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A Modern Insurgency: India's Evolving Naxalite Problem

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The April 6, 2010, ambush in Chhattisgarh state, killing 76 members of the Central Reserve Police Force, marks the deadliest attack upon Indian security forces since the foundation of the "Naxalite" movement. Formed from a 1967 split within the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the insurgency has been responsible for decades of violence throughout eastern and central India's "Red Corridor." These loosely affiliated Maoist rebels claim to fight on behalf of the landless poor, virulently opposing the injustice and oppression of the Indian state. In response to attacks on police officers, government officials, and landlords, India has employed an assortment of counterinsurgency strategies that, over the years, have met varied levels of success. As the modern Naxalite movement continues to develop, the Indian government faces new complications related to one of its most destabilizing internal security challenges. Adequately addressing this threat will prove essential in solidifying India's status as a rising world power, as well as demonstrating its capacity to effectively combat militancy.

Persistent Threat: The first 25 years of the Naxalite insurgency were characterized by the communist principles on which the movement was founded. Fighting for land reform, the rebels gained support from the impoverished rural populations of eastern and central India. The Maoist rebellion quickly adopted violence and terror as the core instruments of its struggle against the Indian authority. Primary targets included railway tracks, post offices, and other state infrastructure, demonstrating the Maoists' commitment to undermining a central government that they believed exploited low castes and rural populations. As states and the central government employed uncoordinated and underfunded responses to the Naxalites, the threat expanded beyond West Bengal and its neighboring states.

In 2004, the two predominant rebel groups, the Maoist Communist Center (MCC) and the People's War Group (PWG), merged together. The resulting Communist Party of India (Maoist) emerged as a solidified base of power for the Naxalites, with a stated goal of overthrowing the Indian government. It has developed in its modern form as a rebellion that comprises up to 40,000 permanent armed cadres and 100,000 additional militia members. According to the *South Asia Intelligence Review*, Maoist violence bears responsibility for 998 deaths in 2009, representing the highest one-year total since 1971.

The Expansion of the Rebellion: The nascent stages of the movement reflected the stark contrast between urbanized areas of India and the primarily rural, underdeveloped regions of Naxalite influence. With the Maoist rebels firmly entrenched in geographically remote areas, Indian government resources remained dedicated to urban security and development concerns. As India looks increasingly to its east for vital resources, the conflict continues to expand beyond the principles of its origin. With a growing population and new development initiatives that require additional coal-powered electricity sources, India's urban centers have come into direct contact with the states most affected by the Naxalite uprising: West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. Containing 85 percent of India's coal reserves, these states have presented insurgents with an opportunity both to strike at the heart of national interests and to seek economic profit of their own.

Rising Urban Influence: A striking development of the evolving Naxalite strategy includes infiltration of Indian urban centers and a shift away from the confines of the rural eastern corridor. While recruitment of

militants for attacks on government targets remains limited to the states traditionally affected by Maoist influence, leaders of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) – the CPI (Maoist) – and militant cadres are turning toward Indian cities for the recruitment of sympathizers and logistical support. In 2007, two prominent members of the CPI (Maoist) were arrested in Mumbai and found in possession of weapons caches, having used the city as a base for their operations. The following year, more than 400 rebels unleashed unprecedented attacks on the urban towns of Nayagarh and Daspalla in Orissa. Last year, Naxalite leader Kobad Gandhi was arrested in Delhi after attempts to garner support from workers, students, and scholars in the city.

This shifting strategy underscores the danger that the Maoist insurgency presents to the Indian population. In 2005, Naxalite incidents plagued 70 of India's 604 districts. India's Home Ministry reports that, in 2009, the number of affected districts had increased to 223. While the tactics of violence that have been used in rural settings are yet to be replicated in urban centers, the Naxalite endeavor to gain new channels of support has strengthened the insurgency's capacity for future operations. Seeking to integrate new spheres of society into the ideological roots of their rebellion, the Naxalites have supported worker movements among underpaid and deregulated urban professions, such as in the sanitation industry. Solidifying urban support represents a new direction of the Maoist insurgency and a potential array of new problems for the Indian government.

The Economics of the Insurgency: In addition to the movement toward urban centers, the Naxalites have opened new pathways for financial gain and the funding of insurgency operations. Traditionally, funding has exploited the impoverished rural classes that the movement claims to represent. According to Indian Home Secretary G. K. Pillai, the Maoist insurgents extort 14 billion Indian rupees (more than \$300 million) each year. By brandishing the threat of violence, the Naxalites make advantageous use of the power vacuum in rural Indian territories. Fees are collected from rural business owners, landowners, and local politicians. Funding is partially redistributed among the military cadres and goes directly toward the purchase of arms and the financing of operations against the state.

As businesses have sought to expand into the resource-rich regions controlled by the Naxalites, an additional opportunity for profit has arisen, albeit one that conflicts with the ideological basis of the Maoist movement. In the years of forcible land acquisition, the Naxalites still turned profits by exacting fees from businesses, such as paper mills, that generated revenue from the land. As India has shifted toward a system where land is voluntarily sold to businesses, the insurgents have used violence as a tool to disrupt the aspirations of corporate groups such as Vedanta and Tata. Seeking to maintain control over resource-rich territories, the abovementioned shift toward urban centers provides a base of operations to protect these economic interests. As most areas of corporate development lie in close proximity to Indian cities, the Naxalites are establishing centers from which they can coordinate attacks upon infrastructure development and corporate expansion.

Renewed Government Response: In a 2006 speech, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that Naxalism remains "the single biggest internal security challenge" that India has ever faced. Under the guidance of Home Minister P. Chidambaram, India has begun to embrace an unprecedented commitment toward addressing this threat. At the end of 2009, India launched a counteroffensive that called for the deployment of more than 50,000 paramilitary soldiers to the regions most affected by the insurgency's increased violence. In previous years, the Indian government tacitly supported the failed efforts of locally operated militias, such as the Salwa Judum in the state of Chhattisgarh. Chidambaram's action instead draws a combined force from the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Indo-Tibetan Border Police, Border Security Force, Sashastra Seema Bal, Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CoBRA) and the Nagaland Armed Police. Deemed "Operation Green Hunt," the counteroffensive includes the use of helicopters and drones with aerial strike capabilities that can provide support to the land forces. To date, the results of the operation have had varying levels of success. While at times the intensified military and police involvement has led to Naxalite calls for peace talks, other instances have led to reprisal attacks by insurgent groups.

The Role of Police: Regardless of the inroads made by committed military and police engagement, a solution to the Maoist insurgency will ultimately require effective governance and lasting security

measures in the states most affected by the threat. In the absence of federal forces, state police are responsible for security issues pertaining to their individual state. Commonly the targets of militant attacks, these police forces maintain a relatively sparse presence in the eastern corridor. In Bihar, police presence per unit of population remains less than half of the national rate. Further exacerbating the problem is a severe lack of modern equipment or standards for adequate training. While states have been deploying special police units to areas greatly threatened by the Maoist insurgency, a lack of coordination between forces has resulted in a failure to mitigate security threats. Instead, special police forces have only become a more glaring target for militant attacks.

Political Complications of a Comprehensive Crackdown: Another barrier impeding a successful solution to the Naxalite threat remains the political nature from which the conflict derives. As state governments have been the primary actors in addressing the threat, and doing so on an independent basis, political affiliations have weakened the effort to reduce the influence of the CPI (Maoist). Recent rule in West Bengal has been characterized by the leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), distinctly separate from the Maoists yet rooted in ideology of the left. While divisions between the two communist parties have deepened, the ruling party relies upon Naxalite sympathizers to maintain its position of power. The local government in Jharkhand came to power in part due to Maoist support. Though not openly supportive of the Naxalite cause, it has been hesitant to crack down on insurgents. As part of the rural population along the Red Corridor, Maoists will inevitably remain an element of eastern India's political landscape.

Maoism as a Legitimate Force in Neighboring Nepal: May 2010 will signify the two-year anniversary of the dissolution of the Nepalese monarchy and the ascent of the United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). India has long accused the Naxalites of acquiring arms and support from their ideological brethren across the porous India-Nepal border, so its fears were recently intensified by the comments of Nepalese leaders. This past November, prominent Nepalese politburo member Chandra Prakash Gajurel admitted full and open support for the Maoist insurgency in eastern India. While details or evidence of direct arms supply between Maoists in Nepal and those in India are lacking, the Nepalese government has lent political legitimacy to the armed resistance. Maoist leaders in Nepal have also called for unconditional talks between India and Naxalite leaders, demonstrating a further desire for the political integration of the Maoist insurgents in Indian government.

Successes in Andhra Pradesh: Although the frequency of Naxalite incidents has surged throughout most of the Red Corridor, the state of Andhra Pradesh has experienced a dramatic decline in Maoist violence over the past five years. Swaminathan Aiyar reports in the *Times of India* that while Andhra Pradesh witnessed 576 Maoist incidents and 211 related killings in 2005, only 62 incidents and 17 deaths occurred within the state in 2009. Expanding its police force by 37,000, Andhra Pradesh has laid the framework for today's federal counterinsurgency operations. In a significant step toward reducing the legitimate political influence of the Naxalites, the state established and has subsequently extended a ban on all political activity by the CPI (Maoist).

The success in Andhra Pradesh cannot be attributed solely to the offensive security measures undertaken by the state. Venkat Sathya notes in an article published by the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies that by increasing the presence of the government, the state eroded the power that the Naxalites had previously established in the vacuum of authority. Massive increases to the state police force coincided with widespread intelligence gathering. During the period of ceasefire, officials developed a vast intelligence network through negotiations with the rebels, as well as the implementation of a multilayered governmental bureaucracy alongside an abundance of state offices and infrastructure. Coupled with massive increases to both the size and budget of police forces, the Naxalites' capabilities of resistance and recruitment became significantly weakened. Developmental projects that forged ties to the tribal populations proved essential toward limiting the influence of Maoist insurgents.

The Changing Future of the Conflict: India is committed to addressing its internal security challenges. Its strong offensive against the Naxalites demonstrates a strengthened ability to organize for the task. In the past, India has experienced the difficulties of integrating national and local efforts to form a cohesive counterinsurgency against constantly emerging militant groups. To achieve its objectives against the

Maoist revolt, India will need to instill strong and effective governance throughout the Red Corridor. The positive example of Andhra Pradesh provides a crucial pathway for the Indian government to follow as it seeks to maintain control not only over its territory but over its citizens as well. This week's attacks in Chhattisgarh demonstrate the urgency that the Indian state must adopt in transferring these past successes to both security and development in the Red Corridor. The recent events have sent shock waves throughout the core of the Indian security community and will undoubtedly lead to a reevaluation of both federal and state policies. Chidambaram has publicly ruled out an imminent military reprisal, but he has left open the possibility of reviewing India's approach to the Naxalite insurgency. As a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy continues to develop, improved governance and the ability to follow successful precedents will remain essential for India to look optimistically toward its future.

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