IDSA ISSUE BRIEF

Countering the Naxals

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Summary

This essay attempts to weld the three prongs - governance, security and development - to better understand and handle the situation in the naxal affected states. Theoretically speaking, a three-pronged approach will have to be built around the conceptual framework of **GRID-GUARD-GOVERN** spanning the critically affected naxal belt. There is nothing new about the strategy except that it would have to be comprehensive in design and necessitate a "whole of the government" approach. The strategy presupposes the need to do away with the sequential application of socio-economic solutions, and which could sometimes be unsavourily politics or media driven, by undertaking security-led governance cum development action.

India has been engaged in combating internal threats including armed rebellions since independence. It has applied a different approach in each situation, and over time has evolved principles, guidelines and procedures to deal with these challenges. It has learned that counterinsurgency campaigns are not just about winning wars, but about controlling the political violence at levels that enable the initiation of peace initiatives and the creation of an environment conducive to foster dialogue and negotiations. It has been fairly successful in handling the border state insurgencies, but the Naxal uprising poses an altogether different problem. A spate of violent incidents in recent months have raised a renewed demand for deployment of the Army, the use of Air Force in a support role, enhancement of the central government's mandate and a review of the development agendas in the affected states. A section of civil society, however, feels that Naxal violence stems from socio-economic grievances and their that redress must take priority over any counter offensive.

An insurgency is essentially a competition between the insurgents and government agencies to win the support of the population. And a counterinsurgent cannot achieve much if the population is not, and does not feel, protected against the insurgent. It is common knowledge that any counterinsurgency campaign is three pronged and hinges on security, development and governance. Some believe that these need to be pursued in unison while others opine that security should pave the way for development and good governance. K. Subrahmanyam argues that without addressing issues of governance and corruption it would be practically impossible to contain internal unrest and raging insurgencies. In a piece written for the *Indian Express*, he states that, "It is today's conventional wisdom that the anti-Maoist strategy should be a two-pronged operation consisting of counterinsurgency operations and development. But the most important third prong is not mentioned, namely good and effective governance and corruption-free politics…. It will be difficult to eliminate Maoism without addressing [issues of] mis-governance and bureaucratic corruption." Similar views have been expressed by several other experts. This essay attempts to weld the three prongs – governance, security and development – to better understand and handle the situation in affected states.

Theoretically speaking, a three-pronged approach will have to be built around the conceptual framework of **GRID-GUARD-GOVERN** spanning the affected naxal belt. There is nothing new about the strategy except that it would have to be comprehensive in design and necessitate a "whole of the government" approach. The strategy presupposes the need to do away with the sequential application of socio-economic solutions, and which could sometimes be unsavourily political or media driven, by undertaking security-led governance cum development action. Such a strategy would entail multi-disciplinary action at three broad levels:

- First, the deployment of a balanced security grid comprising company sized posts across the naxal belt. From a tactical point of view, it would involve identification

Naxal Affected Districts

Worst Affected Districts	State	Area in sq kms	Critically Affected Area in sq kms
Dantewada	Chattisgarh	10238	10238
Kanker	Chattisgarh	5286	0
Bastar	Chattisgarh	8756	8756
Bijapur	Chattisgarh	6555	6555
Narayanpur	Chattisgarh	6640	6640
Rajnandgaon	Chattisgarh	8023	0
Sarguja	Chattisgarh	16359	0
Gumla	Jharkhand	5327	0
E Singhbhum	Jharkhand	3533	3533
W Singhbhum	Jharkhand	5351	5351
Lohargada	Jharkhand	1490	0
Chatra	Jharkhand	3706	0
Hazaribagh	Jharkhand	4313	0
Ramgarh	Jharkhand	1211	0
Bokaro	Jharkhand	2861	0
Garhwa	Jharkhand	4044	0
Lathehar	Jharkhand	3659	0
Malkangiri	Orissa	5791	5791
Gajapati	Orissa	3850	0
Rayagada	Orissa	7073	7073
Deogarh	Orissa	2781	0
Sambhalpur	Orissa	6702	0
Aurangabad	Bihar	3305	0
Jehanbad	Bihar	1569	0
Jamui	Bihar	3099	0
Arari	Bihar	2829	0
Gaya	Bihar	4978	0
Rohtas	Bihar	3850	0
W Midnapore	West Bengal	9296	9296
Khammam	Andhra Pradesh	16029	0
Vishakapatnam	Andhra Pradesh	11161	0
Gadracholi	Maharashtra	9245	9275
Gondia	Maharashtra	4844	0
Balaghat	Madhya Pradesh	9245	0
Sonebhadra	Uttar Pradesh	6788	0
Total Area		**209787**	**72508**

Note:- The data has been sourced from open sources and may not be precise.

of "vital areas" in terms of substantial population concentrations in the region, "vital points" such as government offices, institutions, infrastructure and installations, and "vital lines" of road and rail communication. Each of these vital

areas, points and lines will have to be unobtrusively secured by physical deployment of paramilitary forces. A security grid so established could expand in time and space to include important terrain features such as hill tops, river crossings, bridges and culverts and forested areas in the hinterland. Constructing a security grid can be troop intensive and on occasions may even have to be trans-state. In terms of operational criticality, the current problem spans nine states, and includes some thirty-five districts across the country. In terms of acreage, the naxal belt translates into approximately 209,787 square kilometres. The figure, at face value, may look daunting but in real terms could be narrowed down to a few trouble spots or belts. Importantly, these are Dantewada, Bastar, Bijapur and Narayanpur in Chattisgarh (32,189 sq. kms), Malkinigiri and Rayagada in Orissa (12,814 sq. kms), west and east Singhbhum in Bihar (8,884 sq. kms), Gadchiroli in Maharashtra (9,275 sq. kms), and West Midnapore in West Bengal (9,296 sq. kms). Statistically speaking, the trouble prone area can be pegged down to some 72,000 square kilometres. A closer examination of the violence prone districts could possibly reduce the actual footprint by say another 20 to 30 per cent. In other words, the problem in spatial terms stands at 50,000 to 58,000 square kilometres. The affected areas could be accordingly prioritised, and the paramilitary deployment shaped in terms of tactical weight and spread.

- Secondly, the security grid so established should form the basis of protecting (or guarding) the populace. As a concept, the approach of guarding the populace by ensuring physical presence is distinct from countering or de-capacitating the insurgent leadership or field cadres. Protecting the populace also requires some kinetic action against committed insurgents, but not as much as meeting the potential and economic concerns upon which the ultimate defeat of the insurgency so importantly depends. Guarding the populace will have to be undertaken at two principal levels: one by way of co-locating security components at select locations within population centres; and two, the physical denial of space and logistical sustenance to insurgent cadres in the hinterland. In fact, an effective grid sometimes even dilutes the necessity of undertaking protracted and kinetic counterinsurgency operations. Each node on the security grid interacts proactively with the local populace to instil confidence, and skilfully utilises this relationship and physical proximity to build intelligence and influence. A mosaic of security nodes 'ink blot' in time to expand their respective areas of influence, and eventually merge to deny physical space to the insurgents. The extent of the security presence required to guard the populace would depend on the nature of the threat and the modus operandi of insurgent groups.

- Thirdly, the economic and social well being of the affected populace will have to be addressed by a proactive and forward deployment of the administrative machinery. This could be planned by the state administration in concert with progress made by

the security forces in establishment of the security grid. Co-locating key government functionaries in the vicinity or within the perimeters of the security posts to undertake the initial set of developmental activities would be essential. Paramilitary forces too can play a vital role in the restoration of essential services, till such time the district authorities actually gear up to undertake the developmental tasks on their own. An energetic state administration can surely take advantage of the 'security dividend' delivered by the paramilitary forces to jump-start the economy and help assuage the local grievances in the long term. Several studies have researched the life cycle of insurgencies and most agree that these are often long drawn, sometimes even lasting over 10 to 15 years. This leads to an important deduction – that of serious political resolve to be able to sustain a counterinsurgency strategy for so long a period. In terms of governance, the path to socio-economic development could be as long and difficult. Given the magnitude of the Naxal problem, the central and affected state administrations may well have to raise dedicated administrative cadres and create special dispensatory structures designed to address the socio-economic issues.

A counter insurgency strategy is easy to outline but hard to implement. The asymmetries between the insurgents and the counterinsurgents can be substantial. Since the initiative lies with the insurgent and he is free to choose three things – the target, the timing and the effect – addressing the problem becomes difficult. And when the insurgent's intent is not known, he represents nothing more than an imprecise potential threat. An insurgent cause could even be advanced through legal and peaceful means, and this seems to be happening in case of the Naxals. The likes of "Arundhati Roy" can seriously restrict the state's effort to contain covert or overt acts of terror. This limits both the identification and pre-emption of the menace. The resulting impact is that a counterinsurgency force endowed with tangible assets feels utterly helpless and handicapped against an insurgent cause. In the context of the Naxal problem, it appears that the insurgents seem to be growing from a position of weakness to strength, while the Indian state is declining from strength to weakness with every passing incident. A multi-disciplinary **GRID-GUARD-GOVERN** approach as suggested could perhaps address these anomalies and shortcomings. The specific role of the paramilitary forces (in addressing the two lead prongs of **GRID** and **GUARD)** will be contingent on several factors. The more important of these are:

- First, the suggested approach will be contingent upon the overall availability of well organised, equipped and trained forces. Currently, the paramilitary and police forces are neither adequately trained nor organised to deploy an effective security grid. A security grid demands competent leadership, efficient staff support, command and control, communications, and logistical support. Unfortunately, the paramilitary forces (with the possible exception of the Border Security Force) and special police units are simply not organised to operate on a counterinsurgency grid beyond a unit level. It comes as no surprise that much of the CRPF deployment in the affected

states is at sub-unit or unit level, and administrative in nature (posts being strung along existing roads for ease of maintenance). And because of this lack of expertise in undertaking grid-based operations, the paramilitary forces tend to shy away from adopting a more substantive operational deployment in hilly and jungle terrain.

- Second, the important aspect of force application to space needs to be appropriately addressed. A paramilitary unit usually comprises of six to seven companies and can therefore be deployed at five to six points on ground while the remainder are engaged in training. Sometimes it could even be curtailed to a four-point deployment due to organisational constraints or difficult terrain. Based on the assumption that if a hundred battalion equivalents are available for counter-Naxal operations, the paramilitary forces can deploy a maximum of five hundred security posts on ground. And if each deployment is assumed to be of company strength (it could be less or more), and which roughly in planning parameters can cover some eighty to hundred square kilometres, the estimated five hundred security posts could provide an effective grid covering some 40,000 to 50,000 square kilometres. For instance, the worst affected area – Abujmarh in Chattisgarh – which is roughly 4000 square kilometres in spread would require approximately 18 to 20 paramilitary battalions (10 to 12 battalions may suffice for a thin deployment). An assumed availability of a hundred units could give the paramilitary forces the ability to easily handle six to eight Abujmarh-like situations across the country. But then paramilitary deployments need not always be uniform in spread, and the effective coverage (as a ballpark figure) could be with due caution extended to 75,000 square kilometres.

- Third, the tactical approach, as discussed earlier, will have to be distinct and suited to the task at hand. The nature of operations that the paramilitary forces undertake will determine the efficacy of the security grid. The emphasis will have to be on the protection of civilians – through physical presence or co-location of security forces – rather than relying on harsh population control measures such as cordon and search operations or movement control checks. A soft tactical approach which reflects a continuing and reassuring presence of the security forces will be essential for re-gaining the confidence of the local people. The experience of the Rashtriya Rifles in Jammu and Kashmir also underscores the fact that a certain degree of permanence in operational deployment helps in instilling confidence amongst the local people. A 'residency' in the nature and pattern of paramilitary deployment will therefore be extremely important. Frequent peace to field rotations may further affect the efficacy of the paramilitary units. It may then be worthwhile to consider raising the planned CRPF accretions on the RR-type model, wherein the unit continues to deploy at one location whilst the troops rotate in and out of other CRPF units deployed across the country. This would facilitate the permanence and operational efficacy of the security grid in the long term.

- Fourth, contact intelligence (i.e. information gained by the security forces through routine contact with the local populace) is essential for conduct of effective counterinsurgency operations, and it is an issue that cannot be ignored. While it is important to make use of the inputs provided by intelligence agencies, these are (barring the odd exception) often too broad for any worthwhile action. Much of the intelligence is seldom actionable or at best contributes only towards constructing background information such as insurgent identities, organisations and activities. What is often missing is the so-called 'trail' information and that comes only through direct social and cultural contact. Information gained by the 'soldiers in residence' is key to success and a balanced security grid alone can enable the forces to achieve this. Furthermore, the use of modern surveillance technology can best fill gaps in tactical information and cannot replace valuable human intelligence. It is important to understand the limits and limitations of modern surveillance tools such as UAVs, direction finders and other air or ground borne sensors. Over-reliance on technology can at times lead to fatigue amongst the security forces, and even a cause of a letdown.

- Finally, the business of catch-phrasing counter-Naxal strategies such as **CLEAR-HOLD-BUILD** or **CLEAR-BUILD-TRANSFER** or **SEIZE-HOLD-BUILD** etc., and even for that matter **GRID-GUARD-GOVERN,** will have to cease at some point of time. Success in turning around the situation will depend exclusively on multidisciplinary planning, purposeful paramilitary deployment and resolute counter-action on the part of units to wean away the naxal leadership and cadres from violence. It is therefore most important to dispassionately assess the nation-wide internal security threats including those posed by the Naxals, articulate the national security objectives, allocate appropriate resources and training to the paramilitaries, and address the "security-development-governance" agenda till a reasonable solution is found to the problem.

Countering the Naxal problem is perhaps not as great a challenge as it seems (at least as far as the foregoing statistics reveal). In fact, the paramilitary losses suffered thus far have only been incidental or circumstantial. It is simply that the paramilitary and police forces have crumbled in incident after incident without giving a tough fight and thereby contributed to the overall picture of a helpless state. A more proactive and purposeful paramilitary security grid backed by forward deployment of government teams for developmental work in the affected states could go a long way in retrieving the situation. The deployment could be leavened with military advice, training, specialist expertise and additional resources. Specifically, these would mean the military imparting training for grid-based operations, counter-action drills, communication skills and surveillance techniques, air mobility based on rotary and fixed winged aircraft and support for medical care and casualty evacuation. Calling in the armed forces against the Naxals is neither politically desirable nor operationally necessary at the moment. Besides the long term consequences of military committal, it would mean that the central and state governments would have signed off

the responsibilities of the paramilitary and police forces to even handle their due operational obligations. It would instead be more prudent to expeditiously strengthen, train and transform the paramilitary and police forces to enable them to meet the internal security demands of the state. The CRPF, as a force that was designated as the country's premier counter for internal security threats, needs to rise and meet the looming challenge.