



Anti-Naxal Operations: Employment of Armed Forces

Brig. (Retd.) Rumel Dahiya

Brig. (Retd.) Rumel Dahiya is Advisor (Net Asses & Def. Stud.) at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi



Summary

Whereas employing Armed Forces may appear to be an attractive idea in the face of inability of state and central police forces and PMF to control the menace the adverse affects of long term commitment of Armed Forces particularly that on the Army, needs to be understood. Their involvement in anti-naxal operations will seriously affect their combat readiness to face external security challenges which we can ill afford. We need to develop other potent alternatives for which adequate scope exists.

The massive naxal strike on CRPF personnel in Chintalnar recently led to public anguish and media frenzy. The noise has died down quickly enough with not much follow up action in sight. Unconfirmed media reports about the findings of the one-man fact finding mission by an eminent police officer indicate that there was an element of command failure, perhaps at the level of a Deputy Commandant, and lack of coordination between the state police and the CPO i.e. CRPF. More will be known when the report is placed in the public domain. But the problem is much deeper and requires greater understanding and more concerted effort than what is visible today.

Remarks by the Army Chief and Air Chief about the inadvisability of involving the Army and the Air Force in anti-naxal operations led to some controversy in the press. Sadly, the criticism was not based on objective analysis of the context in which the remarks were made nor the reasons on which their views were based. Some people went to the extent of questioning the Chiefs' right to comment on an issue which is the prerogative of the civilian authority to decide.

The coverage of the ill-informed views of some commentators would have been less unfortunate if instead of using the term 'civilian' they had used the term 'political leadership'. In our context the use of the term 'civil-military' makes it appear that those who wear the uniform and those who do not are on opposite sides of the unbridgeable divide. It is not so. The Armed Forces belong to the country. They are India's Armed Forces. They have the good of the country at heart and the people are aware of their sacrifices for ensuring that our countrymen are secure from external and internal threats. India's Armed Forces also understand and respect the centrality of politics to issues of war and peace. But they are also stakeholders in India's stability and growth, being equal citizens of the country. If they have to step in to restore order where disorder has resulted from poor or no governance then good governance is their business too. They have a right to state their views and the people of India, the real sovereigns, are entitled to know those views. Of course, the Chiefs know that once a decision is taken by the political leadership despite reservations expressed by the former in the consultation phase, they are expected to ensure its success. That is what has always been done.

Whether to Employ Armed Forces or Not?

The decision to employ the Army and the Air Force in anti-naxal operations is, and will remain, a political decision. But one has to see its impact in short and long term and also explore alternatives to arrive at the best decision under the circumstances. A short term quick fix solution with a long term adverse fall out is something to be avoided. The naxal problem is not a short term problem nor is a simple solution readily available.

Naxals will not be too unhappy if the Armed Forces are employed against them because it would be an acknowledgement of their prowess and reach. Any successful attack against an isolated Army detachment or patrol will add to their aura of invincibility. And the

country will be left asking the question 'what next?' Naxals will fabricate stories of Army atrocities like the insurgents elsewhere have done, which will only demoralise the troops.

We all know that the people affected by naxalism are poor and neglected. They enjoy a degree of sympathy among civil society. Once the Army is employed in such areas it will hurt India's image very adversely. There are operational and management issues as well. The Indian Army, particularly its infantry and supporting arms, have been continuously involved in counter insurgency or counter terrorism operations since the early fifties. The Army is experienced in such operations but is also stretched to limits. The field peace turnover ratio, i.e., the time spent alternately in field and peace, is greater than one. Troops spend more time away from peace stations than in them. Stay with their families gets reduced further due to absence from their base due to training exercises and other requirements and inadequacy of married accommodation in peace stations. How much more can you stretch the sword arm of India's Army without the stress and strain showing adversely? If it was a short term engagement then the matter would have been different. But anti-naxal operations are going to be an extended affair because our decision making processes, disputes on turf and responsibility and abysmal implementation skills make it impossible for any policy to succeed in a short time.

The Armed Forces have brought the situation under control in J&K but the political initiative to restore total normalcy is not making headway. Gains of Operations Bajrang and Rhino were frittered away thus prolonging people's agony for decades. In any case, long term involvement of the Army is bound to affect its conventional capability and we can hardly afford that. Fortunately, the political leadership understands this and is not in favour of employing Armed Forces in anti-naxal operations, at least for now. In case one or more Chintalnar type incidents take place in future, political considerations may dictate involvement of the Armed Forces. Even then it will not be a wise decision.

The Alternative

We need to examine as to why different organisations with same weapons and manpower and from same background perform differently in anti-terrorist and anti-insurgency operations. Difference in performance is due to leadership, age profile, manner of employment, professional ethos, logistics, and camaraderie, chain of command and its responsiveness. Presently the CRPF is employed in company and platoon lots and often attached to police stations or to the district police. There is no specific area of operations assigned to CRPF battalions under the command of their commanding officer. Companies are often commanded by inspectors in their 50s who neither have the energy and stamina nor motivation to fight an invisible opponent with thorough knowledge of terrain and enjoying local support. There is no intelligence grid and definitely no inter-state intelligence sharing about the organisation or movement of militants who cross unhindered from one state to another. The leadership from battalion level upwards is not involved in operations

with troops, leaving the latter resentful and demotivated.

It is of course important to provide defensive gear and reliable weapons systems to the personnel involved in combating naxals but it is even more important to train them in all aspects of combat – networking with the population, population control, intelligence collection and sharing, combat operations and coordinated development activities. Grouping of public health, education, public works, irrigation and agriculture specialists with the CRPF to form cohesive multidisciplinary task forces will send a message of the government's seriousness in addressing the basic problems of the people along with the resolve to deal with violence.

Since the threat has become too large it cannot be tackled all at once. The Government could either follow the 'drying up the swamp' approach by trying to gain control of the areas most affected by naxalism, like Bastar Region, Malkangiri etc, or by adopting an 'outside in' approach by stabilising moderately affected areas and then trying to converge on to the most troubled areas. It is felt that the latter approach would pay better dividends because it would be possible to deploy a whole range of governmental resources to win over peoples' support by improving their lot. Focus on roads, agro industries, smaller projects which can employ local people. Increase the reach gradually. Let the people see who is harming their interests. Let the state machinery bond with the people. This recommendation flows from the assumption that common people seek safety, security and progress and will not support naxals if their basic needs are met. The differences in quality of life of those under naxal influence and those supporting the Government will inspire the former to turn against naxals. It may be necessary in the interim not to devote resources for restoring facilities destroyed by naxals in the areas under their strong influence. This is not a tool for imposing collective punishment on people for supporting naxals but a means to use finite resources to better effect and also win a psychological battle with the naxals. In the short run identifying and capturing or eliminating known naxal leaders needs to be given a serious thought.

The key to success of this endeavour lies in the success of law enforcement agencies and counter-naxal forces to restore order in naxal affected areas. There is therefore the imperative need to conceptualise, plan and conduct operations with clarity of aim, strategy and determination. Reiteration of commitment is not enough. The strategy has to be made to succeed. The anti-naxal forces have to be organised properly with clear command and control set up, trained and properly led. It is possible to do so. It will be necessary to provide better leadership at all levels, separate CI force from law & order force, post fitter and younger jawans to anti-naxal forces, provide adequate young leaders, train them together and employ capable senior leaders. It is necessary to select young officers for long tenures. Those who can work in a team should be preferred. Ideally, it must be mandatory for every police and PMF officer to serve with infantry units deployed in counterinsurgency operations for the first three to five years of their initial service. This will equip them mentally

to face the internal security challenges and lead their subordinates with élan.

Specific operational responsibility needs to be assigned to CPO units and ranges. The bases need to be secure for them to venture out. Let them develop intelligence, ensure inter-state coordination, and receive cooperation from states - particularly its police force. The principle of unity of command has to be ensured and the operational area assigned based on operational synergy rather than constrained by state boundaries.

Whereas employing Army (and Air Force) is inadvisable, taking their help in training, operational advice, coordination and development of intelligence, manning key appointments in unified headquarters, streamlining logistics, etc. will help fight the naxal menace successfully.

We also have to ensure that the administration learns its lessons and improves on governance rather than falling back on old habits of mismanagement and corruption. Choking of funds flow by controlling the contractors, mine owners, businesses and unscrupulous government officials will also be required. The authority of the state is being challenged openly and action is needed to re-establish state authority. The question is how the authority was lost? Have we learnt our lessons so that we never let this authority be lost again? Often enough the lower level government functionaries are blamed for messing up things but what about loss of oversight and lack of timely correctives. Simultaneous action on revamping administration and bringing in accountability in governance cannot be deferred.

Some respected security analysts have been recommending lateral entry of Armed Forces personnel into CPO and PMF after a couple of years of service. The Sixth Pay Commission also recommended absorption of PBOR, who retire at a much younger age than police and PMF personnel, into these organisations. Indeed it is a wise recommendation and must be introduced but with related issues also factored in. In case the leadership is the key to success then there is no use sending young soldiers to serve under leaders who have neither the experience of counter insurgency nor share the ethos of the organisations in which the soldiers have been performing well. They have to be placed under officers who share similar ethos. Short service commissioned officers must also be given the option to move laterally into the CPO and PMF. Similarly the officers at middle and senior levels who also retire earlier than their civilian counterparts must have an option for lateral absorption. Select them for their suitability and matching job profile. Place them under similarly sidestepped officers, under early retiree senior officers. Raise a separate wing to fight insurgency with adequate number of units to be able to rotate, not under district police or police stations but with an assigned area of responsibility. The Assam Rifles model can be tried out too. It works under MHA and its operational record has been very good.

An NSG-type arrangement is highly unsatisfactory and breeds resentment amongst highly skilled commandos even if at the tactical level they are commanded by selected Army

officers. In the Army, commandos are not commanded even by normal infantry officers. Army deputationists in NSG may not mind a comparatively better family life, deputation allowance, fewer combat situations, higher profile, greater freedom than what Army life can afford them but it does not mean it is ideal or an even satisfactory arrangement. No one can claim that operations in Mumbai post 26/11 were conducted in the best possible manner.

Conclusion

Naxalism poses a major challenge to the country. That it will not succeed in overthrowing the Government is a given fact. But if allowed to fester it will cause grave damage to the country. It will affect the nation's economy, internal cohesion, damage its social fabric and impede overall progress. Whereas employing Armed Forces may appear to be an attractive idea in the face of inability of state and central police forces and PMF to control the menace, the adverse effects of long term commitment of Armed Forces, particularly on the Army, needs to be understood. We should attempt to improve the operational capability of PMF and CPOs to undertake the operations on their own and supplement the effort by toning up the administration and developing political consensus. Armed Forces should be used only sparingly for internal security duties. This has not been the case so far. Their involvement in anti-naxal operations will seriously affect their combat readiness to face external security challenges which we can ill afford. We need to develop other potent alternatives for which adequate scope exists.