

India's Response to Maoist Extremism: Force, Development or Both?



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Contents

- 03 **Executive Summary**
- 04 **The Problem**
- 05 **State Responses: Military and Developmental**
- 06 **Government Approaches: A Critique**
- 07 **Policy Recommendations**

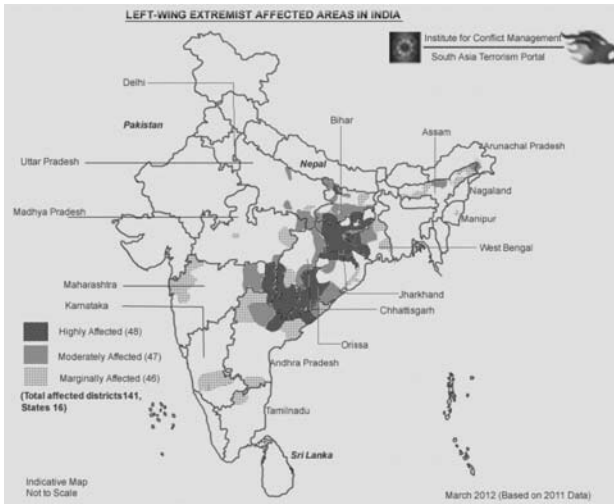


Executive Summary

India is currently grappling with an effective response to left-wing extremism. Even though in the last two years, extremist violence as well as areas under extremist influence has somewhat diminished, the problem remains serious. While India's military approach has failed to make much headway owing to a range of weaknesses among the forces, the development approach too has been critiqued for being too romanticised and unreal for implementation. There is an obvious need for a policy rethink and clarity of approach if the challenge is to be met. It is essential that the policy to deal with the problem needs to consider the following recommendations.

- The country has to arrive at a consensus on the kind of approach it wishes to pursue against the extremists.
- A permanent institutional mechanism in the form of a coordination centre can be established to thrash out emerging differences between the Centre and the States.
- Augmenting the capacities of the police as the primary force against Maoist violence will be key to neutralizing the firepower of the extremists.
- While development is a useful tool against Maoist extremism, it is imperative that a semblance of order precede injection of resources into the extremist-affected areas.
- Development must operate in tandem with the security forces. Resumption of administrative activity should immediately follow the clearing of an area by the forces.
- It is essential that the official approach be based on an effective policy of communication that not just brandishes the extremists as essentially bad, but is also honest about its own honourable intentions.
- Holding elections for institutions of local self-government in the affected areas followed by the strengthening of these institutions with additional financial and decision-making powers is a necessity.
- Success of security force operations need to be based on the concept of just war that strives to do the maximum to avoid collateral damage.
- Government needs to stay away from propagandist claims about winning the war in quick time.

The Problem



(Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal)

For the past several years, the left-wing extremism problem has emerged as a major internal security challenge for India, described on several occasions as the “biggest internal security challenge” by the Prime Minister of the country. The extremists professing a pro-tribal outlook and with an avowed objective of overthrowing the present system of government through an armed revolution have been able to pose a serious governance and development challenge. Armed violence by these extremists, predominantly belonging to the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist)¹ peaked in 2009 when intelligence sources informed that they were active in almost 230 districts of the country, amounting to more than one third of India’s geographical area. Such areas witnessed large scale violence targeting the state and what the Maoists describe as ‘state sympathizers’.



(Remains of a vehicle following a Maoist landmine explosion in Maharashtra, 2012)

Maoist Violence in India

Year	Incidents	Fatalities (Civilians & Security Forces)	Maoists Killed	Maoists Arrested	Maoists Surrendered
2007	1565	696	141	1456	390
2008	1591	721	199	1743	400
2009	2258	908	219	1981	150
2010	2213	1005	172	2916	266
2011	1755	606	99	1972	393

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Government of India.

Areas under extremist control have somewhat shrunk in the past couple of years. While as many as 18 states (of a total of 28) were said to have been witnessing Maoist activities in 2009, since 2010 government sources have been reporting extremist violence only from eight. In 2011, government reported 606 fatalities in 1755 incidents of Maoist violence which was significantly lower than 1005 deaths in 2213 incidents in 2011.² While this represented a major improvement in the state of extremism, the problem continues to remain serious. There has been a spike in the number of training camps organised by the Maoists for their cadres as well as in the number of ‘people’s courts’ in which the extremists punish the ‘enemies of the movement’ – indicating that the decrease in violence is only the result of a tactical and temporary retreat by the Maoists and is not necessarily due to the augmentation of capacities among the security forces. Moreover, intelligence sources have indicated Maoist attempts to spread to new states in southern, central and northeast India. The government has termed the current level of violence ‘unacceptable’³.

Patterns of Maoist Attacks

Targets	2008	2009	2010
Economic Targets	05	17	24
Railway	27	46	54
Telephone Exchange/ Tower	46	67	45
Power Plant	1	2	3
Mining	6	3	9
Transmission Pole	24	7	2
Panchayat Bhawan	7	23	31
School Building	25	71	39
Forest Rod, Culverts etc	41	126	158

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Government of India.

¹ The Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist) is the result of a 2004 merger between two left-wing extremist organizations- the Maoist Communist Centre of India (MCCI), which was active in Central India and the People’s War Group (PWG), which was mostly active in southern Indian states. The CPI-Maoist continue to remain the most dominant and violent outfit among the various Left Wing Extremist groups, accounting for more than 90 percent of total Left Wing Extremist incidents and 95 percent of resultant killings. *Annual Report 2011-12*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, p. 29.

² *State-wise extent of Naxal violence during 2007 to 2011 (from January to December)*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, pp. 1-2.

³ See “Maoist violence down, says Chidambaram”, 14 June 2011, <http://www.inewsone.com/2011/06/14/maoist-violence-down-says-chidambaram/56593>. Accessed on 10 April 2012.

Government Approaches: A Critique

Two types of problems continue to afflict the counter-Maoist efforts – first, the lack of coordination between the federal government and the states; and second, the inherent problems within the states impacting on their capacity to tackle the challenge.



India's Home Minister P Chidambaram

Even when the Centre embarked on the now abandoned Operation Green Hunt, different states pursued divergent policies against the extremists, oscillating between peace talks, development and security measures. The lack of a common approach was taken advantage of by the extremists who used the territories of the states soft on security force operations to regroup. Even the central forces who aided the state police forces were found to be operating without direction and able leadership. The military approach did achieve some notable successes by neutralizing some senior extremist leaders. But in the absence of a coherent nation-wide approach, a complete victory over Maoist extremism remained a far-fetched dream. In 2009, the then Home Secretary had predicted that “within 30 days of the security forces moving in and dominating the area, we should be able to restore civil administration.”⁵ The goal was never met.



Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh has been one of the main advocates of the development approach

Similarly, the lack of unanimity among the Centre and the states has the potential of becoming a bane for the development-centric approach of the government as well. In October 2011, the Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh, whose ministry oversees most of the development programmes in the Maoist-affected areas, pointed to this specific problem. “We need to rise above partisan political considerations and set aside old Centre-vs-State arguments and work concertedly to restore people’s faith in the administration...only then will the tide of Naxalism be stemmed”, he is reported to have said.⁶ This, however, is easier said than done. Media reports in January 2012 indicated that the development projects initiated in the eastern state of Jharkhand have run into a rough patch owing to the unenthusiastic response from the state government. The state forest department has been extremely slow in providing clearances for the setting up of security force camps in the protected forest areas. According to the plan, these forces are to provide security to the development projects.

Similarly, the relative weakness of the state police forces and the complete absence of intelligence networks to assist the security force operations have impacted on the effectiveness of the security force operations against the extremists. Since 1969-70, the MHA has been implementing a Scheme for Modernisation of State Police Forces.⁷ However, implementation of the scheme, according to which the Centre provides money to the states to build capacity among their police forces, has been slow, barring a few states. States continue to demonstrate an overwhelming tendency to fall back on the fighting ability of the central forces rather than going through the tedious process of capacity building among their own police forces. Auditing by the central government on many occasions has revealed serious gaps in implementation of the modernisation programmes.

If the military approach is seen to have achieved minimal results, development initiatives in the extremist affected areas too have received setbacks. Firstly, without any functional system of governance worth its name in vast areas under extremist influence, it has been almost impossible to execute the developmental projects. Secondly, wherever the government has managed to set up a functional project implementing mechanism, real or threatened extremist attacks targeting the executing agency have slowed down the project execution considerably. This has widened the trust deficit among the intended beneficiaries and the government. Thirdly, a perennial absence of coordination between the security forces and the civilian administration has meant that areas continue to remain without official developmental intervention, even after these are cleared of Maoist presence by the forces. As soon as the forces retreat, Maoists recapture the area, nullifying the achievement.

⁵ Alope Tikku, “Anti-Naxal offensive to begin in eleven places”, *Hindustan Times*, 10 October 2009, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/India-news/NewDelhi/Anti-Naxal-offensive-to-begin-in-eleven-places/Article1-463353.aspx>. Accessed on 10 April 2012.

⁶ “Central and state govts responsible for Naxalism: Jairam Ramesh”, *Daily News & Analysis*, 11 October 2011, http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_central-and-state-govts-responsible-for-naxalism-jairam-ramesh_1597691 (Accessed on 25 January 2012).

⁷ *Scheme for Modernization of State Police Forces*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, <http://mha.nic.in/pdfs/MPF.pdf>. Accessed on 10 April 2012.

Policy Recommendations

Wide-ranging suggestions for an optimal response have been made by analysts, activists and experts. Organisations which the government considers to be pro-Maoist categorize the official approaches to deal with Maoist extremism as a war unleashed by the Indian state on the hapless tribals. They allege that the government is merely interested in the natural resources lying buried in the tribal inhabited lands and is trying to cleanse the area of tribal presence on behalf of the Multi-National Corporations (MNCs), with whom it has signed several Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs). Even the official development initiatives have been termed as a 'soft counter insurgency' method by these activists. They prescribe that the government leave the tribal population alone.

Apart from the fact that stopping mining and exploration of natural resources is an unviable proposition for India's growing economy, such suggestions gloss over the fact that the CPI-Maoist has an avowed objective of replacing the current structure of governance with a people's government. Even though, in real terms, this objective appears grossly unrealistic, the CPI-Maoist's capacity to pose a major hurdle for official developmental activity in remote areas remains a reality.

Another group of experts opines that dialogue with the Maoists and development of the tribal areas, rather than a military solution, is the way out of the current mess. This approach too is untenable, given the fact that Maoists have either resisted attempts at negotiation or have used the peace process to recoup. Similarly, suggestions have also been made to use land reforms and to bringing about changes in the laws that secure the rights of the tribal population over forests. Land reforms have remained a contentious issue in many states invoking divergent policies from the governments. While many states have not bothered to take any steps towards land reforms, in some like Andhra Pradesh, where the need for land reforms has been accepted, entrenched stake holders have slowed down the process considerably. The Central government has initiated several schemes and passed legislations aimed at empowering the tribals. But the growing criminalisation in the Maoist ranks has severely limited the impact of such measures on the level of extremism.

On the other hand, a separate groups of experts favouring a security force-led response underline the need to strengthen the state police forces as an effective model of counter-insurgency rather than depending on the central forces. However, given the poor state of police forces in the affected states, this approach appears to be highly ambitious and may take years to implement.

Therefore, an effective approach to deal with the Maoist problem may contain the following.

(i) Consensual approach: The country has to arrive at a consensus on the kind of approach it wishes to pursue against the extremists. Whether it is purely military, developmental or a judicious mix of both has to be decided by national-level brain storming. The MHA will have to be at the forefront of building such a consensus. Merely supporting the state governments by providing funds and forces is inadequate.

(ii) Institutional arrangements for centre-state cooperation: Since problems in formulating a counter-Maoist policy as well as in dealing with the issue on a day-to-day basis are sourced to the lack of centre-state cooperation, a permanent institutional mechanism in the form of a coordination centre can be established to thrash out emerging differences. A coordination centre does currently exist within the MHA, but requires the active participation of state representatives to ensure smoother coordination.

(iii) Police hold the key: Augmenting the capacities of the police, who are conversant with local conditions, as the primary force against Maoist violence will be key to neutralizing the firepower of the extremists. To optimize this, close and timely monitoring of the expenditure of the funds made available by the Centre is required.

(iv) Development follows military success: While development is a useful tool against Maoist extremism, it is imperative that a semblance of order precede injection of resources into the extremist-affected areas. As exemplified by India's experience in other conflict theatres like the northeast, without some level of security, conflict-ridden areas resemble bottom-less pits. Without local capacities to absorb the available resources and an accompanying mechanism for accountability, funds simply disappear into the coffers of the extremists, politicians, bureaucrats and the contractors. Here again, careful monitoring is essential.

(v) *Coordination between the administration and security forces:* As explained earlier, development must operate in tandem with the security forces. Resumption of administrative activity should immediately follow the clearing of an area by the forces. In this context, the creation of a dedicated team of administrators, with some level of independent decision making authority, requires special attention.

(vi) *Strategic communication:* Maoists have exploited tribal disenchantment against government apathy lasting over decades. It is essential that the official approach be based on an effective policy of communication that not just brandishes the extremists as essentially bad, but is also honest about its own honourable intentions.

(vii) *Development of local political leadership:* It is not the security forces, state or central, but local political leadership which will act as a primary resistance force against a cleared area relapsing into extremism. Every step must be taken for the resumption of political activity in the affected areas. Holding elections for institutions of

local self-government could be the first step in this regard, followed by the strengthening of these institutions with additional financial and decision-making powers. This would ameliorate the reality of alienation among the affected population, thereby making them genuine stakeholders in maintaining peace and promoting development.

(viii) *Need for a just war:* Just like other conflict theatres, the Maoist conflict theatre too has reported its own share of human rights violations and excesses committed by the security forces on non-combatants. While some of these allegations have been found to be false, some are real. There is an urgent need to base the success of security force operations on the concept of just war that strives to do the maximum to avoid collateral damage that leads to further alienation of the affected people.

(ix) *Cut the hype:* Without doubt, the anti-Maoist operations will be a prolonged affair. Augmenting state capacity will need sustained effort and time. Therefore it is essential for the government to stay away from propagandist claims about winning the war in quick time.



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