

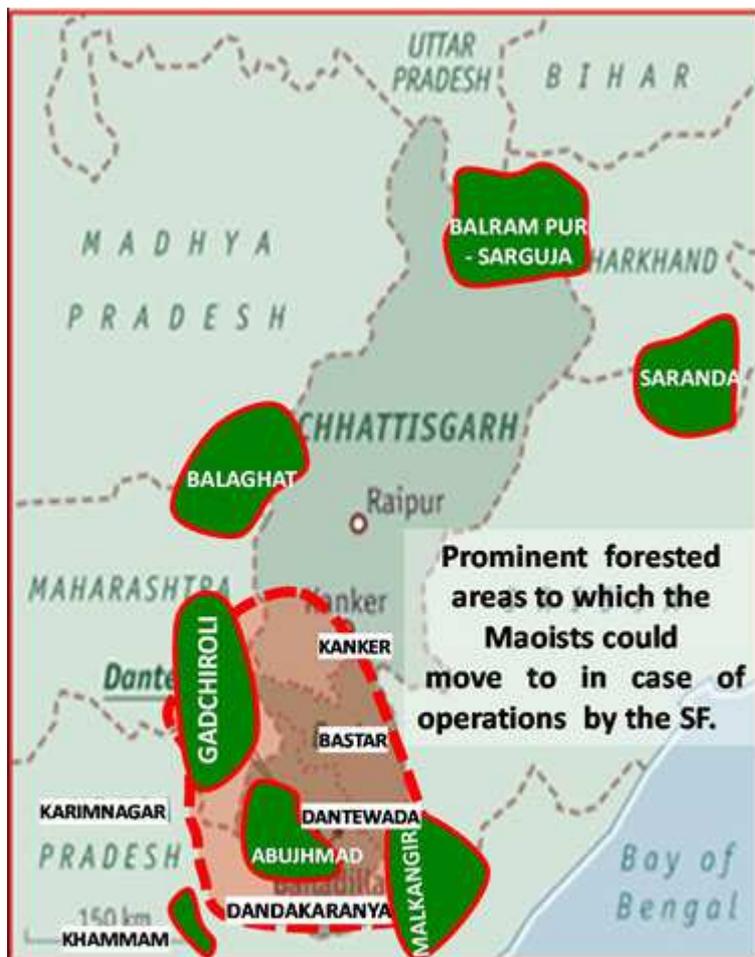
Maoists Look for Safe Sanctuaries and External Support

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A media report of 17 January this year, said a large number of armed guerrillas of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), or Maoists in short, have infiltrated into Balaghat district of Madhya Pradesh comes as no surprise. Of course, it is difficult to hazard a guess at the number of rebels that have moved across the porous border between Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh and from the adjoining areas of Gondia (Maharashtra). The enclosed map shows a few safe sanctuaries in the Maoist-affected areas indicating that in case of sustained operations and hot pursuit by the security forces (SF) against the Maoists, they could move into some of the prominent forested areas - also characterised by their remoteness and vulnerable population. These include general areas in and around Malkangiri, Abhujmarh, Gadchiroli, Balaghat, Balrampur and Sarguja, and Saranda. Interestingly, all these lie along inter-state boundaries. The bi-junctions and tri-junctions are known to be the most vulnerable areas.

On 29 May last year, the Maoists - in one of the deadliest pre-planned attacks - had successfully ambushed a convoy of Congress leaders in Chhattisgarh's Bastar district, killing 29 people. The immediate reaction of the rebels was to cross over to southern parts of Odisha, which thereafter resulted in an increase in violence, particularly in Malkangiri and Koraput. The SF too had further intensified their operations in southern Odisha (Malkangiri, Koraput, Rayagarh, Navrangpura etc), southern Chhattisgarh with greater focus on the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh and Gadchiroli in Maharashtra. They have met with a large measure of success, resulting in apprehension, elimination or surrender of a few rebels. Gudsa Usendi (GVK Prasad), leader and spokesperson of Dandyakarna Special Zonal Committee (DSZC) surrendered to the Andhra Pradesh police in early January 2014,



Map from the author's book "Red Revolution 2020 and Beyond: Strategic Challenges to Resolve Naxalism", page 51.

after having remained with the Maoists (particularly in Chhattisgarh) for about three decades. The rebels have also remained active in the conflict areas by resorting to killing civilians and security personnel, laying IEDs and preventing development activities by destroying plant equipment and vehicles of contractors. If we plot, on a map, the areas in which the operations were conducted by the SF and the places where the rebels have experienced the heat of such operations, the Maoists could possibly move into the

adjoining areas of Balaghat (Madhya Pradesh) to the west or Andhra Pradesh in the south or forested areas in the north, to seek refuge. Considering the overall status of anti-Maoist operations, the distances involved and the success achieved by the Andhra Pradesh's police, Balaghat forests and ghats appeared to offer a relatively safer sanctuary.

Movement of the Maoists into an otherwise relatively dormant Balaghat region was quite expected. It has been reported that one of the Local Guerrilla Squad (LGS) commanders, named Dilip, who has been on the wanted list, has led the armed Maoists into the Balaghat region. Balaghat has also been in the news in recent times due to activities of the Tanda Dalam (guerrilla squad). Coupled with this, a few suspected Maoists were arrested in early January 2014. Balaghat district - one of the poorer district - lies along the south eastern portion of the Satpura Range, and has a series of ghats, laden with dense forest cover. In addition, it is extremely rich in minerals such as manganese, bauxite, copper, marble, dolomite, limestone and clay. Balaghat has all the ingredients required to bolster Maoists activities - difficult terrain, dense forests, vulnerable population. While such forested areas

and ghats provide safe sanctuaries to the Naxals, it is also easier to move across the porous border into Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra to escape the dragnet of the operations by the SF.

Maoists are known to be more innovative and dynamic to change their tactics. Following the broad principles of Mao Tse Tung and Che Guevara - the acknowledged masters of guerrilla warfare - Maoists have adopted hit and run tactics, utilised space to disperse themselves and deny a target, and have avoided direct and prolonged confrontation with the SF. In addition, it appears that movement of their armed cadres into other areas may also be part of their tactics to release pressure on their traditional strongholds. We could also expect them to shift some of their arms, rockets and IEDs manufacturing units to safer areas like Balaghat. While shifting a few elements to safe havens, the Maoists would continue to carry out violent attacks in their traditional strongholds, including firing on helicopters, to tie down the SF in different areas. Thus, SF remain dispersed and are relatively weak, having spread over a large area. However, whenever the Maoists suffer heavy losses, they would normally carry out a 'tactical retreat' to rest, recoup, recruit cadres, and train, so as to strike at an opportune moment. The SF, therefore need to continuously appreciate and analyse the expected movement of hard core Maoists, based on situation on the ground and by developing traditional human intelligence.

Besides, a media report of November last year noted, based on a letter of the general secretary of CPI (Maoist) to 24 international groups in September 2013, the Maoists are seeking international alliances and support to sustain and to strengthen their movement. The letter was intercepted by the security agencies. The report should, perhaps, be seen in the backdrop of the Maoists suffering many losses and the relative weakening of the movement. They have already established linkages with militant outfits in the north east like Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) (IM) and People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur. The CPI (Maoist) is fully aware that a movement of this magnitude cannot sustain on its own for long without any external support; be it in terms of funding, weaponry, training, refuge or ideological support. Though not entirely true of the Maoists movement in India, such an initiative is also in line with a study report by RAND

Corporation which suggests, among others, that, without external support and available sanctuaries, no internal insurgency can thrive for long.

At present, we do not have any concrete evidence of direct involvement of any external powers, except a few linkages being established with certain militant organisations and ultra - outfits. The Maoists are known to have linkages with Maoists of Nepal and anti - India terror groups based in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Given India's geopolitical location, it would come as no surprise if the CPI (Maoist), through its aggressive efforts, is able to garner substantive resources for its disposal. Therefore, we need to remain sensitive to the fact that some of the external powers are perhaps monitoring the Maoist situation in the country very closely and would most willingly provide the necessary support. For instance, in order to open another active front, we could expect our adversaries to be more aggressive by providing multi-faceted support to the Maoists to further destabilise the heartland of the country. Thus, there is a need to sensitize our diplomatic community of the impending threat, as also to streamline the intelligence apparatus to monitor such activities of internal and external powers, to pro - actively prevent 'tangible support' to the Maoists. However, we must not forget that solution to the conflict finally lies in improving the security environment, providing good governance, and simultaneously ensuring implementation of the planned development projects on the ground.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.