

## PEACE AND CONFLICT: TOWARDS A NORTH-EASTERN CONSENSUS

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Much attention is correctly paid to securing a Southern consensus on the National Question: but very little to securing a North-Eastern consensus. The latter is just as critical to finding a solution to the ethnic conflict.

What is the rationale for treating the North-East as an integral unit? If the North-East is to remain as an autonomous region, with or without semi-autonomous sub-regions, its governance should be so structured as to be responsive to the concerns of all the peoples of the region. Is an arrangement possible that would evoke the loyalty and secure the cooperation of all sections of the population? Alternatively, if the region is to be broken up, what are the options and what would be the consequences?

Whatever the solution to the National Question, it needs to begin with a North-Eastern consensus. What are the main obstacles to reaching it? Is it possible, or desirable even if possible, for the units of devolution to be mono-ethnic? What are the diverse interests and fears of the Tamil, Muslim, Sinhalese peoples of the region? Are there critical regional differences within the North-East? What are the prospects of reconciling the various concerns and aspirations?

The paper traces the political developments and the salient interests of the peoples of the regions since independence, highlighting the critical points of special relevance and the changes in the concerns and priorities over time. The paper also attempts to identify the common elements in the interests of the peoples of the North-East as well as the differences. Various proposed reforms are analyzed in relation to these issues.

It would be presumptuous to prescribe a solution; that needs to emerge from negotiations between the leaders of the region, as a step towards negotiations with the center. A basic premise of this paper is that such a process is both possible and necessary, and that it must involve the LTTE as well as Muslims and Sinhalese leaders of the region, just as the resolution of the National Question would also involve the leaders of the PA and UNP. What this paper seeks is to identify in very broad terms some of the more important concerns and aspirations, some of the difficulties hindering progress, and to analyze a few of the options in addressing these.

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