

Countering the Naxalites: Is there a need to 'bring in' the Army?

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As the Prime Minister and the Union Home Minister emphasized in the Chief Minister's Conference on Internal security in August and again in the Conference of the Director Generals of State Police Forces in September 2009, on the need to modernize the Police force of the country as an anti-dote to the problem of terrorism/ insurgency/ left-wing extremism, the task remains enormous and Herculean. In spite of the near unanimity among the political and strategic community on changing the face of policing in this country, individual states continue to be only reluctant participants in this grand project of the Union Government, a matter which is of considerable importance given that almost all of India's successful counter-insurgency campaigns have been led by the state Police force.

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The Punjab Police with support from the central para-military forces and the army successfully neutralized the terrorists demanding a separate state of Khalistan in the early 1990s. Since 2003, in the north-eastern state of Tripura, a Police-led campaign significantly brought down the insurgency-related violence. The Naxalite-affected Andhra Pradesh has managed to construct a highly efficient model of security force operations in which the state Police has played a critical part. This compelled the Naxalites to dissipate into the surrounding region-conflating the 'insurgent balloon' resulting in drastic reduction in the level of extremist violence in Andhra Pradesh but has increased in the neighbouring states.

The replication of the success of the Andhra model in the other states is subject of debate. Many state Police forces lack the capacity and wherewithal to 'protect' the local populace—a key factor in counter

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insurgency campaign. With left-wing extremism continuing to be a serious internal security challenge in the country, there have been demands from various quarters to 'bring in' the Indian Army in providing the much needed thrust to the operations in these 'ungoverned spaces' where the writ of the state is absent or existing institutions are nearly non-functional. However, more than a belief in the capacity in the Army for 'use of force', such demands are about enhancing the capacity of the Police to become an effective counter force to the extremists. As the Naxal violence increases in the country, the state of Police forces to provide effective security is debated. The army can play an 'supporting' role in providing security whilst the Police modernization takes place simultaneously.

Policing challenges

In the Indian context, Police in most states of the country continue to be embedded in the prototype of a keeper of 'law and order'. In spite of the problems of insurgency/terrorism and extremism that affect a large swathe of the country, their ability to keep pace with the demands has been largely lacking. One of the primary reasons of the spread of Naxalism to 223 districts of the country within a short span of time is the lack of or feeble counter offensive efforts of the state Police in reigning in the Naxal cadres. Moreover, there is no coordination among the Police forces of different states, making the tasks of Naxals easier to operate from neighbouring state.

In many states of the country, Police stations operate in deplorable conditions. Policemen neither have access to modern weapons nor have proper housing. Often, while taking part in the operations, they are led not by officers, but by low level Sub-Inspectors or Inspectors resulting in lack of discipline and error of judgment. Operational planning is often done without taking the needs and concerns of the men on the ground.

The lack of capacity and coordination among their Police forces has established a pattern among the affected states to increasingly remain dependant on the central para-military forces. The deployment of at least 33 battalions of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel in various states in Naxal-operations notwithstanding, demand for more forces has been perennially made by the states. This is precisely why the Union Government has also decided to increase the number of para-military battalions in coming years.

State of Police Modernisation

Police modernization scheme of the Union Government attempts to address the anomalies of state Police forces. All the major items of Police administration has been included under the scheme i.e. construction of

secured Police stations / out posts /Police lines, mobility, modern weaponry, security / surveillance / communication / forensic science laboratory equipment, up gradation of training infrastructure, Police housing, computerization, etc. Although in implementation since 1969-70, the scheme has come under serious considerations only from the 1990s.

Funds released to various states under the MPF scheme¹

Sl. No	Financial Year	Funds Released (Rupees in Crore)	Utilisation
1	2000-01	1000	100
2	2001-02	1000	99.98
3	2002-03	695.00	100
4	2003-04	705.27	99.81
5	2004-05	960.00	99.78
6	2005-06	1025.00	99.28
7	2006-07	1065.00	91.70
8	2007-08	1248.70	*
9	2008-09	1157.64	-

*Utilisation certificate for funds released during 2007-08 to states are being collected from the States

As the table indicates, the central government has provided adequate funds under the MPF scheme. The utilization data too looks impressive, even though whether these have been genuinely spent and more importantly, added to the capacities of the state Police forces remains a vital question.

The report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India² on Police modernization is an eye opener on the state of policing in India.

- In Andhra Pradesh, 63 percent of the Police stations do not have four wheelers.
- In Jharkhand, 114 vehicles were purchased for two Armed battalions of the state which had only 120 personnel. Twenty-three vehicles were

distributed to these battalions and the rest were distributed to other units.

- In West Bengal, against the targets of 324 residential buildings and 800 non-residential buildings, 96 residential and 52 non-residential buildings were constructed.
- In Andhra Pradesh, Police stations continued to depend on outdated weapons, as procurement of modern weapons was inadequate. Majority of the weapons were kept in district headquarters. Jharkhand purchased 1470 SLRs for two battalions having 135 combat personnel.
- In Bihar, Police telecommunication network system (costing Rs. 4.96 crore) remained non-functional due to non-construction of tower. There was shortage of wireless sets. Even the batteries procured were not adequate for the available wireless sets. This affected the communication system.

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Will numbers help?

One of the most critical aspects of Police modernization plan has been to increase the numbers of the Police in theatres, both in terms of filling up vacancies and also by carrying out large-scale recruitment. It is a fact that the number of Police personnel per population as well as per area has been abysmally small in many states, especially in the Naxalite affected states of the country. Compared to the United Nations' prescription of law keepers in conflict ridden areas, such ratios fare poorly and are a major hindrance on the ability of the Police forces. Moreover, it is the lack of adequate Policemen on ground that has led the states to depend upon Special Police Officers (SPOs) or the militias such as the Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh with rather a questionable role in providing protection to the civilian population.

However, while increasing the number is vital, this in itself will not solve the problem. Recruiting more number of Police, trained to deal with conventional law and order problems, will not augment the state's capacity to take on the extremists. For example, Jharkhand, which had a rather poor Police population ratio dramatically, increased the ratio, mostly through the appointment of 14,265 constables in 2004 and 2005. This proved to be no deterrent for the Naxals, who today dominate all but one of its 24 districts.

The success of Greyhounds in Andhra Pradesh underlies the need for special commando forces in each of the states affected by Naxal activities. These forces

will have to be trained to survive in hostile conditions and match the Naxalites' skill in order to be successful. At the same time, however, such forces will be effective in an enabling environment, in which general policing is competent and effective.

Thus, a crucial area, which needs attention is that of human intelligence (HUMINT). In many of the Naxal-infested districts, either the intelligence network of the state Police does not exist, or has been destroyed by the Naxalites. The selective elimination of Police informers by the Naxals in almost all the states under their domination makes the task of carrying out surprise raids difficult. And it is needless to say that without intelligence back up even the most efficient commando forces would perform ordinarily. The killing of 35 Greyhounds personnel from Andhra Pradesh in Orissa in 2008 is a grim reminder of such a phenomenon. Lack of intelligence feed back from the Orissa Police led to a situation in which the Greyhounds team was trapped by the Naxalites while traveling in a boat in Orissa's Chitrakonda reservoir. The boat lost balance and most of the commandos drowned to death.

Whether modernised Police forces will be effective in dealing with insurgency will further be subject to political decision making. Politicians and not strategists continue have an overriding say regarding deployment of the forces. More often than not these have been found to be completely mismanaged. For example, a large chunk of anti-Naxalite commandos passing out of Chhattisgarh's Jungle Warfare School at Kanker are being deployed in VIP protection duties rather than in counter naxalite missions. The entire purpose of developing these 'smart men' stands defeated as a result.

Moreover, little will be achieved by simply adding up the numbers of Police personnel. Although this has not been adequately documented, but it is obvious to gauge the impact of the engagement of a large number of Policemen in counter-insurgency duties on the general law and order problems. Thus, the states need specialized Policemen trained to fight the insurgents. This explains the need to replicate the Greyhounds model of Andhra Pradesh in every other state affected by Naxalism.

Is deployment of the army an option?

Participation of the Indian armed forces in the anti-Naxal operations has so far been restricted. The Indian air force helicopters provide logistics and participate in rescue missions. A retired brigadier of the Indian Army is in charge of the counter-insurgency training school in Chhattisgarh. However, skepticism prevails regarding widening the scope of the Army's involvement in direct combat operations. Even after the Naxalites opened fire and on one occasion damaged the helicopter rescuing injured Policemen in Chhattisgarh in September, the Union Government continues to sit in judgment over the

request by the Air force to open defensive fire on the Naxals.

Apart from the statements made by the Army itself, security experts are of the opinion that such a step would boomerang as the Army is not suited for such asymmetric warfare, particularly on its own territory and populace. Such an

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attitude, however, is rather inexplicable considering the fact that the Army continues to be deployed and is fulfilling its strategic objectives in the insurgency affected Northeast. The Army has helped develop an effective counter insurgency grid in Jammu & Kashmir, with the police personnel now playing a more 'proactive role'. Indian Army has its own doctrine on sub-conventional warfare, which applies to insurgency and extremism affected areas.

This 'anti-Army' belief is largely based on a premise that differentiates left-wing extremism from militancy in Jammu & Kashmir and the insurgencies of the Northeast. The 'Naxalites' in spite of their indulgence in wanton violence, are still considered "our people" who "do not demand secession". An

analysis of the pattern of left-wing extremist violence, however, indicates little difference between these different categories of violent extremism. Although the Naxals are not known to receive funds from abroad, there are trends available to suggest their linkages with forces outside to procure arms and ammunition.

Moreover, the Army possibly will be better suited for neutralizing the 'base area' centric Naxal activity. Naxal bases in the forested areas such as Abujhmad in Chhattisgarh and Saranda in Jharkhand has been a key factor behind their military capacity. Police and para-military efforts to dislodge them from such "liberated zones" have either been a non-starter or a failure. There is a lot to learn from the Sri Lankan Army's anti- LTTE campaign. The Tamil rebels, with much advanced weapons and fighting skills, were after all defeated by the Sri Lankan Army.

Interestingly, the Indian Army did participate in the 1971 offensive against the Naxalites, code named 'Operation Steeplechase'. The joint Army-Paramilitary-Police operation was carried out in July-August 1971 in West Bengal over a 45-day period, months before the liberation of Bangladesh. Three full-size divisions, besides the crack 50 Para Brigade were deployed. Although the Army did not fire a single bullet, their "area domination" enabled the Police and administration to penetrate the Maoist heartland.

cite the 'poor' human rights record of the Army in denying it's a role in dealing with Naxalism. However, it is a fact that the state Police forces and the central para-military personnel have also been found to be involved in human rights violation cases. Arguments are also made about the lack of knowledge of the terrain and socio-cultural factors among the army personnel which makes them disadvantaged to deal with the extremists. This argument is equally true with the para-military. Only recently the CRPF has initiated an intelligence wing of its own.

Compared to most of the state Police forces, the Army personnel are far better trained and equipped. Indian Army's counter-insurgency experience in Jammu & Kashmir and the Northeast makes it worthy of deployment in the Naxal affected areas. It is the Army and not the Police or the para-military, which has a doctrine of sub-conventional warfare. Given that the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist) is making consistent attempts to forge ties with the insurgents of the Northeast as well as the Jihadis, it will be the army with its superior firepower, training and decades-long experience in dealing with insurgency, which will be the most appropriate force to be deployed along with the Police and the para-military forces in Naxalite affected theatres in breaking these linkages. The Army may not defeat the enemy, but it will certainly prepare the ground for the same by reducing their fire power, a task that has not been achieved by the Police as well as the para-military.

It will be sensible to make use the available resources, rather than to wait for the state Police forces to become capable of waging an effective war against the extremists. Sensitizing the Army in human rights issues would be a much easier and less time consuming task, rather than to create commandos out of state Police personnel. The army personnel will function under no political whims and fancies unlike the state Police forces who are subjected to local politics.

A Balanced Approach

In the long term there is an urgent need of building the capacity and effectiveness of the Police force in protecting the local populace. However, with the best of intentions, this would be a long-term project. In the near term, the army could be used to deny the Naxalites the luxury of time and space to reinforce themselves and increase their influence. Short-burst operations by the Indian army can be used to lessen the area dominance of the Naxalites. There is no denying the fact that ultimately the Police will provide a long term protection and defense against the extremists. But till the time the state Police forces' are capable to single-handedly take on the extremists, the Army can complement the efforts in providing the basic security and depriving the Naxalites the space of terrorizing the local populace and throttling development work in these areas. The Army can protect the populace under a

'populace protection strategy' and gradually transfer the task to the local Police forces in the long run. 

NOTES

1. Year wise release of funds from 2000-01 to 2008-09; Union Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, <http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/PM-ReleaseFund.pdf>
2. Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General on Police Modernisation, Government of India, 2009.