

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isasec@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Countering Left-Wing Extremism in India: Conceptual Ambiguity and Operational Disconnect

Bibhu Prasad Routray & Shanthie Mariet D'Souza¹

Abstract

The inability to craft an effective national policy to deal with the surge of left-wing extremism (LWE) is a subject of intense policy debate and mounting public concern in India. A short-sighted counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy, an apathetic political class, an unresponsive state machinery, bureaucratic inertia, problems of coordination (between the centre and state governments) and the growing disconnect between a prospering and an impoverished India, have been flagged as some of the factors that contribute to the lack of an effective strategy and the near-unassailability of the extremists. At the heart of such inadequacies, however, is the persistent conceptual ambiguity regarding the nature of the movement and the threat it poses to the Indian state. Authorities have been periodically compelled to revisit their strategies after each successful extremist attack. And yet, a comprehensive and unified national strategy providing a long-term solution to LWE remains a far-fetched goal. The 25 May 2013 extremist attack in the state of Chhattisgarh provided yet another opportunity to

¹ Dr Bibhu Prasad Routray is a Security Analyst/Consultant based in Singapore. He has served as Deputy Director in the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) Government of India, New Delhi. He has also carried out extensive field research on left-wing extremism in the affected Indian states and published a number of articles and opinion pieces on this subject in professional journals and forums. He can be contacted at bibhuroutray@gmail.com. Dr Shanthie Mariet D'Souza is Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. She can be contacted at isassmd@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

rethink and reset the COIN strategy. Whether the new strategy would end the ambiguity and explore alternate mechanisms for conflict resolution, however, remains to be seen.

Understanding Left-Wing Extremism (LWE)

Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) in India, spearheaded by the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist), poses a significant conceptual problem. In spite of the sustained campaign of intimidation and violence by the outfit² with the stated objective of overthrowing the democratic system of government, there is little unanimity among the policy makers and practitioners on the strategy to counter this form of violent extremism. The fact that LWE is not a secessionist movement has scuttled isolated moves to deploy the Indian Army³ in extremist-infested areas even when the law enforcement agencies and police have been found to be lacking in their abilities to protect the local populace from violent extremist onslaughts. The dilemma of proportional 'use of force' to deal with what is essentially perceived as home-based and home-grown extremist movement has complicated the search for an appropriate strategy – counter-terrorism (CT) versus counter-insurgency (COIN).⁴ The 'use of force' against its own population, although not a rarity in the history of Indian counter-insurgency campaigns, continues to evoke strong counter reactions and is restrained under the country's liberal democratic order.

As a result, labelling the Maoists as 'terrorists' remains problematic even for the ardent supporters of a force-centric approach of crushing the extremists. In a September 2011 media interview, then Home Minister P Chidambaram, under whose directives the Indian state launched the biggest-ever coordinated security force operations in 2010, refrained from branding the Naxals as terrorists. "The most violent movement in India is not terrorism or insurgency but Left-Wing extremism",⁵ he said advocating a move to provide enough manoeuvring space and at the same time win public support. A range of incongruous policies

² The history of LWE in India goes back to the 1960s. However, following the 2004 merger between two erstwhile outfits, the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) and the People's War Group (PWG), leading to the formation of the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist), the new party is largely described as spearheading a violent campaign. Once described as active in one-third of India's geographic expanse, the movement has claimed 8,498 lives between 2003 and 2012. India's Prime Minister has termed the movement the most serious internal security challenge. The CPI-Maoist's armed cadre strength was estimated officially to be 8,680 in 2010. Additionally, the group derives support and sympathy from a very large tribal population inhabiting India's resource-rich and yet-ungoverned and undeveloped regions.

³ The CPI-Maoist, unlike the insurgents in India's Northeast and Jammu & Kashmir, has not received any external assistance from foreign powers. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza, Countering the Naxalites: Is there a need to 'bring in' the Army?" *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol.3, No.3, pp. 125-132 (New Delhi, July 2009).

⁴ Shanthie Mariet D'Souza and Bibhu Prasad Routray, "India's COIN approach and Left-Wing Extremism", *Open Security*, London, August 13, 2012, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/shanthie-mariet-dsouza-bibhu-prasad-routray/indias-coin-approach-and-left-wing-extremis>. Accessed on 15 June 2013.

⁵ "Naxalism is a bigger challenge than terrorism: Chidambaram", *Times of India*, 14 September 2011, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-09-14/india/30153889_1_naxalism-bigger-challenge-home-minister. Accessed on 16 June 2013.

has originated from such lack of conceptual clarity.⁶ While some of the extremist-affected states have pursued a militaristic approach against the LWE by deploying security forces and trying to neutralise the military might of the CPI-Maoist, others have espoused recourse to development-led solution, dialogue and peace negotiations as effectual alternatives.

However, every major extremist attack has drained support from the camp that considers the extremists as estranged tribals who can be brought back to the mainstream by a humane state. Support for a militaristic approach against LWE, on the other hand, has increased. The disinclination of the CPI-Maoist towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict has led to a gradual consolidation in the coalition of the willing favouring the use of security forces to expand and implement the writ of the state.

Winning the ‘Hearts and Minds’ Strategy

India's interior ministry, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) propagates a two-pronged approach to counter LWE – combining security force kinetic action with accelerated development of extremist-affected areas. Critics, however, allege that the two-pronged approach merely masks an overtly security force-centric strategy to annihilate the extremists and clear the tribal inhabited areas for exploitation by the multinational corporations and the mining companies. Such criticism notwithstanding, developing the areas under CPI-Maoist domination and addressing governance deficit among the tribals remain a key pillar of the overall official strategy. Several ministers and officially appointed committees have underscored the need to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the tribal population who constitute the primary strength and local support base of the extremists through a sustained development campaign.

The Integrated Action Plan (IAP), launched since 2010 to develop 82 LWE-affected districts,⁷ is one of the key developmental initiatives in operation. There are additional schemes for generation of rural employment, to build road infrastructures, schools, hospitals, and efforts to activate the public distribution system (PDS) with a bid to reach subsidised food items to the impoverished population. There have also been efforts to reform the land acquisition laws for new industrial units as well as mining activities in the tribal inhabited areas. Legislations have been enacted to protect the forest rights for the tribal population and initiate land reforms in various states. Implementation of each of these measures, however, remains a key challenge, affected by bureaucratic inertia, political myopia as well as challenges posed by the extremists.

⁶ Bibhu Prasad Routray and Shanthie Mariet D’Douza, Inde: la reponse de l’Etat a l’insurrection des extremistes gauchistes, (Co-authored) in Aurelie Campana & Gerard Hervouet (ed.), *Terrorisme et insurrection. Evolution des dynamiques conflictuelles et reponses des Etats.*, Presses de l’Universite du Quebec (PUQ) Montreal/Quebec, January 2013.

⁷ The plan began with 35 districts under its ambit and has subsequently been expanded to cover 82 districts.

In the past decade, extremist violence has remained an impediment to such development efforts. The CPI-Maoist has destroyed schools, offices of local self-government institutions, roads, and mobile phone-towers to prevent the state agencies from making inroads into their stronghold areas. This, however, has not prevented the state from pouring money into extremist-affected areas. The total annual budgetary allocation for the 82 worst-affected districts for four financial years stands at Rupees 10 billion.⁸ In the battle to win the 'hearts and minds' and to meet the challenges posed by the extremists who target the developmental schemes, a 'clear, hold and develop' strategy has been implemented with varying degrees of success. However, the proportion of money being siphoned off by the political-bureaucratic-contractor nexus in the burgeoning war economy⁹ remains substantial.

(Dis) proportionate Use of Force?

The preference for using force to quell LWE is not necessarily linked to the state's inadequate gains from the developmental approach. However, the difficulties in pursuing a developmental approach in areas under extremist domination have created a constituency which believes in the need to neutralise the extremists before unleashing developmental measures. The CPI-Maoist has carried out a sustained and systematic campaign of violence targeting the security forces, police informers and civilians seen as sympathising with the state. This has justified the security force operations model.

Moreover, since most of India's previously perceived COIN/CT successes (in Punjab, Mizoram, Tripura and Andhra Pradesh) have been achieved through security force kinetic operations, this model has its ardent supporters both in the official as well as strategic circles. Deploying security force battalions into the conflict-affected areas has always been a convenient strategy of gaining control over the liberated zones. The development model, on the other hand, is perceived as tedious, costly and liable for disruption by extremist violence.

The myriad military measures employed against the CPI-Maoist include multi-theatre operations (Operation Green Hunt), localised small area operations (Operation Anaconda and Monsoon in Jharkhand and Operation Maad, Kilam, and Podku in Chhattisgarh), use of civilian vigilante groups (Sendra in Jharkhand and the disbanded Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh), and covert intelligence operations targeting the extremist leaders. As per the Government of India (GoI) data, as on May 2013, 532 companies of the central armed police forces have been deployed in the affected states to carry out joint operations with the state police forces.¹⁰

⁸ "Rs 1,000-cr fund for 82 Naxal-affected areas to continue", *Times of India*, 15 June 2013, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-06-15/news/39993105_1_backward-districts-integrated-action-plan-central-assistance. Accessed on 17 June 2013.

⁹ Shanthie Mariet D'Souza and Bibhu Prasad Routray, "Red kitty and beyond", *Business Standard*, New Delhi, May 20, 2010. http://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/shanthie-mariet-d-souza-bibhu-prasad-routray-red-kitty-and-beyond-110052000002_1.html. Accessed on 15 June 2013.

¹⁰ Deployment of CRPF in Naxal Affected States, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=95723>. Accessed on 8 May 2013

Achievements from each of these measures have been marred by setbacks. In the ensuing asymmetric warfare, security forces have lost personnel and weapons in some of the neatly executed ambushes by the CPI-Maoist. In 2010, the outfit killed an entire company of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in Chhattisgarh's Tadmetla area. Inadequate knowledge of the terrain and lack of human intelligence (HUMINT) resulted in some of the worst incidents of civilian casualties during encounters, further contributing to the existing alienation among the tribal population. The lack of coordination between the central and the state police forces made the operations far less effective. And the worst among them all, the divergent approaches and the varying intensity of counter-extremist responses across different Indian states have resulted in the inflation of insurgent balloon, allowing the Maoists to move and establish safe havens/sanctuaries in different ungoverned spaces of the country.

At the same time, each of these force-centric tactics, along with continuing efforts to modernise the state police and paramilitary forces, has made several tangible gains. The CPI-Maoist has lost a number of cadres to arrests, killings and surrender, a fact claimed by the official machinery and acknowledged in the outfit's published literatures. According to official data, 1,707 extremists were killed between 2003 and 2012. Another 6,849 were arrested and 1,100 surrendered during 2010 and 2012.¹¹

The area under extremist domination has shrunk after security forces cleared some CPI-Maoist strongholds in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha and Chhattisgarh. In 2011, the chief of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) claimed that his forces managed to free about 5,000 square kilometres of area previously controlled by the Maoists. Police stations, previously the most vulnerable among the Maoist targets, turned into impenetrable fortresses after available resources were used efficiently to augment their security, grossly undermining the 'raids for weapons' strategy of the CPI-Maoist. The overall impact has been reflected in the extremist ability to inflict injuries and fatalities on the security forces and civilians. Fatalities among civilians and security forces declined to 301 and 114 respectively in 2012, from 720 civilians and 285 security forces in 2010.¹² Number of violent incidents during the same period declined from 2,213 to 1,412.¹³

Maoists also were affected by a range of self-generating deficiencies. Rapid expansion facilitated the entry of a large number of insufficiently motivated cadres into the organisation. Mutation along caste lines in states such as Jharkhand and Bihar initiated a phase of internecine warfare. The state agencies roped in the renegade factions and made them unofficial partners in the COIN campaign against the CPI-Maoist. Moreover, craving for media publicity also led to some senior CPI-Maoist leaders coming under the radar of the forces and consequently getting eliminated.

¹¹ "State-wise extent of naxal violence during 2008 to 2012", Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

¹² "State-wise details of Civilians killed, Security Forces (SFs) killed, Naxals killed and Naxals arrested", Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

¹³ "State-wise extent of naxal violence during 2008 to 2012", Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

Case Study: The Chhattisgarh Attack

In the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh, the worst extremist-affected state in India, the CPI-Maoist, on 25 May 2013, carried out a well-planned attack targeting a convoy of vehicles carrying political leaders and activists belonging to the Indian National Congress (INC). A group of 350 Maoists consisting of men, women and children exploded improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to bring the convoy to a halt, overpowered the security forces and went about selectively killing political leaders. Among the killed were Mahendra Karma, the leader of the controversial Salwa Judum vigilante programme, and the INC's Chhattisgarh unit leader and his son. The death toll in the attack was 30 with no casualties on the Maoists side. A former union minister who was injured in the attack succumbed to his injuries on 11 June in a New Delhi hospital.

The attack carried out on the convoy did not constitute a significant military victory for the CPI-Maoist. The motley of security force personnel, mostly personal security guards protecting some of the leaders, either ran out of bullets or were overpowered by the numerically superior adversaries. Neither did the attack advance the Maoist objective of capturing state power. The attack took place in an identified extremist stronghold and did not demonstrate an audacious outreaching capacity into an area devoid of Maoist influence.

However, the violence, termed by India's Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh as a "frontal assault on the democratic foundations of our nation",¹⁴ did pose questions on the exaggerated claims of the state about its gains vis-a-vis the extremists in the recent months. Whether optimistic official assessments regarding the on-ground situation had encouraged such bravado of the INC leaders too came under scanner. Two months before the attack, the Union Home Secretary had told a parliamentary committee, "There has been an absolute turnaround in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand and now we are chasing the Naxal groups".¹⁵ A month before the attack, an internal assessment of the Intelligence Bureau (IB) had emphatically noted, "If the current momentum could be sustained for a period of few more months, it could perhaps lead to decisive tipping of scales in favour of security forces".¹⁶

Rethinking COIN Strategy: Old Wine in New Bottle

The 25 May incident in Chhattisgarh was neither the worst strike by the Maoists, nor did it constitute the first-ever attack on politicians. However, it was for the first time that the extremists had managed to annihilate a number of prominent politicians in a single attack. The incident generated intense media attention. Predictable reactions called for swift punitive

¹⁴ "PM's opening remarks at the All Party meeting on Naxal violence", 10 June 2013, Office of the Prime Minister of India, <http://pmindia.nic.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=1325>. Accessed on 17 June 2013.

¹⁵ Aloke Tikku, "MHA told Parliament panel Naxals are on the run in Chhattisgarh", *Hindustan Times*, 25 May 2013.

¹⁶ Rahul Tripathi, "Bastar Bloodbath: Alert on Naxal build-up came a month back", *Indian Express*, 28 May 2013.

measures against the extremists. The Chhattisgarh Chief Minister categorically rejected the possibility of peace negotiations and vowed to aggressively pursue the extremists.¹⁷ The Union Home Secretary R K Singh predicted an intensification of the COIN operations.¹⁸ The Union Home Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde promised a "joint operation"¹⁹ of state and central forces against the Maoists.

The attack also brought about some noticeable shifts in the proclaimed perceptions of some of the key government functionaries regarding the nature of extremism. Minister of Rural Development, Jairam Ramesh, a long-standing advocate of the politico-developmental approach against the Maoists, termed the attack a "holocaust"²⁰ and its perpetrators, "terrorists".²¹ Home Minister Shinde summed up the shift in the following words. "So far we were thinking that this (violence) would be some other way of movement. But in 2010 incident (Tadmetla massacre in which 76 security personnel were killed) and May 25 (attack on Congress rally) we have seen it is nothing other than a terror (activity)", he said. Shinde concluded, "The (May 25) incident is bigger than terrorism".²² Amid the convergence of views, some dissenting voices, however, remained. The Tribal Affairs Minister K C Deo, for example, opined that the end of the conceptual problem alone will not help addressing the Maoist issue. "Calling them terrorists... is it going to help or improve the situation? You can use different terms but ultimately you have to get at the root of the problem",²³ he said.

Apart from such predominantly rhetorical official assertions, the 25 May extremist attack did herald the possibility of a reset to the existing COIN strategy. The need to end the partisan differences on the issue and evolve consensus at the national level to formulate a policy on LWE led to a meeting of different political parties on 10 June. The Prime Minister, inaugurating the meeting, underlined the need to "fine tune and strengthen"²⁴ the defensive and offensive capabilities of the state against the extremists. While declining to disclose the

¹⁷ "No talks, fight against Naxals to intensify: Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh to NDTV", *NDTV*, 5 June 2013, <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/no-talks-fight-against-naxals-to-intensify-chhattisgarh-chief-minister-raman-singh-to-ndtv-375448>. Accessed on 17 June 2013.

¹⁸ "Anti-Naxal operations will be intensified: Home Secy RK Singh", *Zee News*, 28 May 2013, http://zeenews.india.com/news/maharashtra/anti-naxal-operations-will-be-intensified-home-secy-rk-singh_851348.html. Accessed on 17 June 2013.

¹⁹ "We will launch a joint operation: Shinde", *The Hindu*, 31 May 2013, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/we-will-launch-a-joint-operation-shinde/article4769407.ece>. Accessed on 17 June 2013.

²⁰ "Naxal attack was a 'holocaust': Jairam Ramesh", *Daily News & Analysis*, 26 May 2013, <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/1839766/report-naxal-attack-was-a-holocaust-jairam-ramesh>. Accessed on 17 June 2013.

²¹ "Maoists terrorists, should learn from Arvind Kejriwal, fight polls: Jairam Ramesh", *Indian Express*, 29 May 2013, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/maoists-terrorists-should-learn-from-arvind-kejriwal-fight-polls-jairam-ramesh/112202/>. Accessed on 16 June, 2013.

²² "Naxal attack: Shinde speaks of joint action, Greyhound forces", *Daily News & Analysis*, 31 May 2013; <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/335731/naxal-attack-shinde-speaks-joint.html>. Accessed on 16 June, 2013.

²³ Sindhu Manjesh, "Calling Naxals 'terrorists' will not solve problems: Tribal Affairs Minister KC Deo", *NDTV*, 31 May 2013, <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/calling-naxals-terrorists-will-not-solve-problems-tribal-affairs-minister-kc-deo-373522>. Accessed on 16 June, 2013.

²⁴ "PM's opening remarks at the All Party meeting on Naxal violence", 10 June 2013, Prime Minister's Office, Government of India. <http://pmindia.nic.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=1325>. Accessed on 17 June 2013.

measures initiated to "permanently root out this menace" he assured the nation that his "government will not be found wanting in this regard".²⁵ A resolution passed at the end of the meeting called upon the state and the central governments to "adopt a two-pronged strategy of sustained operations to clear the areas of Maoist influence and pursue the objectives of effective governance and rapid development".²⁶ The parties resolved to "remain united and shall speak in one voice and act with a sense of unified purpose and will".²⁷

The content and direction of the new strategy remains a matter of speculation. Some of its key parameters, however, can be inferred from the statements of bureaucrats and ministers. While an overwhelming opinion against the participation of the Indian Army against the CPI-Maoist continues to persist, the government appears prepared to abandon the policy of trying to develop the extremist-affected areas, pending its sanitisation by the security forces. Underlining the difficulties of implementing development schemes in extremist-controlled areas, Finance Minister P Chidambaram told journalists, "In Bastar (Chhattisgarh), what development can you attempt if people can't enter?"²⁸ The Home Secretary R K Singh also added that security action must precede developmental work and cannot be carried out simultaneously.²⁹ A further hardening of the force-centric policy is visible through the attempt by New Delhi to coerce all states to pursue a unified national strategy against the CPI-Maoist, using preferential deployment of central police forces as a leverage tool. New Delhi intends to rapidly fill up the shortage of 27,000 in the central forces' ranks to ensure an optimal force deployment in the extremist-affected areas.

Lessons Learnt?

The new strategy appears to have assigned a disproportionate use of force, representing a return to the mindset that prevailed in 2010. Operation Green Hunt (OGH) launched in the early months of that year, involving over 70 battalions of central security forces and an equal number of state police personnel, had envisioned to surmount the military challenge posed by the extremists through a rapid and decisive demonstration of strength. Within a few months, the security forces met with a series of setbacks leading to the abandonment of the operation. Lacklustre response of the civil administration failed to address the governance and development deficit both in the OGH and the subsequent focused area operations. Surprisingly, the discourse on the new strategy appears to have given very little attention to these shortcomings.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ "Unanimous Resolution by the All Party meeting on Naxal violence", Prime Minister's Office, Government of India, 10 June 2013, <http://pmindia.nic.in/press-details.php?nodeid=1635>. Accessed on 17 June 2013.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ "States agree to adopt Andhra-style anti Naxal policy; national policy soon", *Economic Times*, 6 June 2013, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-06-06/news/39788812_1_chief-ministers-bastar-dantewada. Accessed on 17 June 2013.

²⁹ Aman Sharma, "Naxal violence: Security action must precede developmental work, says RK Singh", *Economic Times*, 11 June 2013, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-06-11/news/39899514_1_naxal-violence-home-secretary-rk-singh-chhattisgarh. Accessed on 17 June 2013.

Whether a real turn-around can be achieved through the new strategy remains unclear. It may still be possible for a determined state to neutralise some of the senior Maoist leadership and effect some fatal blows on the movement through the force dominated approach. However, unless the state demonstrates its willingness to fill in the vacuum of underdevelopment and absence of governance, Maoists in some form or the other will find an opportunity to return. The purported objective of an extremist takeover of the country has always been unrealistic. Without a unified strategy and a coherent national policy that nips the strength and the support base of the extremists, the government's objective of reclaiming the liberated zones, too, would be defeated, even with the prevailing state of heightened alert.

.....