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COUNTERING THE NAXALITES: DEPLOYING THE ARMED FORCES

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I THE DANTEWADA TRAGEDY

Hopefully, the loss of 76 CRPF personnel of its 62nd battalion in a tactically brilliant and clinically executed ambush laid by the Naxalites in the Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh will mark a point of inflexion in the on-going Green Hunt operations against these left wing extremists. There are a whole lot of questions that have arisen regarding how they were ambushed, whether the laid down SOP [Standard Operating Procedure] was followed and so on. These issues would, no doubt, engage the attention of EN Rammohan, former DG Border Security Force, who has been appointed by the Government of India to probe into this incident. More detailed information on how this incident unfolded, what was the intelligence input available, and how they fell into the trap laid for them would, no doubt, also be noticed in the Report. But, there are several basic issues that may not fall within Rammohan's terms of inquiry that are cardinal for dealing with the Naxalite menace in a holistic manner, and, it is a matter of no satisfaction for this writer to have predicted this outcome before Green Hunt started, by inquiring, "...are the security forces earmarked for these operations trained adequately? Are they physically fit enough for jungle operations? Are they conversant with the terrain, language and customs of the local population? Otherwise, huge casualties without commensurate gains can be expected. It will be very demoralizing for the security forces."

The official version of this incident was given by the Home Minister in his statement to Parliament on April 15. Apparently, the CRPF company that was ambushed was undertaking an "area domination exercise," that was to last three days between April 4th and 6th, and include two night halts. "... [T]hey came under fire at 0550 hours on the morning of the 6th...It was unfortunately a place where they did not have the advantage of either height or cover. Most of them died as a result of bullet injuries. Some died because of crude bombs and grenades...There were no landmines, there were no pressure bombs." Parliament was also informed that the 62nd CRPF battalion was deployed earlier in Bihar and was familiar with anti-Naxal operations. But, there is no mention of whether they were familiar with the particular "terrain, language and customs of the local population" in which they were annihilated. What was this exercise designed to achieve, since the CRPF company left the area sought to be dominated. Further details of this ambush are coming out in dribblets. However, the Naxalites have released their version of the incident, which informs that they kept the CRPF personnel under close watch and ambushed them in an area with no cover, and sequentially attacked them from three sides leaving no room for escape. In fact, all their arms and ammunition were looted and taken away. The Dantewada ambush has been followed up by several Maoist attacks on CRPF camps, underlining the irony that the Green Hunters have, in truth, becoming the Hunted.

II PARSING THE OVERALL STRATEGY

The Prime Minister has repeatedly informed the nation, which he did once again after this episode, that the Naxalites are a major threat to India's internal security. The Home Ministry's Annual Report for 2008-09 officially admitted that Naxalism has afflicted 13 states, 87 districts, and 400 police stations in 2008. Naxalism has an ideological base, and it would be trivializing this extremist movement to equate it with violent criminal activity. Counterinsurgency operations, while important to contain Naxalism, are not a lasting solution to the problem. Military countermeasures can weaken the Naxalites by imposing attrition costs on them, but this will not crush their movement. Currently, moreover, they are in a triumphal mood and unwilling to even contemplate entering into parleys with the State, much enthused also by their signal success in Nepal.

Military countermeasures and commencing negotiations with these left wing extremists is only half the battle. For resolving the Naxalite problem the State has to address the alienation of the local, tribal, population, which has suffered decades of neglect, exploitation and injustice, and have now risen in revolt and anger. A strategic reason for addressing this alienation obtains: it is imperative that the hearts and minds of the local population be won to obtain ground intelligence, which is currently unavailable. Apparently, the local population fled from the villages near the scene of the encounter in Dantewada, fearing reprisals by the security forces, which is hardly conducive to their providing human and real-time intelligence. The Home Minister admitted to Parliament in an extraordinary mea culpa that, "We are not unmindful of the socio-economic causes. We have heard people say there is no water, there is no development, there are no schools, there are no jobs, there is no employment. I do

not disagree. But who can be blamed except ourselves?" For pragmatic reasons, however, it is naive to suggest more funds being allocated to undertake a greater development effort unless it can be ensured that the attendant benefits will reach the tribal population, and not end up in benefiting the intervening bureaucracy. Further, it must be ensured that the State institutions that are established like schools and health centers function on the ground. The familiar spectacle in these areas is schools without buildings and teachers, and health centers without medicines and doctors. Posting teachers and doctors into these areas is a huge administrative problem, and political interference in the matter of postings and transfers is rampant. The truism needs reiterating that the governance processes have to be cleaned up before undertaking development as the mechanism for socio-economic uplift. And, for this to happen, a major clean-up is required of the political scene. Speaking to personal knowledge of the tribal regions in Chhattisgarh, it might be noted that most politicians here have a cozy relationship with the exploiters—money-lenders, forest, excise and building contractors. Of course, there are several honorable exceptions. Local officials in the revenue, police, excise and forest departments often function as agents of the exploiting classes, again with many honorable exceptions. Can one be surprised that, with all avenues of redress closed to them, the local population finds the Naxalites to be their saviours from a rapacious State. The battle for their hearts and minds was lost long ago. How they might be reclaimed should be addressed as the first article of a counterinsurgency campaign with any serious purpose.

The question of the moment here is the age-old one of what comes first—pacification of the disturbed area by military action? Or establishing more effective governance followed by development processes? Can these modalities be proceeded with simultaneously and in tandem? Or would it

be realistic to appreciate that they can only proceed sequentially? Implying that the affected area must first be stabilized and a degree of normalcy restored before the issues of governance and socio-economic development are addressed. Obviously, the law and order situation must be normalized first; it would be unrealistic to believe that the State will be able to run schools and health centers in areas under Naxalite control.

The harsh reality is that the Naxalites realize that the State's attempts to establish these facilities are designed to establish its presence and improve its image; hence their efforts to prevent these institutions from working. Instances of roads being dug up and made impassable, power transmission towers being toppled, land line communications being disrupted and so on are frequent in these areas. Even railways tracks have been blown up. But, if the strategic decision is taken to inflict hard blows on the Naxalites, draw them into negotiations and normalize the situation, then the inadequacy of the local police and para-military forces to undertake these tasks must be accepted. Steps must be taken to improve the quality of intelligence regarding Naxalite movements, establish better coordination between the local police and para-military forces, upgrade their training and equipment, but also to strengthen their morale. Reports of the primitive conditions in which they are forced to live when deployed in the Naxalite-affected areas, while being subject to constant harassment by the extremists are very unreassuring. These realities throw into sharp focus for a dedicated force being deployed to conduct anti-Naxalite operations with greater professionalism.

The question of deploying the armed forces against the Naxalites gains salience in this milieu to take advantage of their long experience with counterinsurgency operations in Kashmir and the Northeastern States. Historical precedents also inform that the critical role of the

armed forces has been to protect the State from external aggression and internal disturbance. This was enunciated to be the security policy of British India, and guided the rulers of earlier Hindu and Muslim empires.

The principle of military aid being provided to civil authority, which currently obtains in India, hardly needs belaboring. But a point of departure arises regarding the respective roles of the Union and State governments in grappling with the Naxalite problem. In his Parliament speech the Home Minister informed that, "The Central government has a responsibility, but the State governments have equal, if not greater, responsibility on development. Likewise, on controlling Naxalism, the Central government has a responsibility, but the State governments have equal, if not greater, responsibility to control the menace of Naxalism." Chidambaram was echoing his predecessor in office, Shivraj Patil, by apportioning responsibility for internal security between the Union and State governments, while suggesting that the latter have the greater responsibility, because 'public order' and 'police' appear in the State List under the Constitution.

The Union List clearly allocates 'defense of India and every part thereof', and 'deployment of any armed force of the Union; any other force subject to the control of the Union...in any state in aid of civil power' to the Central government. Article 355 further provides that, "It shall be the duty of the Union to protect every State against external aggression and internal disturbance..."

The Constitution provides that the Union government cannot dilute these responsibilities. Consequently, the Union government has the larger, overall and unshakable responsibility to ensure the internal security of India. The decision to deploy the armed forces to deal with the Naxalite menace also lies within its purview under the rubric of aid to civil authority.

III DEPLOYING THE ARMED FORCES

Proceeding beyond the legal quibbling and emotionalism of the present debate, what are the implications and ramifications of armed forces being used against the Naxalites? Some part of this emotionalism, unfortunately, derives from the ill-advised public statements made by the Army and Air Chiefs immediately after the Dantewada incident. The Army Chief offered to upgrade the training of the CRPF in counterinsurgency warfare, implying that they were currently inadequate for this task. The Air Force Chief informed that he was ready to assist in counterinsurgency operations, but this was a risky proposition, suggesting that using the Air Force was not a good idea. These public statements were gratuitous. The timing, of course, could not have been worse, when the CRPF was mourning its dead. Reading between the lines, however, the underlying message being conveyed by both Chiefs was that they were reluctant to commit their forces to the fray.

What are the traditions and the law regarding the deployment of the armed forces in counterinsurgency operations? It was noticed above that the Union government has unrestricted powers to deploy the armed forces for dealing with any internal security situation in the country. The law [Criminal Procedure Code] provides that any magistrate can call on the armed forces to assist in maintaining law and order. In practice, the concurrence of the Central government in the Ministry of Defense, generally in consultation with the Home Ministry, is usually sought before deployment is undertaken. These Ministries are required to satisfy themselves that all other State and Union [para-military] forces have been contacted and their resources to deal with the situation have been exhausted--hence the call upon the armed forces being made. Rarely, if ever, are the decisions of the State and Union governments made in this stylized manner, although a general sense

obtains that the armed forces should only be called upon as a last resort. In law, the armed forces remain under the supervision and control of the State authorities for the duration of their deployment, and can be withdrawn at will by these authorities. But, during the course of their deployment, they (armed forces) have the discretion to use force when they find it necessary. The quantum of force used and the exigencies when it will be used lies within the discretion of the armed forces. But, here again, a gesture is made to the democratic nature of the Indian polity by ensuring that the quantum of force used is minimal and only when it is absolutely necessary. Again, these are ideal prescriptions; rarely do events proceed in this textbook manner, especially in counterinsurgency situations. Should the political decision be taken to deploy the Indian Army in the Naxalite-affected region, it would be necessary that they acquire language skills and some knowledge of the obtaining cultural norms. These are operational requirements for the deployed Army elements to establish their own sources of intelligence, at least for corroborative purposes, lest they become wholly dependent on State intelligence agencies and the local police. The Naxalites have the natural advantage of knowing the local language and the terrain, but also in enjoying the sympathy of the local population. The training and tactical doctrine of the security forces have therefore to be devised to beat the Naxalites in their own game.

In the American perception, two models have been conceived to govern the overall conduct of counterinsurgency operations. The "swat the mole" model postulates that the security forces establish a firm base, and essay forth to attack the insurgents whenever credible intelligence becomes available, and return to their firm base thereafter. The intention is to inflict the maximum attrition losses on the insurgents until a larger clearing operation and holding of territory becomes possible. Was the "area domination exercise" resorted to by the CRPF company before it was

ambushed a variant of this strategy? The other model is that of the "inkblot" strategy. Like ink spreading on a blotter the areas coming under state control are expanded outwards. Civil administration moves into cleared areas, but functions under the protection of the security forces till they are no longer required. So, which model should be adopted in Dantewada and other Naxalite affected areas in the affected States? An early decision is required to guide the counterinsurgency operations, which should, of course, be kept under constant review.

A further organizational reform is possible. The accent in counterinsurgency operations, in theory, has to be on small units. Leadership and command must be delegated downwards to lower levels, and to non-commissioned and junior commissioned officers, lieutenants and captains. No disrespect here for officers in higher echelons, who must provide the overall coordination, logistics management, strategic direction, liaison with district and State authorities, and media interaction. But the focus must shift to platoons and sections to provide the cutting edge for these operations, rather than battalions and brigades, which inform planning exercises in the Army; and the field-level commanders have to be captains and below.

The manner in which the Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF) organized themselves is instructive, and bears deeper study. But, from information available in the public domain, it seems that intelligence from surrendered militants, especially in the East, was effectively used to gain information about the LTTE's hideouts, weapons caches and escape routes. Furthermore, small units of the SLAF were deployed to undertake long range patrols to capture or eliminate the LTTE leadership. A similar dispensation informed the operations of the security and police forces in stamping out the Sikh insurgency in the Punjab during the nineteen eighties. There is little reason

why this would not work with the Naxalites, and it is believed to have been successfully used in Andhra Pradesh. The further lessons to be learnt here is that counterinsurgency operations should be coupled with a clearly articulated surrender policy, rewards policy, rehabilitation and resettlement policy, but also a witness protection policy.

Sooner, rather than later, the Indian Army will be drawn into the anti-Naxal operations, as these intensify, spread further, and the inadequacy of the local police and para-military forces become clearer, while the Naxalites display increasing professional capability and audacity. The development that should cause the greatest anxiety, and could become the precipitating event for the deployment of the Army, would be the infiltration of the Naxalites into the urban centers of India.

Coming to the utilization of the Air Force in anti-Naxalite operations several missions can be suggested for their use like support to ground operations by transporting and evacuating personnel. But the Air Force can also perform other operational roles like reconnaissance and attack. Slow flying aircraft can provide actionable information regarding training camps, arms caches and the movements of Naxalites. Air power would be particularly useful for disrupting mass attacks, which is increasingly being adopted by the Naxalites to overwhelm the security forces, and attacking State institutions. The number of Naxalites who attacked the CRPF company in Dantewada, for instance, is estimated between 300 and 1000. Universal guerrilla tactics, which includes the Naxalites, requires them to provoke the State into violent action, but wasting their efforts in wild but futile reactions. This provides a context for judiciously using the Air Force to serve the overall mission objective.

The Sri Lankan Air Force has shown the way. They were effectively used to attack

LTTE concentrations and supplement the efforts of their Army's long-range patrols to eliminate the LTTE leadership. Pakistan and the United States are using airpower to address the Taliban and al Qaeda in the FATA and neighboring regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, with varying success in avoiding 'collateral damage.' Naturally, a high standard of ethical behavior is expected of the military forces of civilized countries by consciously avoiding civilian casualties. But this caveat cannot detract from the armed forces striving for mission efficiency by ensuring that their military actions complement the overall objective, which is dealing hard blows on the Naxalites and bringing them to the negotiating table.

This need for mission efficiency justifies the rationale for using Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) or drones in anti-Naxalite counterinsurgency operations. Drone attacks have destroyed training camps, and eliminated scores of al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in the FATA region causing them perpetual anxiety and degrading their own operations. Local support for these drone attacks is reportedly growing as their precision improves with laser guidance and the use of weapons with low explosive yields. Once their confidence was restored that local people will not be targeted, and that they can safely pursue their usual business, the availability of ground intelligence in real time also improved. There is no percentage therefore in aircraft or drones indulging in indiscriminate attacks. In brief, drone technology, in which the DRDO has shown proficiency, can be refined and used to eliminate Naxalites, especially their leadership, with minimal collateral damage. This modality is of critical importance in the Naxalite-infested areas where ground intelligence is unavailable. The counterfactual question is also worth raising. Could the ill-fated CRPF company in the Dantewada encounter have been saved if it could have called for air support? Or their mission

was assisted by drones performing a loiter and reconnaissance function.

There are several ways of responding to the inevitable questions of collateral damage entering this debate on using the Armed Forces in anti-Naxalite operations. First, this will not be a novel role for the Army, since it has been deployed for decades in counterinsurgency operations in Kashmir and the Northeastern States. It could bring a wide range of experience to bear in anti-Naxalite operations. Second, it is unrealistic to guarantee that counterinsurgency operations by either the Army or the Air Force can be conducted with no collateral damage—all that can be promised is that, with due care and caution being exercised, collateral damage will be reduced to the bare minimum. Nevertheless, collateral damage cannot be totally avoided. What happens, for instance, if an explosives laden truck is attacked—can civilian deaths not occur in the vicinity? Third, using the Air Force engenders much passion, but the problem would seem to lie in the optics and high visibility of air attacks. Is this because the Naxalites may not have a sporting chance to retaliate against aircraft and drones? But, is this a game of cricket?

IV CONCLUSION

It would be instructive to portray here what General Petraeus is attempting in Iraq and Afghanistan to evaluate new thinking on counterinsurgency operations and their relevance for anti-Naxalite operations. A Vanity Fair article on Petraeus informs that his biggest idea is, "Secure the population and do it by living with the people," which is being taught at all levels down the organization. Every private has to know exactly what is expected from him, suggesting the need for constant training and re-training. The troops must respect the rights of local citizens, including those arrested or suspected of being insurgents. "One of our

doctrines is: Live your values,” Petraeus says. “And there are two arguments for living your values. One is you have the moral obligation to do it. It is the right thing to do. If you don’t buy that, you have a practical reason to do it, because every time you violate it, you pay for it.” The core objective at all times remains the trust and respect of the indigenous population. Petraeus adds, “The human terrain is the decisive terrain.” This means the battlefield is not confined or defined by zones and theatres. “Full Spectrum Operations” requires the State to deploy all its resources—not just the military, but also the civilian agencies, neighborhood militias, and every NGO with a stake in the outcome. Soldiers have to be drilled to present a kinder face to the people, since they are the ultimate prize. In the Indian situation the need for restoring governance must be added to this list.

A great deal, therefore, needs to be done by the Central and State governments to

undertake the long haul for dealing with the Naxalite menace. Periodic declarations that the problem will be ‘wiped out’ in three or four or five years must be dismissed for what they are—political whistling in the dark. The people need being taken into confidence that no quick or painless solution to this complex problem is possible. Does the Indian leadership have the courage to make a ‘blood, sweat and tears’ declaration? And not offer meaningless palliatives with an ear cocked towards the next elections? A great responsibility has also devolved on the civil and military bureaucracies to execute appropriate countermeasures and policies to deal with the Naxalite threat, without feeling the need to seek orders from their political masters to perform their Constitution mandated duties. Like the French bureaucracy in the Third Republic. But, unlike the bureaucracy in Gujarat, circa 2002.



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