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Title	Countering India's Maoist insurgency : the need for strategy not operations
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Citation	Akanksha Mehta. (2010). Countering India's Maoist insurgency : the need for strategy not operations. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 074). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2010
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/6655
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Countering India's Maoist Insurgency: The Need for Strategy not Operations

Akanksha Mehta

5 July 2010

Recent attacks highlighted the increasing strength and militarisation of the Maoist insurgency in India. The government, which seems to be faltering, needs to develop a well-coordinated, multi-pronged strategy addressing issues of security, development, and governance in Maoist-affected areas.

WITH ITS spread, mobilisation, organisation and increasing tactical sophistication, the Maoist (Naxal) insurgency has established itself as India's "gravest internal security threat". From the rural, jungle operations, the Maoists are now moving towards urban centres with an ever-increasing target set – government, key infrastructure, and even civilians.

Growing Maoist infrastructure

Currently active in 223 districts across 20 Indian states (30 percent of the country); the Maoists are also linked to leftist groups in neighbouring countries through the Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia (CCOMPOSA). They are even reported to be getting support from leftist groups outside of the region (such as the Communist Party of the Philippines). In addition to having claimed 2,100 lives between 2005 and 2009, the Maoists are destroying valuable infrastructure including railways, schools, hospitals, policing and government institutions. Moreover, the Maoists have come to run substitute governance structures in their strongholds; making a mockery of India's core political and judicial institutions, and placing natural resources and economic investments in these areas at serious risk.

The May 2010 attack on a private bus near Gadiras in Dantewada district of the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh illustrated the strength of the information and structural networks of the Maoists in their strongholds. Whereas, the April 2010 attack, which claimed the lives of 76 personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force, highlighted significant loopholes in the government's counter operations. The

Home Affairs ministry concedes in its latest security report that left-wing extremists operate in the vacuum created by weak governance structures and take advantage of prevalent dissatisfaction. They also exploit feelings of perceived neglect and injustice among the underprivileged and remote segments of the population. As such, it is necessary for the government to develop a multi-pronged strategy that counters both the violence and its roots causes.

Inadequacies of Current Operations

The formation of a successful counter-strategy has been difficult, as the Maoists have emerged as a rather diffused enemy. Several sections of the tribal population are ambivalent in this insurgency, leading to a confusion over the different leanings amongst the armed insurgents, tribal sympathisers and innocent tribal villagers. Moreover, within the Maoist movement, there exist several factions (with several strands of Leftist ideology) that often divide and consolidate. This has rendered the “Maoist ideology” and the goals of the movement, rather unidentifiable. It makes it difficult for the government to counter them and formulate an appropriate strategy that would defeat the armed insurgents without alienating the tribal villagers who are not in the Maoist camp.

Recent operations to combat Maoist violence (such as Operation Green Hunt launched in March 2010) have been largely unsuccessful as the security forces are not provided with adequate training and resources to fight the rebels. While units stationed in Maoist areas are given some training in guerilla warfare, their weapons, arms and ammunitions, as well their networks and structures of communication and intelligence gathering are inadequate to counter those of their adversaries. For instance, in the April 2010 attack on a CRPF unit in Mukrana forests of Dantewada district, CRPF personnel were unaware of intelligence inputs, and were inadequately trained and commanded. This made them commit several tactical errors, rendering them easy targets for the rebels.

Poor Coordination

The poor coordination between local police, intelligence agencies, and the paramilitary personnel in the region is brought about by political differences and related factors. Furthermore, current operations are built on an insufficient tactical understanding of the insurgents. This was also highlighted during the Dantewada attack wherein CRPF personnel, following protocol, headed to take cover in the neighbouring forests after the initial explosion. However, Maoist insurgents, aware of this protocol, had booby-trapped the neighbouring forests with mines, resulting in more casualties.

Owing to India’s federal polity, the Maoist insurgency (classified as a law and order issue) falls under the control of the governments of individual states. However, as Maoists operate on several border areas, a counter-operation in one state merely leads to the spillover of Maoists to the neighbouring state. Political differences between neighbouring state governments have thus further hampered the success of operations against the rebels.

India’s development and governance initiatives aimed at combating the root causes of the insurgency have also been unsuccessful so far. While the failure of these initiatives can be largely attributed to the deep-seated corruption, bureaucracy, and political rivalry that is endemic to India, it is also significant to note that the government cannot develop what it cannot control. The Maoists run parallel government structures in their strongholds, asserting their presence with both violence and political and economic control. This has made it difficult for the government to deliver development projects to these areas.

Strategy not Operations

Because of a lack of proper understanding of the threat, insufficient cooperation and resources, and inadequate implementation of policy initiatives to address issues of governance and development, the

Indian government has been churning out largely ineffective counter operations and not a solid, multi-pronged counter strategy.

The Maoist insurgency has permeated a vast expanse of the country, undermining its very core institutions. Long-term initiatives to address the inadequacies of development and governance in Maoist-infested areas along with measures to degrade operational capabilities of the rebels are extremely important. It is therefore, critical that the security forces are provided with adequate training, resources, and a protocol based on a strong understanding of Maoist tactics. At the same time, the Indian government has to reestablish firm governance structures and demonstrate significant political will in the administration of development projects in the Maoist-affected areas.

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