

# Crafting a Counter- Naxalite Strategy

**Ms Vinita Priyedarshi\***

## Introduction

Tracing its origin to the 1967 Naxalbari movement of West Bengal, forty years down the line Naxalism has come to acquire new dimensions. This led Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to call it the single largest threat to India's internal security. Today, around 235 districts are affected by Naxalism in varying degrees which has led to innumerable loss of life and resources of the country. The stated aim of the Naxalites, to capture power in Delhi, is no longer a secret looking at their strategy of penetration into the urban areas. The Government has to date treated this as a law and order problem and has tried to address it through a three pronged strategy comprising the use of force, dialogue and addressing the socio-economic causes which were responsible for the movement taking roots among the tribals.

Going by the success witnessed by Andhra Pradesh in containing the threat of Naxalism with a similar strategy, nothing seems amiss in the strategy itself. Then why is it that the same strategy does not seem to yield similar results in other Naxal affected states? This is because each prong has a number of imperatives attached. These form an intrinsic part of the overall strategy which the Government has failed to knit into a comprehensive whole. Until each of these imperatives are addressed and interlinked to formulate a comprehensive and coordinated counter-Naxalite strategy, success will continue to elude the security forces. The counter-Naxal experience of the states shows that whenever these strategic imperatives have been considered, the strategy has paid dividends. There is, therefore, an urgency to make the agencies dealing with Naxalism aware of these strategic imperatives and incorporate these at the tactical and operational levels.

## Strategic Imperatives Associated with the Strategy of Use of Force

To examine the first prong of the strategy, which emphasises 'use of force', there are a number of interlinked imperatives. These are: firstly, the amount and type of force which should be used in such actions. Secondly, the type of training which such forces should be imparted. Thirdly, the weapons which they should possess and fourthly, their method of operations. So far the Counter-Insurgency (CI) strategy has focussed on the use of Central Police Forces (CPOs) or the raising of Special Task Forces like the Greyhounds or the Cobras without analysing the lacunae associated with the use of CPOs in CI operations. It is suggested that the use of CPOs should be considered only after duly analysing these strategic imperatives as otherwise, their effectiveness could be doubtful.

## Imperative One: Involvement of State Police Forces

Security analysts and experts have said that in CI operations, State Police Forces should be at the forefront of fighting. In my interview, Mr Mahendra Kumawat<sup>1</sup> and Mr DM Mitra<sup>2</sup> emphasised the significance of using trained 'State Police Force' for dealing with insurgency, since they belong to that particular area and also form part of the local population. They are familiar with the culture, ethos and language of the people; have bonds with the people and are better conditioned mentally to handle them. They would also be more circumspect than the CPOs, when under attack. Their actions would be influenced by the fact that their misguided kith and kin may be on the other side. Moreover, they would have a better chance of fighting the insurgents efficiently because of their inherent motivation for doing so. The defeat of Naxalism in Andhra Pradesh and terrorism in Punjab reveals that leadership of the local State Police Forces played a significant role in these campaigns. Even in Gadchiroli, reports suggest that CRPF always moved in tandem with the Maharashtra police. The forces involved in operations had at least 30 per cent participation from the State Police Forces and increased intelligence-sharing between them.<sup>3</sup>

The use of Armed Forces is, therefore not recommended in anti-Naxalite operations. The Government has also hesitated in using the Army for internal conflicts. This is because the Army is trained to fight in a wider arena where they enjoy complete operational freedom and only have to follow the restrictions imposed by the Geneva Conventions. The rules in CI operations are totally different. Firstly, the Armed Forces have to fight against their own citizens and secondly, this is done in full glare of human/civil rights activists and media.

Another factor which merits consideration in CI operations is that the objectives are not clearly defined and the insurgents are always elusive. Whereas, in conventional armed warfare, aim, objectives and plans are executed with clinical precision in well defined areas of conflict. No such defined theatre of war exists for CI operations. The insurgents attack from within the local population and merge with them easily. Therefore, counter attack by the CI forces carries with it the danger of collateral damage. It is an established fact that large scale collateral damage and targetting of own population strengthens their resolve to fight back. In CI operations use of excessive force can suddenly turn the tide against the forces, which is not the case in military operations against the enemy.

It is a fact that the State Police Forces are specifically trained to maintain law and order within the society. They do not possess the skills and wherewithal for combating insurgents and well armed terrorists. Thus it is essential to

reorganise, reequip and train the State Police Forces in jungle warfare also. The Central Government must also implement its decision of modernising all the Police Forces in tandem with the State Governments expeditiously.

## **Imperative Two : Avoid Centre-State Jurisdictional Conflicts**

While CI forces are governed by jurisdictional constraints between Centre and the States, for maintaining law and order; no such restrictions apply to the Naxalites. Any move on the part of the Central Government to enter into areas under the jurisdiction of a State is viewed with suspicion. Besides, each State is governed by the dynamics of its internal politics, which might be at variance with the rules governing the politics at the national level. It is precisely due to these reasons that States like Jharkhand, Bihar and Orissa, which are ruled by non-UPA governments, have not responded positively to the Central Government's call for joint and coordinated operations. However, under the Maoists onslaught, these States are now forced to look upto the Centre for additional forces. The result is a half-baked counter-Naxal strategy which lacks cohesion between Central and State Forces. Since actions of the State Police Forces cannot be disowned by the state governments, they have the freedom and flexibility to innovate and experiment with new tactics. Under the present scenario, the state governments must understand the benefits of raising special anti-Naxalite forces with help from the Central Government. Such a strategy would meet the approval of the states, since these additional Special Forces would function under their direct supervision. It would also give them the additional advantage of creating a permanent pool of trained Special Forces which could either be used in CI/CT operations or to deal with other Internal Security (IS) problems, as well.

## **Imperative Three: Intelligence Collaboration**

Intelligence forms the back-bone of all CI campaigns. This, therefore, becomes an unfamiliar task for the Army or CRPF which being not well versed with the lingua franca of the region, are seen as alien forces by the local populace. Further, deployment of CRPF or Army is coupled with the problem of coordination between the Centre and the state. CPOs deployed in combat zones located in various states cannot operate on their own. They must liase with the local police, especially for intelligence. Their role, as the CRPF's commander of anti-Naxal operations, Vijay Raman, says, is of "a force multiplier, not contractors to have been given the job of exclusively rooting out Naxals".<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that in Andhra Pradesh, which is being projected as a success model (even at the peak of CI phase in 2005-2009), merely six battalions of CPOs were ever deployed for anti-Naxalite operations.<sup>5</sup> The experience of Punjab terrorism reveals that CT operations started yielding results only when the Punjab Police Force assumed leadership and started paying attention to training of the Punjab Police personnel.

## **Imperative Four: Strong and Independent Leadership**

Effective leadership, especially at the apex of the State Police apparatus, is vital in CI operations. A study conducted by Navlakha in the heartland of the Naxalite movement brought out the case of an upright police officer,<sup>6</sup> who was shifted due to political pressures. This is not the only instance of political interference. Good leadership is indispensable in CI operations, not merely for boosting the morale of the Police Forces, but also for building confidence among the people. Yet going by the analysis of Ajai Sahni<sup>7</sup>, there is huge deficit in the ratio of DSP to SSP (deficits in Andhra Pradesh stands at 19 per cent, Bihar 35 per cent, Chattisgarh 28 per cent, Jharkhand 51 per cent, Orissa 34 per cent and West Bengal 25 per cent as also in the ratio of ASP to Inspector (Andhra Pradesh 15 per cent, Bihar 39 per cent, Chattisgarh 41 per cent, Jharkhand 18 per cent, Orissa 34 per cent and West Bengal 30 per cent. The 13th Finance Commission has allotted adequate funds for modernisation of Police Forces. However, it would still take some time before a pool of trained Police Forces, with strong and independent leadership, become fully operational.

## **Imperative Five: Modernisation of State Police Forces**

The type of training and amount of forces which should be deployed in CI operations also need serious consideration. Training of Police Forces should also include the basics of jungle warfare. Except Greyhounds no other Special Operation Force seem to follow the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) of jungle warfare. Non-state actors/insurgents, lacking the expertise needed to wage conventional warfare, adopt new techniques of warfare. Their aim is neither to defeat the enemy nor to attack it from the front but they attack surreptitiously, to achieve surprise. In such scenarios, large forces would not be suitable as they would be easily detected by the insurgents. They would also find it difficult to move at night, with all their equipment. Special Police Forces on a mission need to carry night vision goggles, bullet-proof vests, sleeping bags and dry rations. Mr Mitra from his own CI experience and research states that "size of the force in any CI operation should depend on the thickness of the jungle, its average visibility area and circumference. A smaller force in a thinner jungle could be counter productive and vice-versa".<sup>8</sup>

There are, other factors too; such as strategy of the adversary, his preparedness, the resources available to the security forces, the intelligence available to them, and the terrain in which the operations have to be conducted. All

these put together will determine, both the strategy as well as the operational tactics of the CI forces. The one man Rammohan inquiry, appointed to probe the killing of 76 security personnel, including 75 belonging to the CRPF, in Dantewada, Chattisgarh, in its report is believed to have indicated leadership failure during and after the operation as one of the causes for the debacle.<sup>9</sup> Further information on the command structure, hierarchy and decisions concerning the operation, quality of training imparted to the CRPF and whether they followed the SOPs would be revealed in due course when the report is made public by the Home Ministry. In all likelihood, lacunae in these aspects are certain to have been responsible in some measure for the brutal ambush of the CRPF company.

## Dialogue

As far as the second prong of the Government's strategy i.e., dialogue with the Naxalites is concerned, one needs to be reminded that the aim of dialogue should be to win the support of the masses. This needs to be done by exposing their lack of agenda and preparedness in offering an alternative to the Parliamentary democracy. Till now the Government has not paid adequate attention to the details of the dialogue. Although the Government's CI policy does talk of the creation of a Perception Management Cell, which would frame the overall policy for articulation of its views and policies to the masses, it has not yet been implemented. Offer of dialogue has been made without chalking out a strategy as to how it should react to the Naxalites rejection of dialogue or how it should utilise the ceasefire period once negotiations commence. It is, therefore, recommended that the following considerations should guide any offer of dialogue with the insurgents:-

(a) **Using Dialogue as a Period of Strengthening the Forces.** The first ever dialogue with the Naxalites that started in Andhra Pradesh at the behest of the 'Committee of Concerned Citizens' reveals that it was used by the Naxalites for reinvigorating their movement. The peace initiative was fully utilised by the People's War Group cadres for eulogising their aims and objectives and creating a sympathetic image for themselves in the media. However, there was also another side to this story. During the ceasefire between the Andhra Pradesh Government and the Naxalites in 2004, Security Forces sent informers into the fold of the Naxalites which helped them strengthen their intelligence machinery. Security Forces also collected information on Naxalites during political negotiations with the State Government. In these negotiations, Security Forces came to know of the hitherto unknown faces of the Naxalites which helped them nab these leaders in later days. Taking lessons from the Andhra case the Government should try to hold talks with the Naxalites but not at the cost of postponing its intelligence and operational preparedness in the process.

(b) **Using Dialogue to Expose Naxalite's Weaknesses.** In end January 2010, Kishanji (leader of the Maoists) had in a letter to the Chief Minister of West Bengal said that the Communist Party of India (Maoists) would never consent to dialogue after laying down arms at the behest of the Centre or any state government or any political party. The Maoists did not trust the current Parliamentary system and laying down arms was not on their agenda. Further, within the Maoist leadership there is a division of opinion, whether there should be talks with the Government. Gopinathji alias Durga Hembram, wanted talks at the earliest while Kishanji the military commander had opposed it in a Central Committee meeting of 30 out of the 36 members, including those from Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa in the Kanai-shol hill forest. Such developments need to be disseminated to the grass roots level to expose the Naxalites preference for violence and their complete abhorrence to principles of Parliamentary democracy.

(c) **Use Media to Highlight the Futility of Naxalite Violence.** The role of media has not been properly appreciated for highlighting the futility of violence resorted to by the Naxalites. Media seems to vacillate between the 'just cause' propounded by the Naxalites and the 'violence' perpetrated by them. There is not enough debate on television channels concerning the loss caused to the Indian economy due to Naxal violence or the damage caused to developmental activities of the Government through actions of the Naxalites. The current spate of attacks on trains leading to the death of innocent people should be used to highlight the hollowness of the ideology propounded by the Naxalites. The Government, thus, needs to use the media innovatively.

## Developmental Measures

There is no denying the fact that Naxalism owes its origin to lack of Governmental authority in the tribal hinterland and its failure in looking after the basic needs of the tribals. However, this is not only peculiar to the Naxal-infected states as other States also suffer from lack of development and deprivation. However, the forested and hilly terrain of the tribal hinterland has allowed the Naxalites to manipulate the grievances of the tribals to suit their own vested interests. Any developmental measure undertaken by the Government needs to take this fact into consideration while formulating its policies.

(a) **Building Infrastructure.** There is an urgent need of connecting the interiors with the mainland through proper roads. One of the reasons why Naxalites have not been able to make inroads into urban areas is because the interiors of the cities are well connected and Forces could easily be stationed at various places. Blaming the Naxalites for stopping construction works will not serve the purpose since the Security Forces, moving in the difficult terrain while commuting, are likely to fall prey to ambushes. Construction of roads needs to be supplemented by building of public utilities like hospitals, rural dispensaries and schools. Protection of these public places should not be left to Security Forces alone but it would be wiser to involve group of villagers who could take turns in guarding them. Involvement of villagers might dissuade the Naxalites from attacking these places. Israel follows the practice of placing voluntary citizen guards (established under the National Police) to guard school premises as well neighbourhoods at night<sup>10</sup>. Prior to the establishment of voluntary guards, Israel was following the policy of placing two parents on the

gates of the school as guards. India might learn such practices from Israel to involve the citizens to defend public places which are meant for their benefit.

(b) **Winning Hearts and Minds of the People.** Gaining support of the masses is critical in any CI operations; however, the Government has not shown innovativeness in winning over the masses. Effective implementation of existing policies is the key to development. Corruption in all walks of life has led to siphoning of the funds meant for development of the tribals as well as denial of their basic rights. The Government needs to overhaul the administration, particularly those involved in the implementation of the policies related to the tribals. Proper implementation of land tenancy rights as well as conclusion of Memorandum of Understanding with the mining corporates is long overdue. The laws do exist, but what is needed is the political will to implement them, keeping aside the compulsions of power politics.

## **Conclusion**

Naxalism is an ideology which is difficult to defeat since it tends to hold its sway over adherents long after the enemy is defeated physically. Naxalism can be defeated only if the Government implements the various strategic imperatives discussed above. It is true that there can be no alternative to Parliamentary democracy. Naxalism, while providing some relief to the tribals, cannot be a substitute to liberal democratic set up. The Government's three-pronged strategy (use of force, dialogue and development) of dealing with Naxalism is workable, provided the machinery engaged in its implementation follows the various imperatives associated with these strategies and link them into a comprehensive and coordinated counter-Naxal strategy.

\*Ms Vinita Priyedarshi is a Research Associate at the Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation, USI of India, New Delhi.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXL, No. 580, April-June 2010.