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The FNTA Model – What Frontier Nagaland Tells Us About India's Approach to Northeast Autonomy

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India has over a dozen unresolved ethnic and autonomy movements in the Northeast. What does the FNTA model represent — is it a template for resolving such demands, or does it create incentives for further fragmentation?"

WHY IN NEWS

The tripartite agreement establishing the Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority (FNTA) was signed between the Union Government, Nagaland Government, and the Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) — the most significant governance arrangement for Northeast India since the Bodoland accord of 2020.

WHY THE NORTHEAST HAS PERSISTENT AUTONOMY DEMANDS

India's Northeast — the "Seven Sisters" plus Sikkim — is among the most ethnically diverse regions on earth. The area has over 200 distinct tribes and sub-tribes, dozens of languages, and a history of pre-colonial political autonomy that was interrupted by British annexation and subsequently by incorporation into independent India.

The fundamental tension is structural: the **Westphalian model of the nation-state** (fixed borders, single national identity) sits uneasily with the Northeast's social geography (fluid ethnic territories, overlapping customary jurisdictions, communities split across state and international borders). The consequence has been a persistent pattern of ethnic insurgency, peace negotiations, and partial settlements — which create sub-optimal outcomes for all parties.

For eastern Nagaland specifically, the ENPO's demand was rooted in a specific grievance: **internal marginalisation within Nagaland itself**. Western Nagaland (around Kohima and Dimapur, dominated by Angami, Sumi, and Ao tribes) has historically commanded disproportionate political and economic power. The

eastern tribes — Konyak, Chang, Khamniungan, Phom, Sangtam, Tikhir, Yimchunger, and Zeliang — felt their resource wealth (coal, oil, biodiversity) was being extracted without commensurate development investment.

THE FNTA AS A “THIRD WAY”

The FNTA represents a creative institutional response to the dilemma between full statehood and inadequate status-quo autonomy.

Why full statehood was not feasible: Creating a new state requires Parliamentary action under **Article 3**, which involves political costs (Nagaland would lose territory and representation; national precedent concerns about further fragmentation), constitutional complexity, and administrative overhead. The Union Government has been cautious about new state creation after the Telangana episode (2014) demonstrated both the political rewards and the governance complications.

Why the status quo was unsustainable: ENPO’s 2023 Nagaland election boycott demonstrated real political leverage. The six districts cover approximately 40% of Nagaland’s area and have strategic importance (Mon borders Myanmar; Tuensang borders Arunachal). Persistent governance failure in this region — which includes active smuggling routes and occasional militant presence — has security implications that the Union Government cannot ignore.

The **FNTA model** — a sub-state territorial authority with 46 subjects, its own financial allocation, and elected representation — threads this needle. It gives ENPO communities meaningful self-governance without triggering the full Article 3 process, while the Nagaland state structure remains intact.

CONSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE — HOW IT WORKS

The FNTA is not a constitutional creation (it does not require an amendment) but rather a **statutory/executive arrangement** — similar in legal character to the Bodoland Territorial Council (created by an amendment to the Sixth Schedule in 2003) or other territorial councils in the Northeast.

The critical constitutional provisions that anchor the arrangement:

Article 371(A): The bedrock of Naga constitutional identity. By explicitly preserving Article 371(A) protections — which shield Naga customary law, land rights, and religious practices from Parliamentary legislation — the FNTA agreement avoids the politically toxic suggestion that it overrides existing protections.

Sixth Schedule (Articles 244(2) and 275(1)): While Nagaland itself is not a Sixth Schedule area (it has Article 371(A) instead), the Sixth Schedule’s architecture of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, and Assam provides a governance analogue. FNTA is functionally comparable to an ADC but with broader financial autonomy.

Seventh Schedule: The 46 subjects transferred to FNTA are drawn from the State List. The Centre’s willingness to facilitate this transfer — effectively persuading the Nagaland state government to devolve powers — required significant inter-governmental negotiation.

THE BROADER LESSON: NEGOTIATED SUB-STATE AUTONOMY

The FNTA joins a growing list of sub-state autonomy arrangements in India's Northeast: Bodoland Territorial Council (2003), Tiwa/Mishing/Deori/Thengal Kachari Autonomous Councils in Assam, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (strengthened 2021), and others.

The pattern reveals a deliberate governance strategy: **differentiated federalism** — recognising that uniform governance arrangements cannot adequately address the region's ethnic diversity, and that calibrated, negotiated autonomy arrangements are more durable than either full statehood or suppression of autonomy demands.

Three lessons stand out:

First, negotiated settlements that address the **specific grievance** (not just symbolic recognition) are more durable. ENPO's core demand was about resource control and development investment. The FNTA directly addresses this through financial autonomy — not just political symbolism.

Second, the **level of the settlement** matters. A sub-state authority that deals with 46 concrete subjects (education, health, roads) delivers tangible benefits that communities can verify. Vague autonomy frameworks that lack budgetary teeth fail.

Third, peace processes that **leave armed actors engaged** (rather than excluding them) have historically been more successful in the Northeast. The FNTA agreement was reached with ENPO — a political body — rather than an armed group. But its success depends on whether it addresses the grievances that sustain the appeal of more radical options.

THE NAGA PEACE PROCESS — THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS

The FNTA agreement exists alongside the still-unimplemented **NSCN(IM) Framework Agreement** of August 2015. This is both an advantage and a complication.

Advantage: FNTA shows that meaningful progress on Northeast governance can proceed without waiting for the comprehensive settlement, which has stalled on NSCN(IM)'s demand for a separate Naga flag and constitution — demands that India has consistently refused.

Complication: NSCN(IM) may read the FNTA as a deliberate effort to “split” the Naga movement by addressing eastern tribes' immediate concerns, weakening the pan-Naga coalition for a comprehensive settlement. Ceasefire maintenance with NSCN(IM) could be affected if NSCN(IM) views FNTA as undermining its political position.

The Union Government has evidently calculated that the security and governance benefits of settling eastern Nagaland's demands outweigh this risk — especially given NSCN(IM)'s maximalist positions that have made comprehensive settlement unlikely in the near term.

UPSC RELEVANCE

FNTA (6 eastern Nagaland districts, 46 subjects, ENPO, tripartite agreement); Article 371(A) (13th Amendment, 1962); Article 3 (creation/alteration of states – Parliamentary action required); Sixth Schedule (ADCs in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura); Bodoland Territorial Council (2003); NSCN(IM) Framework Agreement (August 2015); Differentiated federalism; Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (2021); Anti-Defection Law (Tenth Schedule, 52nd Amendment 1985).

Northeast governance; constitutional provisions for special arrangements; tribal autonomy models; differentiated federalism in India; Centre-State relations in conflict-affected areas; Article 371 special provisions; peace processes and security implications; federalism and ethnic diversity management.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA
FNTA AGREEMENT (FEBRUARY 7, 2026):

Districts: Tuensang, Mon, Kiphire, Longleng, Noklak, Shamator (6 eastern Nagaland)

Organisation: ENPO (Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation) — 8 tribes

Subjects: **46 state subjects** transferred (education, health, agriculture, roads, etc.)

Financial autonomy: Direct allocation mechanism bypassing state government

Article 371(A) status: **Fully preserved**

Northeast agreements count: **12th since 2019**

CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR NORTHEAST SPECIAL PROVISIONS:

State/Region	Constitutional Provision	Key Protection
Nagaland	Article 371(A) — 13th Amendment 1962	Customary law, land rights, religious practices
Manipur	Article 371©	Hill Areas Committee
Arunachal Pradesh	Article 371(H)	Governor's special responsibility
Mizoram	Article 371(G)	Customary law, land rights
Sikkim	Article 371(F)	Existing laws, rights
Sixth Schedule areas	Articles 244(2), 275(1)	Autonomous District Councils in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura

BODOLAND TERRITORIAL COUNCIL (BTC):

Established: **2003** (Bodo Accord with BLTF + BLT groups)

Reinforced: **January 2020** (upgraded agreement with multiple armed groups)

Districts: 4 (Chirang, Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri — BTR: Bodoland Territorial Region)

Subjects: 46 subjects; analogue to FNTA

NSCN(IM) FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT:

Signed: **August 3, 2015** — PM Modi + Gen. T. Muivah (NSCN(IM) chief)

Status: Unimplemented — core disputes on separate Naga flag + constitution unresolved

NSCN: National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah faction)

OTHER NORTHEAST PEACE ACCORDS (2019–2026):

August 2019: NLFT (National Liberation Front of Tripura) signed peace

January 2020: Bodo accord — BTC expanded; NDFB factions surrendered

September 2021: Karbi Anglong agreement — expanded ADC powers; 5 groups

February 2026: FNTA — eastern Nagaland

Sources: The Hindu, AffairsCloud

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