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# Maoist Insurgency: Dealing with a Major Threat

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## Introduction

The Maoist insurgent movement presently engulfing some 231 districts in 21 states of our country has been identified as the single biggest internal security threat to the nation by the prime minister. Considering that he has repeated this observation time and again since 2006<sup>1</sup> to the *crème de le crème* of senior Home Ministry, police and Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers, the response of the mighty Indian state has been pathetic. The exhortations of our prime minister to the elected and selected hierarchy seem to have fallen on deaf ears. It is a telling commentary on the competence of a nation that aspires to be a global power yet cannot handle issues in its own backyard.

Abducted recently by the Maoists, the collector of Malkangiri and a junior engineer in Orissa became the latest hapless pawns in the ongoing tug of war between the state and the brigands. In the end, quite expectedly, the writ of the Maoists prevailed. All of the fourteen demands and more were acted upon with some alacrity by the state government. Some key Naxal leaders as also rank and file lodged in the jails of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa were released and operations against the Maoists put on hold. How these actions will affect the plummeting morale of the paramilitary forces (PMF) in this war against the Maoists is anybody's guess. After the release of hostages, the central and state governments have indulged in the time honoured custom of finger pointing and talked of failed strategy – that much abused term.

## A-Hunting We Will Go

The quixotic operation against the Maoists launched initially with wildly optimistic bravado by the government has come to be called Operation Green

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Hunt. Presumably, the PMF comprising the state police and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) are the hunters. However, post Dantewada, Jhargram, Lalgarh, the massacre suffered by 39 CRPF at Narayanpur, with the kidnapping of four policemen of the Bihar Military Police (BMP) at Lakhisarai and now the abduction of an IAS officer together with an engineer, one is inclined to wonder whether the hunter has become the hunted! The morale of the PMF must surely be in the boots. However, the cavalier approach of the political leadership towards the categorical imperatives of counter-insurgency (CI) operations continues to prevail. The present strategy is confused and its execution defies description. A quatrain sung

in the pre-1947 era by the likes of Colonel Blimp in messes aptly sums it up:

*Oh, a-hunting we will go; A-hunting we will go  
We'll catch a little fox; And put him in a box  
And then we'll let him go; A-hunting we will go.*

Frankly, 26 personnel of a road opening party (ROP) getting slaughtered within kilometres of their base at Narayanpur and ten policemen getting killed, with four getting kidnapped, at Lakhisarai, within a span of weeks shows an incredibly poor standard of leadership, training and a lack of adherence to basic tactics and field craft by the police forces. The Maoists have annihilated about a platoon strength of the CRPF in every encounter. The absence of professional commitment in Unified Commands of states directing these operations is apparent. In the latest incident at Malkangiri, Orissa, why was the district collector (DC) not escorted by armed guards? Apparently, standard operating procedures (SOPs) exist on paper only. Strangely enough, the home minister had recently checked the progress of the integrated action plan (IAP) through video conference with sixty-odd collectors of Naxal hit districts and urged them to spend Rs. 25 crore within the financial year and to contact *him* if they faced any trouble in executing developmental plans in their areas<sup>2</sup>. However, with regard to the abduction proper of the DC, the Centre remained studiously silent, ready only with assistance if needed by the state! An example of run with the fox and hunt with the hounds? A dispassionate examination of these incidents only highlights the fact that the higher ups of neither

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the PMF nor the central and state governments have learnt any lessons from the past whatsoever. This is all the more astonishing considering that the Indian security forces have unmatched experience in CI operations in the northeast and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Instead of applying their mind to the problem that lies clearly at hand, the bureaucrats and the politicians – in the states and at the Centre – are desperate to pass the buck. Certainly, the knee-jerk reactions and talk about ‘limited mandate’ at the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) meetings advocating the need for involving the army and air force reinforce this impression. A nebulous suspicion remains that a blueprint for an overall strategy to deal with the Maoist problem has not seen the light of the day. Such apathy is extraordinary considering that the problem has been simmering for decades.

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## **Identifying the Maoist Problem**

For a start, the nature of the Maoist problem must be understood in its entirety. Why do men get motivated to raise the banner of revolt against a state? Why are they risking life and limb against the might of the state in 231 districts of our union? Why have they taken to the gun? The obvious answer is that they have been discriminated against and deprived over the years of the very basic needs for their survival. The harsh and unpalatable fact is that venal politicians and corrupt bureaucrats who manage to survive in the corridors of power have not allowed the benefits of growth and development to reach the marginalised sections of our society and those in the back woods. If such was not the case why—despite the prime minister’s (PM’s) repeated assertion that Maoists are the single biggest internal threat—has the Maoist problem increased dramatically from 110 districts to 231 districts in the last six years? It is ironic that the government allows the writ of the Maoists to run in these districts that are spread across 21 states of the Union of India and yet claims that India is the world’s largest democracy?

On the other hand, the claim of intellectuals who support the Maoists cause is fallacious.<sup>3</sup> To think that the Maoists are merely misguided people and do not indulge in wanton violence is absolute rubbish. The fact is, Maoists are plain and simple terrorists indulging in rape, pillage, terrorism and extortion. They do not

believe in the Constitution and their avowed aim is to overthrow our democratic form of governance.

### **Where Does the Buck Stop?**

Over the years, an irresolute response by the government has emboldened the Maoists to launch spectacular strikes, smug in the knowledge that our counter-measures will remain pedestrian. Procrastination developed to a fine degree by our largely comatose government makes decision-making impossible till overtaken by the events. Briefly, in the eyes of the Centre, tackling the Naxalites remains a law and order problem left to the genius (?) of the concerned state chief minister. The infirmity of this approach is highlighted by the Lakhisarai incident. The Bihar government, after the murder of one policeman at Lakhisarai, negotiated for the release of the remaining three kidnapped policemen. In an identical kidnapping case, the West Bengal government acquiesced to the demands of the Maoists without so much as batting an eyelid. In such situations, the Centre says quite cannily that they are with the state government! The local satraps are happy with this arrangement as they remain monarch of all they survey—barring of course, the region under the Maoists' control. The Centre thinks its duty is to provide reinforcements of PMF and funds interspersed with pithy homilies to the chief ministers. Even here, confusion may prevail if contrarian views are expressed. As, for example, the philosophical observations of the PM while addressing the top brass of police that “.....the Naxal movement *retains* the tribal and the poorest of the poor. It has *influence amongst sizeable sections of civil society, the intelligentsia and the youth*. It still retains a certain *élan*.....”<sup>4</sup> do not help and may cause some hesitation in the minds of those entrusted with the iron fist of the state. The previous home minister had even contested the claim that Maoists are the single biggest threat!<sup>5</sup> The buck (presumably black in the context of Operation Green Hunt) has, therefore, a choice of trotting or cantering at state level if the PMF is used piecemeal or galloping right up to the Centre if the army gets to be used en masse! The ease with which the CCS in the recent past has discussed the need for deploying the army<sup>6</sup> and had presumably put the army commander, Central Command, on the alert<sup>7</sup> is a cause for concern. Is it possible that another swift operation by the Maoists may break the proverbial camel's back and force the government to call upon the army to undertake CI operations?

The reasons for such hare-brained thinking in our fight against the Naxalites are not far to seek. Fighting insurgency in our federal structure is essentially considered a provincial responsibility. Such may be the case when one or two states

are affected, however, with the red corridor getting bigger by the day, surely the Centre needs to take the call. It is for the Centre to plan the overall strategy and give clear directives to the states. Coining slogans like “clear, hold, develop” and “winning the hearts and minds of the people”<sup>8</sup> is easy and good for sound bytes in the media but these are never sufficient by themselves. To actuate these slogans, clarity of thinking and concentrated effort are required of the planners from the apex to the district level. The situation relative to each state has to be worked out in exhaustive detail and contingency planning done. Sufficient time has to be given for the lethargic government machinery bound in rules, regulations and audit to get its act together. For example, some time back, the PM rightly identified shortage of policemen as a factor affecting operations against the Maoists but to overcome the problem, he directed that over 30 percent of the vacancies be filled within six months—an unlikely implementation!<sup>9</sup> Sometimes, when the right noise is made by the PMF or administrative machinery, the actual execution is adversely affected by various factors like political ambitions of local satraps, greed of commerce, systemic failure of government institutions, coalition *dharma* that requires support of the maximum number of members of Parliament/ members of the Legislative Assembly (MPs/MLAs) and, most importantly, an overweening desire to avoid risks of any kind. No one likes to risk casualties of forces or cause what is euphemistically termed as collateral damage. The Centre also has a wary eye on the next elections and, thus, keeps the aforesaid factors in mind. The basic idea is to vociferously condemn ‘dastardly’ Maoist activity as and when an incident occurs, avoid any decisive action in the affected regions yet keep reminding the nation that it would take more than a few years to root out the scourge of the Maoists.

### **Using the Army Against the Maoists**

Possibly it is only in India that the armed forces can be called at the drop of a hat. It may be recalled that in the past, at one point in time, the central government had approved the use of our ace special force, the National Security Guard (NSG) to capture a bandit like Veerappan simply because the state police forces of two states had raised their hands!<sup>10</sup> Recently, alarmed by stone pelting goons in Kashmir, the central government caved in to the demands of the state government and deployed the army to carry out flag marches! Since the bone and muscle curtains in the minds of the rulers remain impervious to ideas of good governance, ever since independence, the army has been employed time and again on trivial tasks.

Many analysts, especially the arm-chair kind, have argued vociferously on TV channels that the army should be employed at the earliest to resolve the Maoists

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issue. In their opinion, the CRPF and state police are *danda* forces who can never match the Maoists in minor tactics. In favour of their argument is the fact that there is precedence and the army has been employed in various parts of the country including the northeast and J&K in counter-insurgency (CI) operations. However, the effectiveness of the army in CI operations needs to be seen in the correct perspective. By training and by its credo, the army is a force designed for swift decisive operations. Just because it has been misused in the past, is no logic for using it against the Maoists. CI operations are a long haul that require picketing, policing, grid deployment, road opening, convoy protection, check posts, cordon and search, intelligence gathering, liaison with local government organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In short, activities that army units are not trained for and, therefore, they require orientation training. Even the army has not been able to achieve quick results and their employment has been marred with controversies of collateral damage. Since CI operations continue for many years, the operational efficiency of units and formations is decidedly affected. Finally, in CI operations, the army is never given a free hand and the politicians have begun to exercise complete control over the forces by imposing a Unified Command and calling/ curtailing the shots! However, notwithstanding the foregoing arguments, it is also a fact that the army has been eminently successful in many CI operations because of the outstanding leadership and discipline of troops.<sup>11</sup> Some proponents of employing the army are optimistic that it may be a short haul as was the case in 1971 in Operation Steeple Chase when the army was employed against the Naxalites. They could not be more wrong as the ground situation obtaining now is entirely different from that in 1971.

In 1971, the army, together with PMF and state police forces, was employed against the Naxalites of Charu Mazumdar in West Bengal. The army formations—three divisions and a parachute brigade—were deployed only on the outermost ring and had a limited role. The actual work of large scale arrests, etc was done by the police and the PMF. The operation lasted a mere 45 days and was largely successful. The Naxal movement died its natural death as Mazumdar had not trained his cadres for a protracted struggle. Later, after the Bangladesh War, the West Bengal government ensured vastly improved land reforms. However, to equate the current

Maoist threat with that of the Naxalites in 1971 would be grossly incorrect.

Two major factors germane to the employment of the armed forces in anti-Maoist operations may be mentioned albeit briefly. China is reiterating its claims in Arunachal Pradesh and the Ladakh region and its troops are making regular inroads in our territory. Notwithstanding the present bonhomie with Pakistan, due entirely to the efforts of our government, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Pakistan Army are leaving no stone unturned to encourage pro-separatist movements in J&K. The rising tenor of separatists and violence in J&K is proof of it. Considering the army's commitment, from the Siachen glacier and along our international borders to the east and west, is it possible to make available five infantry divisions for operations against the Maoists that would continue for some time? Further, will the central and state governments accept collateral damage—inevitable when the army is employed? And, finally, will the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) remain in force or will it be diluted to tie down the army's hands? For some time, the separatists in J&K have been demanding that AFSPA be revoked in J&K. Clear answers are unlikely to the last two questions. As to the first, employing five divisions on a long-term basis will hugely impact the army's operational preparedness against external threats.

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### **Placing Trust in the Paramilitary Forces**

So, who should tackle the Maoists? The answer is obvious. The police forces of each state and CRPF battalions i.e. the PMFs should conjointly handle the operations. The state police, coming from the region, know the area like the back of their hand. Equally, the CRPF, with some terrain familiarisation and training, would be a force to reckon with. They have a good record in the past of taking tough action. The PMFs also have a better equation and understanding with administrative officials and elected representatives of the region. Of course, all police units involved in CI operations need to undergo a training capsule in a Counter-Insurgency and Jungle Warfare School. The states can, of course, develop their own schools but it would be preferable that they send their units to the army for a refresher. It is equally if not more important that officers commanding the police units get trained along with their men. After all, it is the junior leadership that wins tactical engagements and training a complete unit pays dividends.

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In the first place, however, the Centre has to prepare an overall operational plan of how the Centre and states should work in conjunction with each other to subdue the Maoists. It needs to have clearly defined goals for the security forces in the strategy of “clear, hold and develop” as also administrative/development projects that affect the “hearts and minds” of the populace. If the Status Paper of 2006 is anything to go by, there is an urgent need to improve upon it<sup>12</sup>. In so far as field operations are concerned, the Centre, in conjunction with the states, has to

take some major decisions. Should action by the PMFs be simultaneous in all states or should the Maoists be canalised towards a particular region? Should anti-Maoist operations proceed at the same pace in all states or should certain states be given priority over others? Could there be some merit in using specially trained, networked police commandos in viable groups to carry out deterrent strikes? Should swarm tactics be used? How should the Maoists be disconnected with their bases? The merits of cordon and search operations, area domination, area clearance, set-piece attacks in irregular warfare need to be planned by professionals before launching operations. Is it better to obtain early success by liquidating Maoists in states where they are weakest or should their strongholds be threatened from the beginning? Surprise, concentration of force and momentum of offensive action can only be sustained if there is an overall plan of offensive operation. How can synergy be generated and the hearts and minds of the tribals discriminated over decades, won over? Leaving the planning and execution of field operations to the genius of individual chief ministers alone of each affected state is absurd in the extreme. The preposterousness of this idea has already been proved most recently in J&K and Orissa.

Equally, to expect the Home Ministry to visualise, plan, coordinate, monitor and apply mid-course corrections to gain advantage of fleeting opportunities in a war against the Maoists in addition to other tasks specific to the ministry is asking for the moon. While the Home Ministry should exercise overall control, they should not be burdened with the day to day war against the Naxals. For this, the Centre has to create an organisation comprising handpicked serving/retired director general (DG) of police/PMFs, bureaucrats, intelligence personnel as well as some advisers from the military at the apex level who can address the problem in its entirety. Creating Unified Commands at the state level alone is not sufficient. Under the



Home Ministry, there is a large number of central police organisations that can easily be milked to create the infrastructure of a Unified Command at the Centre. A set of hardened professionals selected on the basis of proven field record can assess the conflicting requirements of terrain considerations, surveillance, intelligence, relative strength, communication and time to work out a decisive strategy and position national resources for optimum gains. This command centre, complete with staff and communications, could act as the nerve centre for anti-Maoist operations. It could monitor progress district-wise in each state and scrutinise all activities ranging from active operations to developmental activities.

## Conclusion

Good intentions alone will not wipe out the scourge of Maoists from the 231 districts. Employing the army, however tempting it might appear, is not the right solution. The bottom line is that both the Centre and the states have to be on the same page and until such time this is achieved, anti-Maoist operations will continue to flounder. An overall Unified Command should be established at the Centre to work out the strategy, allot resources and monitor the progress of operations. Waiting for the Maoists to strike before reacting or merely sending out PMF units without an overall aim is like the game of pinning the tail on a donkey.

## Notes

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