Furthermore, the greed element of secessionist war and the belligerent leaders' aspirations for dominance may then replace the struggle for nationhood and self-determination. So, rebel leaders logically look for ways to prolong the war rather than end it. Insurgents' use of weapons, killings, looting, kidnapping, and extortion has caused civil disorder in Nagaland. The province has been India's declared troubled periphery since the 1950s, with minimal access for tourists, humanitarian organizations, or researchers. Furthermore, the factions are not committed to a ceasefire. They have attacked civilians, rebels, and security forces unpredictably. As Figure 2 shows, between 2002 and 2015, more than 1,500 people were killed, including 786 rebels.

The presence of numerous insurgent groups in Nagaland has established the

shared sovereignty of various groups, which, on the one hand, has legitimized rebels' coercion, taxation, looting, trafficking of arms and drugs, racketeering, and armed conflict. Baruah (2020, 110) correctly points out that the Indian government has made considerable compromises on power sharing and its monopoly over taxation. Unarmed citizens in areas controlled by rebel groups are living in a culture of fear. Two quotes from scared civilians that emerged from ethnographic research are enough to prove this point: "I fear that my life or my family's life will be in danger if we do not pay the taxes demanded by the factions," and "the factions/army will come and hurt my family if I say something against them" (Zagefka and Jamir 2015, 46).

On the other hand, in the name of territorial integrity, security forces have converted the area into an exceptional zone. Goswami (2020) has shown that rebels are now more visible in Nagaland as they are a formal part of the peace arrangement, and people are forced to pay taxes to multiple groups. The question of human rights in Nagaland has become largely ignored; the Indian army and intelligence agencies have the right to disrupt the life of any person who raises questions about national security, and they routinely do so by abducting suspects. The ongoing negotiations have suffered near derailment in the past for various reasons, ranging from divisions among the different tribes and clans within the Nagas to NSCN-IM's insistence on a separate Naga flag and constitution. Moreover, there has been a practice of extortion and collection of illegal taxes by the cadres of different armed groups, including the NSCN-IM and NSCN-K, which ensures substantial income. If the peace talks are successful, these illegal extortions will certainly come to an end. Many rebel splinter groups in the Naga peace process do not want any disruption to this well-established system of illegal taxation, and they therefore make every attempt to delay the completion of the peace process, so that they may continue taking advantage of the cloak of ceasefire for their illegal activities (Kumar 2023).

Next, I discuss the CHT case, which simultaneously presents two contrasting pictures: first, how the integrity of a single rebel group helps to build a pathway to peace, and second, how the fragmentation of rebels transforms peace into violent conflict.

Absence of Factions and a Peace Pact in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord was the result of a long political process initiated by the Government of Bangladesh. Military officer-turned-politician General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) transplanted Bengali settlers to the CHT in 1976, which gave rise to indigenous resistance and a guerrilla movement (Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission 1991). Zia tried to sign a peace deal but failed due to a lack of trust between and within the involved parties (Mohsin 2003).

Table 3. PCJSS Demands and Attainment Performance

Initial Demands	Output of Peace Settlement	Comments on Attainment of Demands
(1) Regional autonomy for the CHT	A regional council for a local government recognized by the Constitution	Moderately achieved as regional council approves all development works
(2) Removal of Bengali settlers	Special status for the CHT as a tribal-inhabited region and halt Bengali migration	Not achieved but succeeded to stop new migration
(3) Withdrawal of all military camps from the CHT	Withdrawal of security forces and military camps from the CHT	Partly achieved; 116 military camps withdrawn
(4) Retainment of the CHT Manual of 1900 for local government	Partial retainment of the CHT Manual of 1900 by approving chief circle	Partially achieved
(5) Recognition of distinct ethnic identity	Constitutional recognition of ethnic minorities	Fully achieved

Source: Author's compilation, from Mohsin (2003) and PCJSS (2017).

Like Zia, General Hussain Mohammad Ershad (Zia's successor as president) also tried to negotiate a peace deal. The Ershad government held six meetings with the CHT rebel group, Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS), but failed to reach an agreement. This failure led to a split among the rebels, and in 1983, rebel leader Manabendra Narayan Larma (often referred to as MN Larma) was killed, along with eight of his deputies, by a faction led by Priti Kumar Chakma (UPDF 2023). Allegedly, General Ershad had caused the splintering of the rebels that led to Larma's death, and subsequently lured the Priti faction to surrender.

Nevertheless, Priti faction failed to make peace. MN Larma's younger brother, Santu Larma, emerged as the rebels' sole leader after the Priti group surrendered, preventing another party breakup and continuing the armed struggle. The surrender drama suggested that the peace deal would only be sustained with the participation of the PCJSS, since the PCJSS had initiated the armed struggle on behalf of the indigenous people. Facing this reality, in 1988, the Government of Bangladesh undertook another attempt at peace. At the negotiation table, the rebel leaders were very rigid about their five-point demands, which are presented in Table 3.

These demands were rejected based on state sovereignty and the Bangladeshi Constitution. Instead, the Government of Bangladesh offered a solution within the framework of the constitution. The key PCJSS leaders, however, refused to consider the government's proposal and withdrew from the negotiation table (PCJSS 2017).

The second negotiation phase was initiated by the return of a democratic

government in 1991. The newly elected prime minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, argued for a political solution to the ethnic problem (Mohsin 2003). This announcement opened a new gateway for a peace settlement, and both the government and the PCJSS declared a ceasefire. Thirteen rounds of peace talks, however, failed to produce a settlement (PCJSS 2017). Then, a new government, led by the Awami League party, came to power in 1996 and extended the ceasefire to express goodwill for a peaceful settlement. It was clear to the Awami League that a total victory by war would be almost impossible in the remote mountainous Chittagong region, as it had not been possible in two decades; moreover, it would lead to massive bloodshed. On the other hand, the PCJSS also realized that defeating the Bangladesh Army through guerrilla warfare was impossible. This context of shared constraint pushed both sides toward a win-win peace settlement, avoiding the lip service of the past. This study finds that the peace agreement's main clauses reflected the rebels' primary demands (see Table 3), demonstrating that the presence of a single rebel group made peace negotiations much easier for the Bangladesh government. In this case, the government did not have to deal with conflicting demands from multiple rebel groups or the zero-sum game of leaders' gains or the distribution of future benefits.

As there were no significant conflict or competition among the rebels (in contrast to the situation in Nagaland) and communities, the Government of Bangladesh could sign a peace settlement solely with the PCJSS. The absence of rebel group factions made the decision-making process easier; the sole rebel leader, Larma, could settle all issues without fearing replacement or further fragmentation. Since no other rebel leader challenged his leadership and authority during the peace talks, Larma had greater bargaining power to achieve the group's demands. Table 3 suggests that the rebels did not have to curb their demands, except for some rhetorical concessions in the peace agreement; they fulfilled their demands. After signing the peace pact, he became the chairman of the CHT Regional Council in 1998. As of this writing, Larma still holds the post and defends the peace pact.

Growing Divisions among Rebels, and Violent Peace in the CHT

In this section, I discuss how the rebels of the CHT split after the peace accord and created conflict among themselves, and how this has affected public life and the peace settlement. The historiography shows that a year after the signing of the peace agreement, a small rebel group, the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), emerged from the PCJSS in opposition to the agreement (Chakma 2014; Mohsin 2003). The splinter group announced, however, that it would pursue a democratic struggle to establish full autonomy in the CHT (UPDF 2006). That is, the group did not identify as an armed group. This splinter group has tried to

Table 4. Factional Division and Clashes of Rebels in the CHT

Group	Group from Which It Was Formed	Year of Formation	Causalities (Killed)	Key Demand(s)	Involvement with Government
PCJSS	Parent Body	1972	208	Implementation of peace accord	Cooperation
UPDF	PCJSS	1998	318	Full autonomy, implementation of peace accord	Cooperation and conflict
PCJSS-MN Larma	PCJSS	2007	92	Full regional autonomy	Cooperation and conflict
UPDF-Democratic	UPDF	2017	11	Implementation of peace accord	Cooperation
KNF	PCJSS	2017	11	Separate region for Kuki-Chin	Violent conflict Forbidden/Banned

Source: Author's compilation, from SATP (2022), PCJSS (2023), and UPDF (2006).

increase its influence through political participation in local elections, as opposed to conducting armed operations against the government. Table 4 demonstrates that, over time, an additional three rebel groups emerged and engaged in violence.

Larma's PCJSS broke up again in 2008, and unsatisfied members and supporters of the PCJSS formed a new group called Jana Sanghati Samiti-MN Larma.

In 2017, the UPDF, which was formed to demand full autonomy, similarly split in two (Singh 2022). The new group became known as UPDF-Democratic, which moved away from the demand for full autonomy, emphasizing instead the full implementation of the peace agreement. Another new armed group, the Kuki-Chin National Front, has recently emerged in the hills with a new demand: to create an autonomous region for the Kuki-Chinese community inside the CHT (Sarkar 2023). This organization has developed ties with Islamic militant organizations that pose national security problems (Das 2023).

Although the five groups in the mountains have not carried out large-scale attacks on the Bangladesh government, army, or police, they have started violent conflicts to spread their dominance (Singh 2020). The ongoing conflict in the CHT is less intense than in Nagaland; however, it gradually destabilizes the region. According to data compiled by SATP (Singh 2022), in the last twenty-five years (1997-2022), at least five rebel factions have emerged in the CHT, and at least 640 rebels have been killed in inter-group clashes (Table 4). Among them, 318 belong to the anti-agreement UPDF faction led by Prasit Khisa, and 208 are pro-agreement supporters of PCJSS led by Santu Larma. After twenty-five years since the peace agreement, the army started a clean-up operation in the CHT in 2022.

As a result, there is fear that a major armed conflict could begin in the mountains at any time. The PCJSS, the parent rebel body, blames the government and the army for the rise of factions, stating that the government created several splits among the rebels to reduce their strength, fueling the various groups to attack each other. In a report on the human rights situation in the CHT, the PCJSS (2023) claimed that state forces have created four pro-army armed terrorist groups against the PCJSS to thwart the accord implementation process. In this process, the government gets two benefits.

First, since the rebels are engaged in internal conflicts, they cannot exert enough pressure on the government to implement the peace agreement or to protect the rights of the indigenous people. Second, the government gains space to maintain army patrols and camps and avoid implementing the peace agreement. While it is difficult to prove that the government of Bangladesh has engineered divisions among the rebels and turned them against each other—because conflicts of interest among the tribal groups and leadership competition are evident—the government's understanding of the splinter groups and the negotiations provides insights into Bangladesh's counterinsurgency. When the UPDF was formed in opposition to the peace accord, the signatory PCJSS demanded the banning of the new group. Seeing the government's inflexibility, PCJSS (2023) complained that the government was patronizing the new faction to reduce tribal power. We also saw that the newly formed groups (e.g., UPDF [Democratic] and PCJSS [MN Larma]) allied with the ruling Awami League party and helped the Awami League win the region's three constituencies (Singh 2020).

Some current factions in the hills fight for an independent Jummaland, some for full autonomy, while others have economic interests. People live in a culture of fear as a result of rebel conflicts and rivalries in the remote mountains. Many Bengali and tribal traders are forced to pay taxes or extortion fees to multiple groups (Islam, Schech, and Saikia 2022). Many observers say the groups are at loggerheads with each other in the hope of winning local government elections, engaging in extortion, and gaining additional benefits from the government (Singh 2020). Along with regular killings, kidnappings, and extortion, these groups have developed the region's illegal arms, timber, and drug smuggling networks (Choudhury and Chowdhury 2023). Because of the direct participation of the rebels, the CHT has become one of the main routes for smuggling drugs in South Asia. The income from the drug and arms trade is being used again to buy new weapons and recruit rebels (Patwary 2023). As a result, the politics of terror, smuggling, and murder are being reproduced persistently in the hills, which makes the peace settlement very fragile and complex. The rise of multiple rebel groups and their factional violence have already created a culture of fear, as attacks in villages and disappearances in the hilly region have become almost regular incidents (Bal and Siraj 2017, 674).

Discussion

This article demonstrates that the governmental divide-and-conquer policy toward rebel groups may be counterproductive, as it often produces multiple factions with different demands and goals. This makes the peace process very uncertain, since bringing together all the splinter groups at the negotiating table is difficult. The findings show that factionalism has created complex dual-contest scenarios in each of the two case studies. This includes both rebel-versus-government and rebel-versus-rebel scenarios, as shown in Figure 1, Model 2. These dynamics foster a vicious cycle of mistrust, commitment problems, and a prevalence of violence. The Bangladesh government was able to sign a peace accord with the CHT rebels because—at that time—the insurgents were unified under one leader. In the decades after the peace agreement, however, several factions emerged among the rebels, which created obstacles to implementing the peace accord and led to escalating violence. Therefore, scholars (Chakma and D'Costa 2013; Choudhury and Chowdhury 2023) have referred to the peace process in the CHT as a *violent peace* in the context of widespread and ongoing violence.

In Nagaland, there are fifteen rebel groups, and each one is subdivided into smaller groups (see Table 1; Waterman and Holt 2025, 17). Members of the rebel groups are recruited along ethnic lines—the main rebel leaders of the Naga insurgency come from different tribes. There are historical rivalries between the tribes and personality clashes among the rebel leaders as they all claim superiority. These factors make peace difficult in Nagaland. Bringing together all the factions at the negotiating table is a difficult task in Nagaland, since they have differing strategic aims, personal/group interests, and tribal loyalties. The key leaders of the factions also have personality clashes. For example, the NSCN-IM and the NSCN-K leaders exhibit personality clashes and sub-tribal rivalries (Swu 2013; Brahmachari 2019).

Moreover, the key rebel leaders of Nagaland are always afraid of negotiated peace because it may be used as a cause of splits by a rival faction within their own camp. Naga rebel leaders, by and large, have consequently avoided a peace settlement. Suppose, for example, that one or two factions were to agree to a settlement. If that were the case, the remaining factions might declare that they will not accept any peace agreement without the sovereignty of Nagaland and will continue the insurgency movement for the independence of Nagaland. In 2015, a framework agreement was signed between the NSCN-IM and the Government of India. The NSCN-IM leadership has shown flexibility regarding Nagaland's sovereignty since it accepted the constitutional framework (Kumar 2023). The provisions of the framework were not disclosed. Still, some rebel factions act as spoilers of the peace settlement. Therefore, it is uncertain whether the accord can establish peace in the Naga hills after all.

In contrast, the CHT presents different conditions for the rebel leaders. MN Larma and his brother, Santu Larma, were the foremost leaders who started the war against the Bengali settlers and the military in the first place. After the assassination of MN Larma, Santu Larma became the sole leader of the insurgent group. During the conflict, he was exiled in Tripura and Assam, India, where he organized and operated the rebel forces, known as the Santi Bahini. Between 1985 and 1997, Larma established firm control over the indigenous rebels and succeeded in resisting factions within the PCJSS. Since there were no factions among the insurgents, Larma could decide on a peace settlement.

The presence of multiple armed groups created a fundamental difference between Nagaland and the CHT that produced different outcomes in the peace process. Nagaland fell into continued violence due to rebels' internal rivalries, and the CHT established peace, albeit with some tensions. These two cases show that the governmental divide-and-conquer policy toward rebel groups does not work effectively to end insurgencies; instead, it makes the peace process very complex.

The emergence of multiple rebel groups after the peace settlement in the CHT teaches us that guarantees of peace in post-conflict societies are highly fragile, especially if rebels engage in inter-group conflict. On the one hand, it makes the government and the army hesitant about implementing all the conditions of the peace agreement. On the other hand, it creates tax zones for multiple rebel groups, which upsets the lives of ordinary tribal populations. Despite the conditions of the agreement, the government is not withdrawing all of its army camps from the region for fear of jeopardizing public security and possible secessionist movements. The CHT case proves that it is easier to settle a peace agreement and establish peace if no visible, substantial faction exists within a separatist armed group. The peace deal was possible in 1997 because the PCJSS was led by Santu Larma alone, and there was no strong opposition within the PCJSS or from the indigenous community. Currently, at least five groups are trying to establish dominance in the mountains, which could turn into a full-fledged armed struggle at any time.

The models used in this study reflect the realities of the separatist movements in the CHT and Nagaland, namely, that the presence of multiple rebel groups complicates peace negotiations and perpetuates a spiral of violence. Alternatively, the presence of a single rebel group provides the government with an opportunity to successfully conduct peace talks, as it encounters fewer spoiler and commitment problems. This model, or dual contest theory, is broadly applicable to states in sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, Sudan is a classic example where multiple rebel groups have hindered peace efforts. The dominant Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) splintered into multiple factions, including the SPLA-North, SPLA-South, and various dissident militias. Local historical ethnic divisions (namely, the Dinka versus the Nuer), competition over the control of oil fields, and disagreements about governance

structures have given rise to these groupings. Repeatedly, discussions for an effective peace agreement have been hindered when rival factions refused to sign a deal within a common framework or were excluded from negotiations, thereby undermining the legitimacy of the agreement. Different rebel groups hold distinct perspectives about Sudan's future political system due to their bases of support, ideologies, and economic interests, making it challenging to find a common platform for dialogue. For instance, previous agreements like the Abuja and Doha processes failed to bring all armed groups in Sudan to the negotiating table, which subsequently undermined the sustainability of peace agreements. Groups excluded from the negotiations of such agreements (e.g., the Koka Dam Declaration [1986]) have weakened the agreements through continued violence. The conflict-ridden regions of Sudan, such as Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and Blue Nile, are controlled by different groups that instigated a broader civil war in 2023.

Similarly, the politics of various powerful rebel groups in the eastern DRC (such as M23, the Allied Democratic Forces, Mai-Mai, and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda) illustrate how the fragmentation of armed groups creates an uncertain environment in which the implementation of peace agreements becomes exceedingly difficult. Each group in the DRC has its own political objectives, ethnic foundations, regional networks, and external patronage (Human Rights Watch 2022). These splinter groups have shaped a highly fragmented battlefield that muddies mediation and state negotiation efforts. The leaders of these groups are recognized as warlords, complicating mediation efforts and state negotiations. The Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire has splintered into factions, including the National Congress for the Defence of the People, M23, and Mai-Mai, which quickly leads to new cycles of violence following peace agreements (Stearns 2012). Peace talks between rebels and international mediators have frequently been undermined by the competitive politics of fragmented groups and a mindset focused on seizing greater power, ultimately rejecting negotiated settlements.

The rebel politics of Somalia presents a similar picture. Decades of civil war in Somalia gave birth to an array of armed groups. Al-Shabaab, local militia networks like Ma'awisley, small jihadist groups, political-military coalitions such as the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia, and clan-based factions in Mogadishu together have created a diverse set of insurgent actors. In Somalia, the Islamic Courts Union fragmented into several Islamist factions in the mid-2000s, the most notable being Al-Shabaab (Skjelderup, Ainashe, and Abdulle "Qare" 2020). Many scholars (e.g., Mueller 2018; Skjelderup 2020; Woldemariam 2018) have claimed that while Al-Shabaab has the capacity for violence and is organizationally significant, it is not a unified force: the group has regional sub-units and unstable mid-level commanders who have rejected proposals for dialogue. Al-Shabaab's refusal to participate in peace talks has significantly

blocked prospects for national reconciliation. However, this decision was taken by the central leadership due to pressure from local militia leaders; otherwise, there was a risk of fracturing into various sub-groups at the grassroots level (Mueller 2018). Menkhaus (2014) notes that the fragmentation of the Islamic Courts Union and the rise of Al-Shabaab have empowered extremists while weakening moderate peace-seekers, resulting in prolonged conflict. This fragmentation among the rebels increases suspicion and diminishes the appeal of negotiations with the federal government of Somalia. In short, the fracturing of rebel leadership in the sub-Saharan region complicates inclusive dialogue because no fragmented faction can credibly represent a broad spectrum of armed actors. On the one hand, this obstructs dialogue; on the other hand, it diminishes the capacity of rebel leaders to maintain commitments.

Conclusion

The fragmentation of rebel groups plays a critical role in determining the course of a civil war. In Nagaland, India's government and military have compromised on the state's monopoly over arms, violence, and sovereignty. A pathway to peace has not been constructed in the last six decades due to the rebels' fragmentation and the presence of multiple rebel groups. The Indian government's continued ceasefire and attempts at peace talks and agreements have failed due to the overlapping demands of multiple rebel groups and spiraling violence. Although the capacity of Bangladesh's government and army was much less than India's, Bangladesh could bind the rebels to a peace framework mainly because it only had to negotiate with a single entity. However, due to the inefficiency and/or reluctance of the government to implement the peace agreement and the evolution of spoilers in the CHT, at least five new rebel groups have since formed and have already undermined peace through violence.

To explain why either peace settlements are achieved or war is prolonged, theorists have emphasized various factors, such as the distance between the center and the conflict zone, the content of peace pacts, or the government's policy toward rebel groups. There is a basis for arguing that a decisive victory by the Indian Army in Nagaland or the implementation of a peace treaty has not been possible because Nagaland's distance from New Delhi has made it difficult for government forces to respond effectively, which has favored the rebels in organizing and conducting operations. In contrast, the CHT, a troubled periphery of Bangladesh, is only two hundred kilometers from the capital, Dhaka, and is close to several large military cantonments, enabling the Bangladeshi government to respond more quickly and facilitate the implementation of the peace treaty. This article, however, primarily investigates how and why rebel fragmentation influences the peace process.

The two case studies teach us that multiple rebel groups can block peace trajectories by instigating widespread violence, forming unstable alliances, and creating commitment problems. Even after a peace accord, competing rebel groups can forge new lines of violence and relegate the military to a destructive role. Although this study has primarily conducted an in-depth analysis of two cases through a qualitative approach, it is not suitable for generalization. Nevertheless, similar results have been observed in the sub-Saharan cases of Sudan, the DRC, and Somalia. Therefore, policymakers should reframe counterinsurgency policies, emphasizing the reintegration of rebels and tribal populations rather than exploiting their historical enmities. Colonial governments created divisions within societies to leave the process of plunder and exploitation unchallenged for as long as possible, knowing they would eventually leave at some point in the future. The purpose of the nation-state is different: its primary goals are the peace, security, and sustainable development of the people's society. The divide-and-conquer policy differs from the objectives of the nation-state because the actual goal of this policy is to separate and kill or defeat the elites of the dissenting community. As a distant consequence of this policy, numerous armed groups have established shared sovereignty; human rights, peace, and a disarmed civil society are abandoned either in the primitive terror state established by the rebels or in a *state of exception* (e.g., armed forces special powers and indemnity). The state may take advantage of its power leverage over the splinters and seek to adopt a policy of divide and conquer. It can increase pressure by maintaining army camps in disturbed areas. However, such an approach may prove to be a harmful counterinsurgency policy. The presence of numerous rebel groups poses an arduous challenge for the state government to negotiate peace agreements with them. Conversely, warring insurgent groups challenge the state's monopoly over arms and establish their control over them. This further complicates the situation as there is no sovereign power in the war zone to adhere to peace negotiations.

Therefore, the findings of this study have policy implications. First and foremost, this study underscores the importance of involving all splinter groups in peace negotiations, since the exclusion of any faction leads to the destabilization of the peace settlement. The CHT and Nagaland cases demonstrate that even if a few rebel factions agree to a settlement, the process could be derailed by the remaining armed groups that are dissatisfied because their demands are unfulfilled. In such circumstances, the discontented rebel groups refuse to lay down their arms and form alliances with others, disrupting the ongoing peace process.

Second, the government must avoid using a policy of fragmentation to diminish the power of rebel groups. Although this policy creates a weak opponent for the government, it is not conducive to peace. A fragmentation policy often creates a cycle of violence and puts the lives of people at risk. Therefore, the government should assist the parent rebel organization in the reunification of

its divided factions. Third, in peace negotiations, the government should strive to bind as many factions as possible within the framework of a peace agreement and initiate discussions to incorporate the excluded groups in the subsequent resolution of the agreement in post-agreement settings. The government must be sincere about a generous peace agreement. An illiberal peace, which disregards most of the demands of rebel organizations, may alienate a portion of the rebels and invite renewed violence. The Shillong Accord of 1975 in Nagaland, for example, led to an intensification of violence. Finally, rebel groups often exploit youth as a rebel labor market, taking advantage of poverty, unemployment, and stagnation. The government should initiate extensive employment initiatives for youth in the troubled periphery so that the rebel labor market loses its appeal to the young generation.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Professor Klaus Schlichte at the University of Bremen for his valuable feedback on an earlier draft of this article. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and constructive comments.

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Submitted: September 28, 2025, Revised: March 05, 2026, Accepted: March 15, 2026