

Examining the Maoists' attacks in Jeeram Ghati

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Once again, Naxalites of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) launched an audacious ambush, in broad day light, on a joint CRPF-police road opening party in south Chhattisgarh on March 11, 2014, that killed 15 security personnel. From initial reports, it is evident that the Maoists had mustered a sizeable combat strength from different areas into Jeeram Ghati, to deliver the deadly blow. According to the survivors, the strength of the Maoists ranged from 150 to 300. The security personnel were moving to provide security to the road construction work on National Highway (NH 30) that connects Jagdalpur to Sukma. The ambush took place barely 10-12 km south of the spot where the Maoists had attacked a Congress party's convoy on May 25, 2013 and killed 27 people.

The latest ambush is in line with the Maoist trend of launching attacks closer to the elections. The aim was to create fear among the local population, to deter people from participating in the forthcoming elections and to gain greater visibility at the national and international levels. 'Boycott elections' has been one of their stated war-cry. Pre-election period offers the best opportunity to achieve their multiple aims. This attack is, to some extent, similar to the deadliest and bloodiest ever attack on the column of CRPF at Chintalnar in south Chhattisgarh on April 6, 2010, in which 76 personnel were killed in one single incident.

The attack on the security forces near Jeeram Ghati area is part of the Maoist's annual Tactical Counter Offensive Campaign (TCOC), the timing of which coincides with the forth coming elections. The aim of "TCOC" is to exhibit and consolidate their (Maoists) strength, by carrying out violent operations during the summer months between March and June. Going by the past experience, the rebels have launched a number of deadly attacks during the TCOC period. In addition, 2014 is a significant year on two counts: one, it is the tenth year of formation of CPI (Maoist) that requires a show of its strength and lethal prowess, and two, that general elections, scheduled in April-May, need to be

disrupted. It, therefore, does pose a serious challenge to the security forces in the immediate future.

Strategic Significance of Darbha-Jeeram Ghati

The successive attacks in general area Darbha-Jeeram Ghati do suggest that the Maoists are extremely sensitive to retaining their control on the National Highway running from Jagdalpur to Sukma, which runs almost parallel to Chhattisgarh's boundary with Odisha in the east. It may be recalled that in an earlier incident, on June 21, 2009, the Maoists had killed 12 personnel of the SF by blasting an IED in close proximity of Tongpal. What are the reasons for numerous attacks in this specific area? South Bastar is extremely rich in forests, minerals (iron ore, tin ore, corundum, granite, marble, silica etc) and medicinal plants. While the area between Darbha Ghati and Jeeram Ghati is thickly forested, the area further south towards Tongpal starts opening up into mild undulating ground with agricultural fields astride the road. The close proximity of Odisha border and the difficult forested terrain astride the highway facilitates east-west movement of rebels with impunity. It refers to movement between south Bastar and south Odisha, both of which are strong bastions of the Maoists. The areas of Koraput and Malkangiri in south Odisha provide safe sanctuaries to the rebels during such operations. Having lost their hold on the traditional support areas in Adilabad, Karimnagar, Warangal and Khammam in north Telengana, the Maoists desperately want to retain control over south Bastar and south Odisha region, in that order of priority. In addition, the highway (NH 30) - the life line of the region - is used extensively for mining and transportation of minerals and goods. The rebels apprehend that any improvement in the communication network in this region - both surface and cellular connectivity - would result in faster response by the SF. Therefore, induction of troops or construction activity in this area is resented by the Maoists due to fear of losing their control over south Bastar, in particular.

In both the attacks in question, the Maoists had mustered, undetected, a large strength at the point of attack (decision) and melted away with weapons soon after the operation. It is evident that there has been an intelligence failure – in terms of generating local human intelligence – to support operations by the SF. As regards the Maoists' attack on March 11, 2014, it appears that generic intelligence inputs were made available about an impending attack along the road axis Tongpal - Jeeram Ghati - Darbha Ghati. On the fateful day, it is learnt that children did not come to attend the schools at Tongpal – tell tale signs of these were not known to the SF and the intelligence agencies. While setting on fire a few trucks carrying road construction material to block the road axis from the north, the

Maoists exploded IEDs and sprung ambush at different points on the patrol. The sequence of events suggests that it definitely was a meticulously planned, rehearsed and deftly executed operation by the Maoists. They had studied their target in detail, based on intelligence gathered over a period of time.

It is undisputed that the standard of training of the CRPF has definitely improved manifold in comparison to their initial induction into the Maoist – affected areas in 2003-04. As the CRPF was aware of the TCOC and its implications, its commanders had carried out adequate planning and preparations to take actions against the rebels in south Bastar. Therefore, they had, according to media, planned to induct a large number of troops to conduct operations. However, the Maoists, based on their apprehensions of operations by the SF, seized the initiative and launched a deadly attack on the SF. We have to understand that in such high threat and sensitive areas, the margin for error is always razor thin. Therefore, it is extremely important to remain alert and conduct operations in a professional manner. In a high risk zone, inadequate basic policing in the affected areas, lack of local human intelligence, predictable movements of the force and lack of failsafe communications could result in disastrous consequences. A number of attacks by the Maoists in south Bastar region suggest that they continue to remain strong on the ground in these areas.

Physiographic features and human terrain map (HTM)

Broadly, the critical areas in the southern region fall between Indrawathi River in the north, Godavari in the west and to the south, and Sabari and Sileru rivers in the east. Sabari River is one of the main tributaries of Godavari and forms an approximate boundary between Odisha and Andhra Pradesh in the east for some distance. The main areas in this physiographic comprise south Odisha, south Chhattisgarh and Gadchiroli in Maharashtra. Specific critical areas are: Malkangiri, Koraput, Rayagarh, Balangir, Nuapada and Nawrangpur in Odisha, Sukma, Bijapur, Dantewada, Jagdalpur, Bastar and south Narayanpur in Chhattisgarh and Gadchiroli (east of Pranhita River) in Maharashtra. Gondia, Chandrapur and Bhandara in Maharashtra appear to be relatively dormant and are under control. The physiographic clearly indicates that the critically - affected areas lie in a broad triangle formed by the three major rivers, which involve four adjoining states. The tribals, due to their ethnic affinities, do not confine their movements to the political boundaries. It is true of the rebels as well. The areas astride the inter-state boundaries are the weakest link in gathering intelligence and conducting operations by the SF. On the contrary, the Maoists have conducted their operations most successfully, at the inert-state

boundaries. This, therefore, brings me to an all important question: While our mind set is confined to conducting security operations within tight political boundaries of the states, would it not be more appropriate to look at the broad physiographic features and the HTM of the region as a whole? A comprehensive security plan is perhaps the requirement of the day, which cuts across political boundaries of the states.

Security and Governance

It would be prudent to recall that there was a progressive increase in the spatial spread and casualties due to Maoists' violence from 2001 to 2010. After that, there has been a steady decline in the overall number of incidents and killings by Maoists. However, with lesser number of incidents, the proportionate fatal casualties of the SF have increased during the last two years. To deal with the challenges posed by the Maoists, it must be understood that the country has to tackle them primarily on two fronts: one, against the Maoists to improve the security environment, and two, against the prominent underlying causes of their movement.

With this as the background, we need to ask ourselves a few questions pertaining to two basic issues – security and governance. It is essential to analyse the efficacy of the current strategies and policies of the government in critically – affected areas, effectiveness of the intelligence machinery, capability of the SF to counter IED- cum- ambush type of attacks and effectiveness in addressing the prominent underlying causes of the insurgency? On balance, besides formulating a comprehensive security plan, good governance is vital to synergise the efforts of all available resources and to push other critical drivers like development, empowerment, job opportunities for the youth and delivery on the ground to manage the conflict.

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