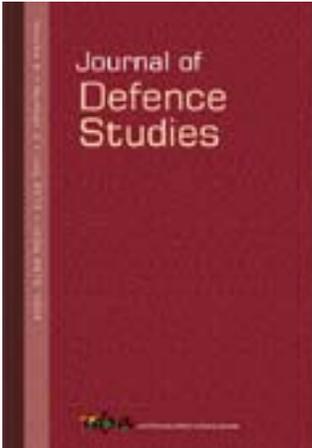


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The Maoist Threat

*Deepak Kapoor**

As a nation, we have a tendency to react once a crisis overtakes us. This holds good in the case of natural disasters like the annual floods in the North-East, earthquakes, the tsunami, the most recent calamity in Uttarkhand or national security threats like Kargil, 26/11 in Mumbai, and the Chinese intrusion in Eastern Ladakh in April 2013. To this list can be added the chimera of Maoism or Left-wing Extremism (LWE).

Even though the outlines of a looming LWE crisis started appearing in the late 1990s, it was left to fester and grow by taking inadequate and half-hearted steps to control it. Many among us even romanticized with the movement, terming it as an appropriate response of the have-nots to the state's apathy and poor governance. And the result is for all to see: today, as many as 182 districts of the Union (estimates vary), cutting across 14 states, are afflicted with this menace. The irony is that even after the recent attacks on the Congress vehicle convoy in Chhatisgarh and the Dhanbad-Patna railway train, resulting in deaths of innocent people, the media and the intelligentsia are still debating whether Maoists are 'terrorists'.

While some may term the recent series of attacks as acts of desperation by the Maoists, there is no denying the fact that such pre-planned, cold blooded actions can only be classified as 'terrorist acts'. In fact, there is an urgent need to recognize the contours of a full-blown insurgency on our hands in the coming years unless urgent steps are taken immediately. After all, over the past 15 years, Maoism has broken out from its confines within

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the jungles of Andhra Pradesh to spread like a cancer, stretching from the border with Nepal all the way down to Tamil Nadu. Amid indications of clear linkages of external forces inimical to us with the Maoists, there is a re-inforced possibility of its further spread. The attempts to destabilize India are obvious.

While neglect, underdevelopment, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, maladministration and poor governance have been major reasons for the rise and spread of Maoism, junctions of state boundaries have proved to be safe havens for camping and training of Maoist cadres. Since Maoism was treated as a law and order issue—which is a state subject—for long, the Centre followed the policy of providing assistance to the states to fight this menace without getting directly involved. This resulted in different states following different strategies to tackle this problem. While Andhra Pradesh created the Greyhound special forces, Chhatisgarh pushed the creation of the Salwa Judam, a self-defence militia. Yet others viewed the Maoists as political vote banks that could help them win seats in the polls or to be used as instruments to fight the existing government/regime in the state (most notably, West Bengal).

Terrorism does not recognise state boundaries. Thus, after conducting a heinous act in one state the Maoists found it convenient to shift to a neighbouring state, thus cocking a snook at the pursuing police parties who were constrained by jurisdictional limitations. The lack of suitable infrastructure in the region of interstate junctions further aided them in making a safe getaway. Some initial successes and lack of appropriate state response added to the popularity of the movement, leading to its further expansion.

TACKLING THE PROBLEM

Viewing Maoism as a national problem is a recent phenomenon. Consequently, the Centre has stepped in and coordinating headquarters have been established to coordinate police operations in the affected interstate boundary regions. While the process of implementation of these steps has a typical bureaucratic touch to it and is taking its own time, nevertheless, these actions are bound to have a positive effect on the outcome of operations against Maoists over the long term, if undertaken diligently.

However, politics seems to be rearing its ugly head even here. With different parties ruling at the Centre and the states, there is invariably a difference of opinion on when and how to tackle Maoism, resulting in

lackadaisical or, at times, even negative actions at the implementation level. Vote bank politics and reluctance to share credit for any improvements seem to be dictating execution of action plans. No wonder then that the blame game between the Centre and affected state takes over in the aftermath of an incident. In the process, the focus on Maoism as a national threat is lost.

A second major drawback in our fight against Maoism is lack of real time, actionable intelligence. It is difficult to explain the preparation and gathering up of 200–300 cadres to ambush a Congress party convoy of vehicles, or 100 cadres to attack a train, without the security forces getting even a whiff of it in advance. It is obvious that, despite being involved with counter Maoist operations for the last four to five years, we have been unable to develop a suitable and credible intelligence network to deal with the problem. Without specific intelligence, the security forces would invariably be operating in a void and would continue to incur casualties, both public as well as their own. Additionally, they would per force remain reactive rather than pro-active, with the initiative always resting with the Maoists. To set up a credible intelligence network is a painstaking, back-breaking and time consuming task, which may take anything up to two to three years, or even more. It should already have been in place and functioning by now. The sooner we get down to creating a credible and responsive intelligence network, the better.

Thirdly, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has been a major subject of discussion and debate lately, both in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and in the North-East. Crisis situations call for drastic remedies. It is only when the situation became totally unmanageable in J&K and the North-East, with the civil administration breaking down and innocent people getting killed and receiving threats from the militants on a daily basis, that the security forces were directed to step in to restore normalcy. While collateral damage may have occurred or excesses may have been committed by the security forces in some rare cases, they should not be sent to battle the terrorists with their hands tied behind their back. Once the situation normalizes, it is better that the civil administration takes the decision to withdraw the security forces, thus automatically terminating AFSPA. However, that decision has certain ramifications and is not easy to arrive at; moreover, people holding authority, more often than not, shy away from belling the cat, since they are apprehensive that they may be held accountable in case the situation breaks down again. Both the military hierarchy and the Supreme Court have laid a set of strict norms

for operating in such disturbed areas, and these guidelines are religiously followed by the security forces. While any misdeeds or excesses during operations should be severely punished, at the same time, the greater good being achieved by the security forces' functioning to bring the situation under control quickly should not be lost sight of. One must stop here to ask whether the Maoists keep human rights in mind while attacking innocent and unsuspecting people. Despite best of intentions of the security forces, if some collateral damage occurs, it has to be accepted in the right spirit. If the security forces continue to suffer casualties due to severe restrictions imposed on their functioning, they are likely to get demoralized, resulting in non-performance and making the fight against Naxalism that much more non-effective.

Fourthly, state police and paramilitary forces being made available for counter-Naxal operations need to be provided with the right equipment, communications and training to fight the Maoists successfully. Today, the security forces are even short of appropriate protective gear, not to mention the weaponry and communication equipment required. No wonder then that in an interaction with private businesses on 13 June 2013, the Director General (DG), Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) made a pitch for private entrepreneurs to chip in and produce good quality helmets indigenously. Similarly, the security forces need state-of-the-art rifles, carbines and related equipment to deliver against the Maoists, who appear to possess better and more modern weaponry. The need for good communications to respond to developing situations and taking advantage of fleeting opportunities in fluid anti-Naxal operations can hardly be over-emphasized. Additionally, good logistic backing will ensure that forces fighting Naxalism do not have to look over their shoulder for anything. It is only when these prerequisites have been taken care of that we can expect the security forces to deliver on the tasks assigned to them.

Training is another major area of weakness. Usually deployed to ensure normal law and order, traffic control, riot control, election duties, etc., the police lack the training and skills to fight sustained anti-Naxal operations. The Army is doing its best in providing all assistance for training of the central police forces going for operations in Naxal-affected areas. However, in order to firmly tackle this menace, there is a need for continuity and sustained operations for a prolonged period. Police forces have to develop an expertise in fighting the Naxals and then put it to good use so as to achieve success. There is no short-cut to practical hands-on experience. Our inclination to pull out troops deployed in Naxal areas

for other tasks such as election duties, riot control, flood relief, etc., even temporarily, can take away the focus and prove detrimental to ongoing anti-Naxal operations.

Finally, as in the past, there will be demands in the future that the Army should be called in to fight the Naxals and resolve the problem. Conceptually, the Army has the prime responsibility of guarding the territorial integrity of the nation from external threats, and the police forces—both central and state—are expected to ensure law and order internally. If additional police forces are being raised to fight this menace, they must deliver. While the Army can always be depended upon as an instrument of last resort, it is only when all forces of the Union perform at their optimum level will the security of the country be assured. Besides, the Army is already stretched guarding unresolved national borders and fighting insurgencies in sensitive border states.

Today, Maoism is our biggest internal challenge. Left unchecked, it would strike at the roots of our identity as a nation as well as the country's territorial integrity. The need of the hour is to rise above political and parochial considerations to fight this menace to our national security in a concerted manner. There is no denying the fact that Maoists are already feeling the heat of anti-Naxal operations being undertaken by the security forces. The increase in the number of Maoist surrenders is a clear pointer to this trend. Further, refining these operations by implementing suggestions such as those outlined above would produce the requisite synergy for the security forces to win the day against the Maoists. Ambushing of convoys and attacks on trains may take some time to stop but, with time and the right investment in the endeavour, ultimately, the hard work and perseverance of the security forces will pay off.