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India's Anti-Maoist Operations: Where are the Special Forces?

By Bibhu Prasad Routray

Synopsis

Poor standards among its police force and the lack of specialised units within its para-military is hampering India's counter-Maoist efforts. The objective of neutralising the military might of the extremists looks, for the moment, an unrealisable goal.

Commentary

ANDHRA PRADESH, the only Indian state which was successful in defeating the left-wing extremists (Maoists), did so using its specialised counter-insurgency force, the Greyhounds. Raised in the late 1980s, the ability of the Greyhounds to take the fight into the Maoist stronghold areas was crucial in draining the extremist strength. By 2005, the Maoists had little option after losing hundreds of their cadres, but to flee Andhra Pradesh into the safety of the neighbouring states, where security operations have been far less intensive. Since then, the Greyhounds experiment of raising special force units to counter Maoists has been replicated in different states and also within the para-military Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) -- but unsuccessfully.

Lack of Sustained efforts

With the constant prodding of the government in New Delhi, some states like Maharashtra and Orissa have raised special counter-Maoist units. Some others like West Bengal are still 'in the process of' raising them. States like Bihar are managing by re-employing former Army personnel within its Special Auxiliary Police units. States like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have tended to manage their anti-Maoist operations with their regular police personnel, renamed as 'special task force', who have undergone training in the counter-insurgency and guerrilla warfare schools. Twenty such schools, in addition to the one currently operational in Chhattisgarh, are being raised by the government.

The ineffectiveness of such specialised or semi-specialised units is clearly rooted in the continuing dependence of the states on the central paramilitary forces. Over 70 battalions of such forces are currently deployed in various states as part of the anti-Maoist 'Operation Green Hunt'. The easy availability of these central forces for the states, at almost a nominal deployment and maintenance cost, is creating an unenviable situation -- the states are paying inadequate attention to modernise their own police forces. In addition, states have regularly defaulted in paying for the deployment of such forces.

Same rot within the paramilitary

The paramilitary CRPF, raised with a mandate to manage normal law and order situations, has the experience of countering militants and insurgents in Kashmir and the northeastern states. But the Maoists are proving to be a different and difficult challenge.

Following the 1999 Kargil conflict in Kashmir between India and Pakistan, New Delhi's Task Force on Internal Security had recommended modelling the CRPF as the primary strike force for counter-insurgency (CI) operations. This recommendation had been accepted in 2000 by the then National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. Since then, enormous funds have been made available to the CRPF to augment its size as well as its capacities. However, former CRPF officers, including a former chief of the force, accept that a plan to achieve the objective is yet to be formulated. There is no indication that the CRPF, which has grown to 210 battalions after continuing expansions, is anywhere close to being a specialised CI force.

A series of setbacks suffered by the CRPF in Maoist attacks has compelled the force not only to go on the defensive, but also to centralise its operations. As a result, local commanders' capacity to innovate and launch swift counter-attacks, which are critical in counter-insurgency operations, have been put on hold.

Clearance from the CRPF regional headquarters in Kolkata, which takes at least a day to receive, has been made mandatory before the personnel embark on any CI operation acting on intelligence leads. Maoists have been extremely mobile in their approach. A day's delay in obtaining clearance has virtually turned the CRPF into an inspecting unit rather than a combat force.

In 2008, the government set up a 10 battalion specialised counter-Maoist unit within the CRPF. The unit was fashionably named Combat Battalion for Resolute Action (COBRA). Home Minister P Chidambaram did not like the acronym. But the name stuck. The personnel underwent a year-long specialised training in the counter-insurgency and guerrilla warfare schools and were deployed in phases in the Maoist-affected states. Actual achievements of the COBRA are operational secrets. However, by any standard, this is too small a unit to make any impact on the Maoists who have spread out over a vast territory. In addition, in the absence of adequate support from the state police forces, the actual capacity of the COBRA forces, has been marginalised.

Stress from continuous engagement could also be growing within the COBRA. Recently, a COBRA personnel deployed in Chhattisgarh fled the force after killing a civilian, disfiguring his face and planting his official identity card on the dead body to fake his own death. Separately, another COBRA personnel was arrested for alleged involvement in a series of crimes perpetrated by a criminal gang.

No Intelligence, No Capacity

The CRPF's setbacks are partly linked to the weak or non-existent human intelligence apparatus within the state police forces and also to the poor operational camaraderie the two forces share. Attempt to set up CRPF's own intelligence unit has been a long- pending ambition. Frequent verbal duels have been reported between the CRPF and the police authorities. In August, New Delhi transferred a top CRPF officer overseeing Operation Green Hunt after his spat with the top police officer of Chhattisgarh State. Frequent changes in the CRPF's leadership have disrupted continuity of policies and programmes for augmenting the capacity of the force.

The government aims to turn the course of the war with the Maoists within the next few years. However, with the security forces receiving regular setbacks and the country still struggling to raise specialised counter-Maoist force units, such an objective appears far too difficult to achieve.

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