



SMALL WARS

JOURNAL

Counterinsurgency in India: The Maoists

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India's Prime Minister identifies the Maoist (or "Naxalite") insurgency as India's "single biggest internal security challenge." The insurgency is today severe in scale and violence with 2,212 violent incidents in 2010 causing 1,175 casualties (713 civilian, 285 security force and 171 guerilla), a 63% increase since 2008.^[i] Today, about 10,000 – 40,000 full-time insurgents wage a protracted peoples war to overthrow the Indian state across a vast "Red Corridor," affecting 20 of India's 28 states. India is currently waging a large-scale counterinsurgency campaign against the Maoists, deploying 70,000 paramilitary police in November 2009, many to the insurgent heartland in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, where 50 percent of all attacks were recorded in 2010.^[ii]

The Maoists benefit from "two Indias living side by side."^[iii] India is rapidly modernizing, but many inequalities are also widening – between rich and poor, town and country and upper and lower castes. Conditions for large swathes of rural India still compare with the worst of sub-Saharan Africa, and in many remote areas the state has long been absent. However, economic grievances alone do not correlate with Maoism, and in net terms, the Indian state has tremendous internal legitimacy – only 26 of India's 100 poorest districts, and 20 of its 100 most illiterate are Maoist afflicted.^[iv] In truth, Maoist legitimacy is restricted to the extreme end of India's deprivation scale – amongst the adivasis (tribals) and dalits ("untouchables") – where in addition to extreme human misery, a broader set of social and status grievances are being inflamed.

Analyst Eric Randolph astutely noted on the issue that, "People can put up with a great deal of structural violence in their lives [...] particularly when it is all they have known. Instead, what tends to trigger acts of violent rebellion are specific flashpoints of injustice."^[v] For the adivasis and tribals, there are plenty such flashpoints. India's tribals – in particular the Gonds of Central India^[vi] – are under intense assault from state and private corporate interests, and are being pushed off their forestlands by giant hydro, logging and mining projects for little compensation and rehabilitation. The dalits, already the bottom rung of landless agricultural farmers, are similarly disproportionately impacted by the tumultuous changes of modernization on the Indian countryside, and discriminated against daily despite legislation. Tribals make up the core fighting strength of the Maoist insurgency – their narrow eight percent share of the population is still sizeable given India's 1.2 billion peoples.

The Maoist insurgency follows on a long history of peasant and tribal rebellion against predatory state structures on the subcontinent. It originated in its present form in a small village in Naxalbari, West Bengal, where in 1967, villagers armed with bows and arrows resisted police and feudal landlords with bows and arrows.^[vii] The incident galvanized the Indian Communist movement, which found a fertile audience for its Chinese-inspired Maoist rhetoric of land reform and overthrow of feudal class structures. Militant Communism has since waxed and waned for the past half century, crushed by security forces and de-legitimized by the Indo-Chinese War of 1962, but the current phase of escalation is the strongest and

most violent in history. In 2004, the two largest insurgent groups – the People’s War Group and the Maoist Communist Center – merged to form the new Communist Party of India Maoist (CPI-M). The merger elevated security hardliners in insurgent command, reiterated their commitment to violent and large-scale “peoples war,” and immediately increased insurgent kinetic activity. Today, the CPI-M accounts for 90% of attacks and 95% of fatalities from “left-wing terrorism,” according to the Indian Home Ministry.^[viii]

Maoist insurgents are tactically effective and intimately familiar with their jungle terrain. They employ classic guerilla tactics, dispersing in the face of organized force and prioritize their links with the population –often through violent intimidation. Their dispersed organizational structure mitigates the risk of being decisively impacted by targeted counterinsurgent (CI) operations. Local cells have tremendous autonomy, reflected in the fact that since 2007, six of the fourteen members of the Politburo, the highest echelon of insurgent command, have been arrested, to little discernible impact in the field.^[ix] Unusual in COIN campaigns, Maoist guerillas have the tactical advantage over Indian security forces, and have demonstrated the ability to conduct sophisticated large-scale operations. Insurgents assault training centers and police stations to capture weaponry, attack jails to break out captured comrades and target judges and state functionaries to weaken state presence. Their lethality has grown with the use of IEDs, which now result in the majority of CI casualties. Despite a total lack of external support, the Maoists have ready access to funding – territories under their control are resource-rich and the insurgents maintain an extensive and lucrative extortion network that may net them as much as 14 billion rupees (\$300 million) annually.^[x] Part of the insurgent “tax” is explosives used in the mining sector, which companies are often in no position to refuse.^[xi]

A Military-Centric Response

India has grown acutely aware of the Maoist threat, but the effort to date remains vastly inadequate, both in mobilizing capacity and in implementing policy. The current counterinsurgent (CI) strategy is typically Indian – manpower-intensive and enemy-centric. It emphasizes building up force numbers to “saturate” areas with government forces and prioritizes kinetic action to suffocate the insurgency by attrition. Only lip service is paid to Western-style population-centric strategy; CI forces are present to target insurgents, not secure the population. The resultant flood of ill-trained and ill-equipped soldiers conducting large-scale sweep and commando operations has exposed civilian populations to collateral damage and abuse, increased Maoist legitimacy and recruitment, and left populations open to reprisal attacks by insurgents. As such, it is likely that the scale and intensity of violence will increase in the short-term, but over the longer-term, the sheer mass of government capacity may tip the balance. Even so, brute military force is unlikely to ever fully extinguish an insurgency that is driven primarily, if not exclusively, by social and status grievances.

In India’s federalist structure, states assume primary responsibility for combating Maoism, but their inadequacy has forced central “paramilitary” police forces to assume the leading COIN role. “Operation Green Hunt” launched in November 2009 deployed about 70,000 Central Reserve Police Forces (CRPF) personnel (split roughly evenly between combat and support staff) to reach a 2011 end-strength of 73 battalions across Maoist-affected states.^[xii] The CRPF is India’s largest internal security force and is a resource provider of sorts for the central government – sending emergency infusions of armed police to insecure areas across the country.^[xiii] The nomenclature of “paramilitary” typically attributed to the CRPF may overestimate its true capabilities – it is nowhere close to being a specialized CI force.^[xiv]

In Kashmir, some CRPF units received intensified resourcing and training allowing them to independently secure key terrain districts, ^[xv] but in net terms, the CRPF is subject to all the problems of the Indian police sector including chronic shortfalls of equipment, training, leadership, and logistical and

administrative support. It struggles in basic constabulary operations – let alone open combat against a tactically proficient insurgent on home terrain. Symbolic of the challenge, some CRPF units' still lack protective vests, even while deployed in frontline combat roles!^[xvi] For anti-Maoist operations, the CRPF is supported by other state armed police forces, i.e. those state police units trained for higher grade law and order problems, including India Reserve Battalions (IRB). These forces are more competent than the regular police, but there is generally a net decline in combat capacity, discipline and professionalism down the hierarchy of security institutions.

Scale, capacity and terrain challenges severely hamper the CI force. 70,000 troops cannot by themselves realistically expect to affect any measurable difference over a population of at least 450 million people across 1.86 million square kilometers of tough, remote terrain^[xvii] – especially without adequate support from effective civil police for regular law and order functions. The UN recommends a peacetime police-to-population ratio of 222 policemen per 100,000 members of the population, which India – and especially its insurgency-affected areas – falls far short of. ^[xviii] In the Maoist heartland of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, new figures show their police-to-population ratios at 226 and 206 in 2010,^[xix] a dramatic improvement (at least on paper) from 2000, when the ratio was a mere 50!^[xx] Other states lag far behind. Orissa remains at 136, West Bengal at 100, and Bihar at just 74.^[xxi] Numbers tell only part of the story. Indian police are notoriously corrupt and brutal by Western standards. Draconian sedition laws punish even the semblance of sympathy for the Maoist cause.^[xxii] and anti-Maoist operations regularly leave behind a trail of destruction – including serious abuses such as torture, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions and rape.^[xxiii]

In the field many units – other than some elite forces – are tactically outmatched. Maoists benefit from the guerilla's ability to choose the time and place of engagement, allowing them to confront the state at its weakest points. Coordinated attacks have penetrated high-security areas with relative impunity, but most notable was the 2010 Maoist ambush in Dantewada that killed 76 soldiers of the 62nd CRPF Battalion, the single largest loss of life in Indian COIN history. The event deeply undercut the Indian government's claims of progress, and revealed systemic failures. 62 Bn. had served previously in anti-Naxal operations in Bihar, but like other CRPF units was shifted in an ad hoc manner on the basis of availability rather than suitability for the mission. As a result, it failed to acclimatize to the local physical and human terrain, evident when the force found itself trapped on a narrow jungle path. An IED was able to halt the entire column by disabling the lead vehicle, and well-positioned guerillas prevented any retaliatory maneuver. ^[xxiv] Chronic deficiencies in leadership were also evident – not uncommon in a force that sees its best officers poached by other agencies.^[xxv] The unit commander reportedly lied about his position to avoid a long-range field patrol, and failed to report a lost radio that likely allowed guerillas to track to column over several days.^[xxvi] Insurgent intelligence dominance was easily evident – the Maoists were able to maneuver 1,000 men into place without detection, no doubt benefiting from at least some local support.

Dantewada was an exceptional incident, but there are a legion other equipment and training challenges that limit CI abilities. Drastic expansion in force size has come without a commensurate emphasis on building up an adequate support base. Troops are barracked in terrible living conditions and there is widespread resentment at the perceived lack of political support, as well as the lack of clarity and resources with which to conduct their missions. Force protection is low, especially against IEDs. Deployed counter-IED equipment is limited^[xxvii] and current armored vehicles provide inadequate protection, forcing a reliance on vulnerable dismounted patrols. New armored vehicles are being introduced – but Maoists have generally adapted by increasing the size of their bombs.^[xxviii] Unsurprisingly, morale is low. One soldier angrily declared to an embedded reporter, “Have you ever seen a war being fought like this? We don't know if we are here to assist the state police on law and order or to flush out Naxals, or merely to oscillate between troubled territories, getting our jawans (soldiers) killed for

no fault of theirs.”^[xxix] He went on to point out various shortcomings including inadequate and sporadic rations, virtually no support for injured and killed soldiers, and points out that even “when I go on leave or when I am on my way back home [from camp], I travel that distance at the mercy of God or the Naxals. What morale are you talking about?”^[xxx]

Despite their tactical capabilities, Maoists adhere to classic guerilla tactics, readily ceding territory in the face of organized state offensives, even “liberated areas” such as Lalgah district. Their mobility and trans-bordered nature allows them to exploit weak intra-state cooperation, making border areas between states particularly troublesome. Some states such as Chhattisgarh have multiple tri-junctions – where the borders of three states meet – allowing insurgents to mount attacks across state lines before retreating to safe havens.^[xxxi] Success in one state – such as Andhra Pradesh – may only displace insurgents into others; the neighboring states of Orissa and Chhattisgarh have seen significant spikes in violence since. Several initiatives have been unveiled to overcome the jurisdictional conflicts that plague effective trans-border policing, most notably by creating unified commands in insurgency-affected states.

Designed to act as ‘fusion centers’ to facilitate cooperation between states, between state and federal forces, and between civilian and military personnel, their result has so far been underwhelming, not least because of the pushback from many state and local governments. On the local level, a political-criminal interface ensures that many politicians are eager to collude with Maoists and profit from their control of mines and resources. In some states – such as Jharkhand and Bihar – political rivalries mean that states refuse to cooperate with federal efforts, and in others, leaders collude with the Maoists for self-preservation. In West Bengal, the state government has greatly slowed CI activity and all but allowed a Maoist sanctuary earning them greatly reduced levels of violence in the state, but damaging the overall COIN effort.^[xxxii] The easy availability of central forces has also resulted in many states neglecting their own police modernization efforts.

Unsurprisingly, simply augmenting force numbers has not paid dividends. Chhattisgarh and Jharkand both saw insurgent attacks rise despite a police surge, whereas in Andhra Pradesh, the state which has most effectively combated Maoists, the police force in population terms remained constant. Credit for reversing insurgent momentum is generally given to the state’s elite ‘Greyhound’ force built to live and operate in the jungle as the guerilla did, and fight the Indian jungle equivalent of a “bush war.” The force’s 1,000 personnel across 30 “assault units,” benefited from rigorous training and superior equipment (particularly communications technology) and were able to rapidly deploy and effectively operate on Maoist terrain. The Greyhounds have been extremely effective, but they did not operate in a vacuum. Beyond elite forces, Andhra Pradesh pursued an effective state police capacity-building effort, spreading tactically trained personnel across the force, and building synergistic relationships between the district police, intelligence assets and the Greyhounds.^[xxxiii] The state also benefited from focused efforts to improve its COIN doctrine. It coordinated police strategies, created fortified police districts in vulnerable areas, improved intelligence sharing between security agencies,^[xxxiv] cross-trained regular police units with elite police commando forces, and measurably implemented well-crafted community development programs.

Unfortunately through the militarized lens of India’s COIN campaign, only the warfighting elements of Andhra Pradesh’s strategy have been replicated with earnest. The CRPF is raising ten Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (COBRA) battalions to reach an envisioned end-strength of about 10,000 men.^[xxxv] COBRA battalions are expected to be some of the best-equipped paramilitary troops in the country, and are trained specifically for the Maoist fight. They are armed like a regular Army infantry platoon and are trained in counter-guerilla and jungle warfare operations at the elite Counterinsurgency and Jungle Warfare School (CIJWS), the Indian Army’s premier unconventional warfare training institution. State police forces – such as the India Reserve (IR) battalions are also are tasked with raising

two companies of specialized ‘commando’ forces per battalion[xxxvi] - and more state police forces are being given at least some advanced warfare training. This militarization of the police may yield results in terms of removing insurgents from the field, but comes with the tradeoff in diverting attention and resources away from the equally crucial task of increasing and professionalizing regular policing capacity to “hold” cleared territory.

Another worrying trend has been the outsourcing of security responsibilities to auxiliary non-state militias that operate with little oversight, training or accountability, and yet are deputized under the aegis of ‘Special Police Officers’ (SPOs) with official government sanction. Most prominent was the Salwa Judum (literally translated to “Purification Hunt” in the local Gondi dialect), a Chhattisgarh government-sponsored and equipped militia of about 5,000 lightly armed tribal people. Salwa Judum may have benefited from support and funding from mining companies, and was widely accused of extreme human rights abuses including forcible displacements of villages, killings and rape. In response, in July 2011, the Indian Supreme Court declared SPOs illegal and unconstitutional and ordered their disbandment.

Indian security officials had routinely justified these forces as helping them ‘localize’ their force presence, build up human intelligence networks and provide alternative employment opportunities for tribal youth. They came, however, with substantial tradeoffs including the militarization of tribal society and the emergence of ‘warlords’ who maintain control over refugee camps and swathes of territory – making disbandment and reintegration difficult.[xxxvii] However, despite their record, SPOs did provide an important “force multiplier” for culturally foreign CI forces, and their replacement with regular police will take time – by some accounts at least a year.[xxxviii] Moreover even if SPOs are abandoned fully – itself a dubious prospect – other shadowy vigilante groups also exist, including the several “Cobra” organizations in Andhra Pradesh that retaliate against Maoist violence, particularly if committed against military and government officials.[xxxix]

As detailed, Indian CI forces suffer many capacity shortfalls that impede their operational effectiveness, but major reforms are currently ongoing that could significantly increase the quality of anti-Maoist CI forces. Israeli assault rifles are being purchased,[xli] helicopters being redeployed back from peacekeeping missions ostensibly for anti-Maoist operations,[xlii] and retired army soldiers being recruited as trainers. [xliii] Two of three sanctioned UAVs have been inducted to improve ISR capabilities and detect massed insurgent forces – although forested terrain restricts their utility[xliiii] - and a variety of other new equipment is being inducted. All these if utilized effectively can improve the CI capacity to kill insurgents, but it is less certain that they can strategically end the insurgency.

Inadequate Social, Political and Economic Redress

The Indian state has focused on combating the insurgency by military means, but addressing the legitimate economic and social grievances of tribal peoples has been less forthcoming. Rural development in India comes with significant scale challenges, affecting 1/3rd of the entire world’s poor and traversing remote areas where the government has traditionally been absent. Improving tribal welfare is a component of the broader growth and modernization of India, and as such competes with a host of other priorities. Development projects come with sizeable time-lags that must be factored in – effective policy will require sustained funding and attention over a period of years without immediately apparent results.

Development must be recognized for the offensive weapon that it is – both in attacking insurgent legitimacy and in binding tribals to the Indian state by destroying their earlier forms of social existence. [xliv] Moreover, it is not a panacea. Efforts to raise economic and human welfare standards must come alongside broader reforms in social justice and local governance to mitigate predatory and corrupt local administrative structures. It is not for nothing that the insurgent heartland in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand

corresponds with the two worst governed states in the country. [\[xlv\]](#) Tighter regulation of private industry is also necessary, including measures to ensure rehabilitation for those displaced by mining projects, and efforts to compensate for and mitigate the ecological and social impacts of extraction.

India has admittedly prioritized rural development – elevating its ministry to a cabinet level position in 2011 – and significantly increased allocations to Maoist-affected areas through targeted entitlements. However, rural development to date has been superficial and ineffective, with emphasis on increased allocations obscuring problems in implementation and a lack of progress towards desired outcomes. The Maoist Integrated Action Plan for example provided 250 million rupees in 2010, and 300 million in 2011 in discretionary funds for quick-impact human welfare projects including building facilities for drinking water, sanitation, health clinics, roads etc. Data to date, however, suggests that only a quarter of allocated money has been spent and only 15 percent of projects completed. [\[xlvi\]](#) This is despite the obvious fact that sincere development is appreciated – in February 2011 the Maoist abduction of a district collector known for being an efficient and honest administrator led to tribal rallies and protests, forcing his release [\[xlvii\]](#)

There is, however, a prevalent belief that current patterns of insecurity dictate that stabilization must precede development. This is not an unreasonable view – it is obviously difficult to develop territory you do not control and the Maoists recognize that development can erode their control. As such, insurgents have targeted 1,241 ‘economic targets’ between 2007 and 2011, including roads, power plants, telephone towers etc. [\[xlviii\]](#) Such targeting is entirely self-interested, seeking to keep communities isolated and insulated from the relief efforts and ensuring that Maoists are the sole providers of social services. Human Rights Watch for example details how Maoists shut down rural schools to create captive recruiting pools for their Bal Sangam child-brigades. [\[xlix\]](#) Government agents are prime Maoist targets, severely complicating outreach. CI forces have attempted to mitigate this problem by recently unveiling plans for seven new battalions of “specialized forces” that integrate engineering and security personnel. [\[l\]](#)

There are islands of success, but overall reconstruction and aid delivery efforts in Central India leave much to be desired. Plans look good on paper; the Saranda Action Plan for example seeks to build on successful clear operations with a series of entitlement plans – including issuing ration cards for the poor, creating rural work schemes and developing infrastructure to connect isolated communities. [\[li\]](#) Unfortunately, many of these policies fail to be implemented effectively and a large proportion of allocated funds are leaked to inefficiency, corruption and the incompetence of the state machinery. Corruption in particular is not a side effect that can be ignored – the nexus between corrupt politicians, private industry and Maoists is a key driver of both tribal alienation from the state, as well as a major facilitator of insurgent freedom of action. Much development money is also believed to flow to Maoist hands in the form of protection money paid by reconstruction firms.

Lessons Learned

1) Skewed priority of effort – The mission fails to integrate military and civilian efforts, and prioritizes tactical military decisions that may in many cases have strategic tradeoffs. Development and political outreach is tainted by police brutality, and ineffective military operations are a major driver of Maoist mobilization. Military missions must be designed and conducted carefully to minimize civilian alienation, and must be viewed as precursors for post-“clear” development and reconstruction. Civilian and military coordination must improve and emphasis must be placed on improving the conduct of security forces.

2) Over-Militarization of Police – The emphasis on building up paramilitary forces capable of taking the fight to the Maoists should not detract from efforts to build up competent civil police. Kinetic operations must be merely a prelude to a viable rule of law, which will require building up capacities in not just the

civil police, but also the supporting justice and detention sectors.

3) Mobilize Scarce Assets – The Indian Army has rightly assessed that it is not trained or equipped to combat its own people, but it is the only Indian institution with the specialized capacity that could tip the Maoist fight. Aerial assets can improve ISR coverage, equipment such as counter-IED kits and armored vehicles can reduce police casualties, and Army trainers and facilities are the best available resource to build up small-unit combat capabilities and disseminate tactical lessons learnt from other theaters.

4) Improve unity of effort – The insurgency crosses borders, and so must the CI effort. Focus must be given to improving coordination between the many state and central agencies involved, and between states. The goal should be to create effective border management protocols that prevent insurgents from locating safe havens to regroup.

5) Attack insurgent legitimacy – CI actions should best sell their mission, but strategic communications can highlight Maoist complicity in corruption, extortion, and violent abuse at the expense of tribal communities. This is most viable if CI forces themselves adhere to tighter ethical codes of conducts than insurgents – not currently true.

6) Empower non-state actors with care – Actors such as Salwa Judum deeply de-legitimize the state and taint it by association. Especially in India, the population cannot easily distinguish between police branches or between formal and informal forces, and brutalities reinforce the predominant image of the Indian state as callous and predatory.

7) Improve the effectiveness of aid delivery – There must be a focus on outcomes over allocations. Emphasis should be paid on ensuring that projects are completed on time and to standard, and continual oversight should mitigate leakages. Projects should be visible and have immediate impact, and local communities must be involved from project design to completion.

8) Governance reform – Corruption and local predatory state structures are drivers of Maoist legitimacy and mobilization. A major facilitator of the insurgency is the willingness of local politicians to collude with Maoists and/or private industry at the expense of their constituents, and to enact self-interested policies that weaken the mission. Measures such as the sedition laws would be better suited to tackle direct support such as this, rather than human-right workers and ordinary civilians whose only crime is to extend moral support.

9) Aid is insufficient – Aid and quick-impact projects can only alleviate immediate needs. Broader economic and social reforms must be tackled with real urgency. A culture of impunity and blatant corruption must end; for politicians, police, and business elites, and inequalities between rich and poor and town and country must ease. Targeting Maoist-affected areas with increased funding and attention is probably good policy, but it is likely not an overstatement to say anti-Maoist success will correlate significantly with India's progress in caring for its poorest peoples.

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