



The Need for a Strategic Response to Insurgency and Terrorism

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Summary

Assertion of ethnic and religious identities, forcible merger of former princely states, perceived sense of neglect, disaffection towards the government and pervasive underdevelopment have been instrumental in fomenting insurgencies and terrorism in India. India's attempts at dealing with these issues have met only with limited success. It has been variously argued that the lack of a sound counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism strategy has been the main reason. Moreover, vested interests, petty politicking, and nexus between politicians, government officials and insurgents are seen as preventing the formulation of such a strategy. Given the enormous international security challenges these twin problems pose, it is imperative that India develops a comprehensive strategy to deal with them. Elements of such a strategy should include concerted efforts to counter the ideological narratives of the insurgent and terrorist groups and highlight the inclusiveness of Indian democracy; effective communication of the government's developmental measures to uplift the socio-economic profile of the affected people; adherence to the principle of judicious use of force.

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Since independence, India has been grappling with insurgencies and terrorist campaigns. Growing sense of ethnic and religious identities, forcible merger of princely states with the Indian Union, perceived sense of neglect and alienation, and pervasive underdevelopment are variously cited as reasons that have led to the clamour of separatism and the rise of insurgency. India has been successful in largely containing the insurgencies and terrorist campaigns on its territory, though a final resolution has evaded it in many cases.

India's counter insurgency approach has four key elements: establishment of the writ of the State through the deployment of security forces; accommodation of at least some of the political demands of the insurgents; socio-economic development in the affected areas; and, restoration of the democratic process. This template has been successful with minor spatial variations in the case of Punjab and Mizoram, whereas in other cases it has not yielded the desired results. For instance, a peace accord was signed with the Naga National Council in 1975, but 35 years hence the Naga insurgency still continues. Similarly, despite the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, peace still eludes Assam.

Many analysts have argued that India's failure to find a final resolution to these conflicts and prevent the revival of dormant conflicts is due to the lack of a long term strategy to deal with insurgency and terrorism. One particular point of criticism is the Indian State's failure to counter the narratives used by insurgent and terrorist groups to win popular support. What are these narratives and how should they be countered? This is the departure point of this Brief.

India today is dealing with insurgency and terrorism in three distinct theatres of conflict namely, the naxal affected areas, the North East and Jammu and Kashmir. It is to the narratives employed by insurgents and terrorists in these theatres that we now turn.

Left Wing Extremism

Naxalism or Left Wing Extremism continues to be the gravest of the internal security challenges facing India. According to the official estimate, currently, a total of 223 districts are affected by Left Wing Extremism. Statistics reveal a perceptible increase in the incidences of violence as well as fatalities caused by Maoists. The growing severity of their tactical counter offensive campaign (TCOC), which includes attacks, massacres and targeted killings of security forces and high profile individuals, is primarily responsible for the rise in incidences of violence.

Left Wing Extremism is not new to India. During the time of independence, two major Communist campaigns - the Tebhaga movement in 1946 in Bengal and the Telangana movement in 1948 - had rocked the country. Although these two movements were not very successful, they helped communists gain a stronghold in socially and economically backward areas. It was, however, the 1967 Naxalbari uprising against feudal landlords

that sowed the seeds for Left Wing insurgency in India. The Naxalbari uprising in West Bengal was successfully crushed, but Left Wing insurgency continued in some form or other in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh in the next three decades. The year 2004 marked a watershed in the history of left wing extremism in India, when the Peoples' War group (PWG) then operating in Andhra Pradesh and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) then operating in Bihar and present day Jharkhand merged to form the Communist party of India (Maoist).

Left Wing Extremists' Narrative

Left Wing Extremist philosophy is premised on the belief that the Indian government is a semi-colonial, feudalistic and imperial entity that needs to be overthrown. The objective is to seize State power through a protracted armed struggle. By taking up the cause of the marginalized sections of society against big landlords and petty government officials, the Naxals not only gain popular support but also whip up anti-State sentiments. They also prevent the implementation of various developmental projects such as construction of roads, rails, schools, hospitals, etc. in the affected areas in order to demonstrate to the people the ineffectiveness of the State. These further add to the feeling of perceived neglect and injustice among the under privileged section of the people. The Naxals have been fairly successful in their mission as they operate in the vacuum created by the absence or collapse of the administrative structure at the grassroots level.

In recent years, the Naxals have taken up emotive issues such as displacement induced by mining activities and conversion of agricultural land into industrial land for the creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ). By supporting the struggle against mining and SEZ policies, they have successfully tapped into the popular sentiment against the government and expanded their mass base to new areas.

Countering Left Wing Extremism

So far, the response to the LWE challenge has been limited, delayed and reactive in nature. Rather than responding to Naxal propaganda by providing a suitable ideological counter-argument, explaining the benefits of these economic activities, and better implementation of rehabilitation packages, the State response has been one of application of force and coercive power. This is evidenced in the deployment of security forces to counter the Naxals, while very little has been done to complement it with political, economic, social and administrative measures on the ground.

Incidentally, having taken control of the ungoverned spaces in the most backward areas in several states across the country, the Maoist movement has now reached an "ideological plateau" and is unable to gain a foothold in the urban areas. This is because liberal economic reforms in urban areas have undermined the bases for discontent that fuels left-wing extremist movement and enables mass mobilization in its favour. This further reinforces

the need for socio-economic measures to uplift the socially marginalized and economically depressed sections of society in non-urban areas.

To prevent the spread of Naxalism, the best strategic response would be to work with civil society actors to counter the Naxal narrative and ideology particularly in the media. This requires a fundamental reconceptualisation of the strategy to counter Naxalism. State response must be recalibrated to privilege the use of “brain force” over “battalion force”. A consensus thus arrived at will serve as a force-multiplier for the security forces, who seem to be fighting a lone battle.

Insurgency in the North East

Ethnic insurgency in the Northeast started in the 1950s and continues to ravage the region. The roots of insurgencies in the North East, however, go back to the British era when these areas were treated as buffers between the British Empire and neighbouring empires, and mostly left alone. Yet, the British introduced Christianity and elementary education in these areas. The teachings of the Church along with exposure to the outside world during World War II generated a feeling of distinctiveness among the newly educated elite of the hill areas. They became conscious of their separate identity and started demanding protection for their customs and tradition. This consciousness was exploited by the British to sow the seeds of independence in the minds of the tribal elites.

The tribal elites had opposed the merger of the region with India arguing that since people of the region belonged to a different racial stock and their socio-political and economic life is quite different from that of the mainland, they do not belong to India. The first manifestation of revolt was the clamour for a separate homeland by the Nagas, who declared independence on 14 August 1947.

Nevertheless, all the political entities of the region were made part of India. The princely states of Manipur and Tripura were designated as centrally administered areas and the Khasi state was dissolved into Assam. The Hill areas were constituted into autonomous district councils under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, which was specially designed to protect tribal interests. These measures have allowed the tribal elites to exercise political authority and preserve their customs and traditions.

The failure of the District Councils to fulfil the aspirations of the Hill tribes, the coercive tactics employed by New Delhi in forcing Manipur to accede to India and the neglect of Mizoram during the famine in 1965 contributed to the feeling of alienation among the people of the region and resulted in three separatist insurgencies within the first two decades of independence. In 1956, the Naga National Council (NNC) declared independence from India and soon began an armed campaign to achieve it; a separatist insurgency began in 1964 in Manipur; and the Mizo National Front (MNF) launched an insurrection two years later.

Insurgents' narrative

The insurgents' narratives continue to propagate that neither their land had ever been occupied by any power nor were they assimilated into the Indian mainstream. The fundamental reason for this failure, according to them, is the socio-cultural difference between the 'highly stratified Hindu India' and the 'egalitarian tribal societies' of the North East. The insurgents assert that despite these differences India had forcibly occupied their land and continue to hold it through force since 1947. In the process, India has committed untold atrocities on the innocent tribes, killed scores of people, burnt their villages and suppressed their cultural and religious identities.

In addition to continuing anti-New Delhi sentiments, the contemporary conflict is also characterised by resource disputes between tribal areas; between hills and plains areas; and between "sons of the soil" and migrants from the plains of Bengal, Nepal, or central India. Among these conflicts, the tribal movement against Bengali migrants in Tripura and the anti-immigrant movement in Assam started in the late 1970s have transformed into enduring insurgencies. The insurgents fomented the fear among the indigenous people of being overwhelmed by outsiders and stressed that it is imperative to preserve their socio-cultural identities and safeguard their economic aspirations. While the government of India, according to them, is insensitive to the plight of the common man in the region, it is the duty of the insurgents to espouse the cause of the common man and fight for them.

Thus the insurgents gain legitimacy because they project themselves, and are seen, as fighting for the marginalized and even oppressed common man. These narratives are the underlying force sustaining insurgencies in the North East. Military and administrative measures alone therefore have limited utility as these narratives are nurtured and ingrained deep in the psyche of the people by the insurgents.

Countering North East insurgencies

Statist narratives of history, which are based on selected facts that are biased in the favour of the State, often ignore the narratives of those who take up arms against the State. As far as insurgency in the North East is concerned, a counter-strategy must therefore be based on a moral commitment to the truth, in all its subjective complexity, and its truthful representation in the media. This is essential since the State is capable of committing extreme violence and may not always be viewed as the "protector". A fact corroborated by New Delhi's attempts to end insurgencies in the region through collective punishment, forcible relocation, and military operations. Instead of resolving the problem, this strategy has contributed to the further alienation of the people and undermined the prospects for peace in the region. The best way forward is to invoke the "soft-wiring" that human beings naturally share with one another, and the creation of an empathetic civilization.

The Separatist Movement in Jammu and Kashmir

In the case of Jammu & Kashmir, the insurgency arose as a result of the complex interplay of several factors. Most prominent was the Centre's constant intervention in state politics to ensure that the demand for 'independence' is not raised and its viewing of any opposition as anti-national. New Delhi also imposed a succession of chief ministers on the state, and the final straw was the rigging of the 1987 elections to ensure that staunch loyalists assumed power. Denied the fundamental right to choose their own leaders, the people of the Valley in particular began to call for separation from the Indian Union and extended support for those who took up the gun. A popular insurrection started in the Kashmir valley in 1989, when the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Force declared the beginning of its armed struggle.

Kashmiri Separatists' Narratives

The separatist narrative in Kashmir has two distinct threads. One section asserts that Kashmiris have a distinct identity and therefore they neither belong to India nor to Pakistan. They question the legitimacy of the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India and view India as an occupying power. They propagate Kashmiri nationalism and their agenda is to establish an independent Jammu and Kashmir. The other section advocates the merger of Jammu and Kashmir with Pakistan. Close links with Pakistan have conditioned their thinking and their identification with that country. This group too terms the accession as illegitimate and demands the holding of plebiscite as had been promised. They maintain that the interests of Kashmiris, who are predominantly Muslims, will be suppressed in 'Hindu' India.

In its early days, the Kashmir uprising was an indigenous movement. But soon Islamabad became directly involved driven by the belief that the majority in Kashmir favoured accession to Pakistan. Despite the full backing of Pakistan and broad based support from Kashmiris, the militants have failed to achieve their goal of separation of Kashmir from the Indian Union. Sustained counter insurgency operations and an underlying desire of the people to give peace another chance saw the return of normalcy after a period of twenty years. Elections to the state and general assemblies were held in 2008 and 2009 respectively.

Unfortunately, the mishandling of the Amarnath Yatra agitation, the Shopian protests, and the protests against the killing of young Tufail Mattoo triggered yet another round of popular protests in Kashmir, and plunged the state into an atmosphere of despair and uncertainty. Consequently, the separatists who had lost ground to mainstream political leaders once again came into prominence. And the demand of 'azadi' once again reverberated across the Valley. Kashmiris demand the withdrawal of 'Indian occupational forces' from the State and granting them the right for 'self determination'. Institutional lacunae and executive lapses have contributed to serious misgovernance in the state,

further weakening confidence in the Centre. The capacity to deliver on the Centre's proposed confidence building measures is highly questionable given the dilapidated administration and a frayed police force.

Countering Kashmiri Separatism

For Kashmir, the solution lies not in competing with the separatist agenda but in working towards meeting the legitimate public demand for stability, normalcy, justice and dignity. In such a situation, the best way to counter the separatist narrative is to clearly convey to the people the confidence building measures that have been announced by the Centre and implement them. In addition, credible commissions of inquiry need to be set up to investigate the happenings during the recent unrest.

It would also be useful if the regional council model adopted in Ladakh in 1993 were to be adopted in Jammu and the Valley as well, so that sub-regional interests are addressed in a timely manner. Finally, given the perception of a long history of political disempowerment and psychological besiegement, it would be important to "baby-feed democracy" in Kashmir.

Systemic Reforms

In addition to countering the narratives of insurgent and terrorist groups, India also needs to address the crucial issue of systemic reforms. A slow judicial process, sloppy investigation, demoralised police force, corruption, all contribute to a negligible number of terrorists and criminals being prosecuted. The need of the hour is to implement systemic reforms in order to revitalize the process of investigation and prosecution of terrorists and criminals.

The first step in this direction should be to address the problems plaguing the country's criminal justice system. It would be, therefore, worthwhile to resuscitate the Malimath Committee Report (2003) on Criminal Justice Reforms and the Madhav Menon Committee Report (2007) on the National Criminal Justice Policy re-designating IPC offences to strengthen the institutional mechanisms dealing with insurgency and terrorism.

A reformed criminal justice system, including police reforms as directed by the Supreme Court (2007), would go a long way in restoring people's faith in the law and order machinery, which is essentially built on principles of limited use of legitimate force. Reckless expansion of paramilitary forces is not the solution. Serious flaws in the recruitment, training and deployment patterns in practice with respect to the CRPF needs to be identified and corrected.

Institutional atrophy and subversion at the level of the state government have come at the serious cost of damaging the functional efficacy of intelligence, vigilance and accountability institutions. A second systemic lacuna is the lack of an anti-terror law, which makes it

difficult to criminalize acts of terror as distinct from criminal acts. A final systemic reform that is essential to tackle the internal security challenge is electoral reform to ensure a political leadership that is upright and can effectively deal with corruption.

Need for a Comprehensive Strategy

The obvious fallout of an absence of strategy is inconsistency in the State's response to insurgency and terrorism. Lack of strategy also means poor public perception management, which is extremely important in conflict theatres; after all, the goal of both insurgents and the State is to mobilise the people firmly behind them and gain legitimacy.

Unfortunately, a focused and consistent effort by the Government of India to influence public minds to support its actions against insurgent and terrorist groups is missing. It also fails to communicate its intentions, plans and programmes to the nation in general, which creates an image that the government is not doing anything substantive to tackle the situation. Consequently, the general reaction of the common people to the Government's counter insurgency and counter terrorism activities in the conflict theatres has often been quite unfavourable, despite the government undertaking various positive measures for the welfare of the people.

One major stumbling block in developing a comprehensive strategy has been the lack of political consensus. Vested interests, petty politicking, collusion with insurgents and terrorists, and corruption have played a part in preventing the forging of a political consensus in matters of crucial national interest.

Given the enormity and complexity of the internal security challenges facing the country, devising a strategic response towards insurgency and terrorism is imperative for India. The reconceptualised strategy should be comprehensive and long term. Its effectiveness would depend on some critical elements such as the ability to answer the opponent's questions, i.e. countering the ideologies and narratives of the insurgent and terrorist groups by highlighting the inclusiveness of Indian democracy. The strategy should also spell out the effective steps that the government would require to take to garner the people's support for its counter insurgency measures.

One means by which this can be achieved is by being empathetic towards the people in the regions affected by insurgency and terrorism. Use of force is integral to all forms of governance and therefore using military might to quell insurgent movements and terrorist campaigns for the greater good is legitimate. But it should be complemented with a mechanism to effectively communicate this fact to the public, while at the same time reassuring them about the Government's intentions of judicious use of force. Thus, communication is another key in evolving an effective strategy against insurgent and terrorist campaigns.

In recent times, displacement caused by mining activities, creation of SEZs and construction

of dams have led to much hardship among the affected people. In addition, loss of economic opportunities and inadequate compensation have further alienated these people and created a conducive atmosphere for insurgents to spread their ideology among them. Therefore, proper implementation of Government's policies and programmes such as Land Reforms, Relief and Rehabilitation, various rural and tribal developmental plans, etc. should be made an integral part of any counter insurgency strategy.

The strategy also needs to address long standing structural issues such as judicial and police reforms because effective policing and investigation and prosecution of terror related cases goes a long way in arresting the further spread of the problem. Last but not the least, sectarian and collusive politics have been significant for causing and for the persistence of terrorist and insurgent movements. An effective strategy should be able to successfully eschew political manoeuvring and posturing.