

COUNTER NAXALISM: STRATEGIC FLAWS LEADING TO TACTICAL SETBACKS

-SUDEEP LAKHTAKIA

-PRABHAKAR ALOKA

‘Tactics without strategy are the noise before defeat’.

-Sun Tzu

Incidents of deaths of security personnel in counter naxal operations are followed by an elaborate charade of condemnation of the dastardly attack, emotional wreath-laying on tricolour-draped coffins, and an unambiguous chest-thumping announcement that ‘culprits will not be spared’. The expansiveness of the pretence is directly proportional to the magnitude of the tragedy. The optics covers up the fact that the repetitive tactical setbacks are due to strategic flaws.

Loss of life of security personnel must invite a serious review and willingness to adopt a different approach. Prognosis should do away with the hackneyed practices and response.

There are several strategic flaws that underpin such disasters. These shortcomings lie in a weak understanding of the form of the naxal movement, and **lack of unity of purpose** amongst various players specially the Governments at the centre and states. They have implications not just for overall strategy but also for the employed tactics, for example, the role played by intelligence gathering and the structure of leadership of anti-naxal operations. Filling these gaps requires comprehensive proactive policy.

The primary strategic flaw in the current approach lies in the **failure to recognise naxalism as insurgency**. It is a conflict based essentially on exploitation of the social, political, and economic ferment among the masses. Maoist project its misdemeanours as a ‘people’s movement’. It is bureaucratization of coalesced unrest in the society at large or of a section of the citizenry. It purportedly seeks to change the system to usher in an arrangement that would mitigate the alleged sufferings. Insurgency encapsulates three important aspects , (i) it is a protracted armed struggle, (ii) has armed and political organisations , (iii) to gain control of population.

Treating **Maoism as terrorism and not as insurgency** is a cardinal strategic mistake. Though insurgents use terrorism as a tactic, their target, unlike the terrorists, is specific. The focus of insurgents is on the Government and its representatives. Alex P. Schmid has highlighted that “the main direct victims of terrorist attacks are in general not any armed forces but are usually civilians, non-combatants or other innocent and defenceless persons who bear no direct responsibility for the conflict that

gave rise to acts of terrorism”. Schmidt explains that “terrorism as a tactic is employed in three main contexts: (i) illegal state repression, (ii) propagandistic agitation by non-state actors in times of peace or outside zones of conflict and (iii) as an illicit tactic of irregular warfare employed by state- and non-state actors”. Since insurgency thrives on alleged existence of these contexts, it employs terror as a tactic.

Another strategic flaw is **non recognition of secret nature of the movement**. Secrecy is sine-qua-non for the existence of this movement. Its operatives are under cover with multiple aliases. Sometimes same alias is assumed by many. Any tactical manoeuvre against naxalism should consider the clandestine nature of the organisation. Intelligence operations are, therefore, of utmost importance to counter the naxalite offensive. These intelligence activities must be differentiated from gathering of intelligence. The nuanced application of intelligence tradecraft by Subsidiary Intelligence Branch of Andhra Pradesh Police had helped in making inroads into PWG, the precursor of the Maoist, and its collapse in Andhra Pradesh. The sustained intelligence operation helped in furnishing operational intelligence to Greyhounds for continuous successes. Unsuccessful operations make the States lose faith in their own.

Lack of unity of purpose amongst various stake holders is a debilitating strategic weakness. This exists at multiple levels – between the Centre and the States, amongst affected States and even within a State. It is essential that all the stakeholders, primarily the States, be on the same page. Difference in perception and utterances conveys mixed signals to the operating forces. Different Governments at Centre and the States have disrupted this unity of purpose due to political expediency. Response to **naxalism should be consistent and continuous**. Long term tactical and strategic planning as whole-of-the-government approach would reinforce unity of purpose.

Naxalite warfare also has undergone major transformation. Guerrilla warfare of the yore have been supplemented with mobile and positional warfare tactics. Naxal attacks in Jhiram Ghati (May 23, 2013; Sukma District, Chhattisgarh, 27 civilians killed); Chintalnar (Dantewada , Chhatisgarh, 76 CRPF personnel killed), and Sukma-Bijapur Border (Chhatisgarh, April 5,2021; 22 CRPF/State Police personnel killed and over 30 injured) are examples of mobile warfare tactics.

The anti-naxal strategy of a State should consider the new tactics employed by them. Kissinger’s famous remark , “We fought a military war; our opponents fought a political one. **We sought physical attrition; our opponents aimed for our psychological exhaustion**. In the process we lost sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla war: the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win.....”, is relevant in the context of naxalism.

Disproportionate emphasis **on Central Armed Police Forces relegating State Police is strategically counter-productive and self-defeating** in the long run. The hubris

of being the largest force in the world does not give any tactical advantage to lead the force operating in this theatre. One should be wary of the numbers game in the field of counter insurgency. Number of Battalions, encounters, killings, arrests, etc. are useful optics but not purposeful enough to justify normalcy. A good engagement even without 'kills' will shake the adversary. And a lost engagement is morale shattering for the forces, which unfortunately is the case too often. Once such an incident takes place, the narrative changes to pump in more forces which is a recipe for more disaster.

Forces trained in high mountain warfare, or border guarding, or industrial security do not have attitudinal competence to handle people-oriented insurgency. Their orientation, training, attitude, motivation, material resources, equipment, etc. are not geared for an insurgent situation. Local police have calibrated response, while CAPFs have a monolithic approach because of their orientation, training, roles, responsibilities, and SOPs.

In a seminal study of 648 violent groups, Jones and Libicki found that Police and Intelligence were the most effective strategy responsible for demise of 40% of such units, while military methods could succeed in neutralisation of only 7% of these entities. Political process was instrumental in neutralisation of 43% of terrorist and insurgent groups. Success of political process depended on range of political demand; narrow scope resulted in quick resolution.

Counter naxalism in Andhra Pradesh, counter insurgency in Tripura and counter terrorism in Punjab some shining **examples of robust counter led by State police are worthy of emulation at the national level**. There is a need for a strategic 'shift' to **accord primacy to State police because of their strong ties with the community** at the grass roots. A tactical shift from militaristic counter to state police led response would ensure accountability on use of force.

Though the MHA has shared the lessons of these successes with the States, the latter are under no obligation to follow them, either in part or the whole. The prerogative is that of the States to pick and choose from the learnings. Most of them have raised Special Forces patterned on the lines of Greyhounds of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana albeit with mixed successes. To make them more effective, States must create a structure of Intelligence collection and sharing. Intelligence collection for an accurate offensive is a completely different tradecraft. Effectiveness of State police increases manifold when backed by hard intelligence. Operation Blue Star, a full throttled Military operation was hugely counter-productive as it alienated a prominent section of citizens of the country, with disastrous consequences on the polity of the Country. **Operation Black Thunder which was led by State Police against same groups at the same venue broke the back of Sikh Terrorism**. The operation was backed by hard intelligence. While the success story of Andhra Pradesh Police in

countering naxalism is woven around Greyhounds, the State Intelligence Branch has rendered yeoman service in neutralisation of top leaders.

Intelligence is the huge game changer. It comes from varied places in varied forms. It cannot be collected by CAPF personnel as there are serious limitations in that approach ; inherent dangers when the hunter can become the hunted. Practitioners of intelligence know the vulnerabilities of CAPFs trying to collect intelligence, either it is raw, non-actionable, or a trap. It needs to be supported by intelligence backing from the District Special Branches, Range/Zonal intelligence set up as well as a dedicated anti naxal intelligence unit at the State level.

State Police would also require to strengthen and create structures, and enhance competencies. Naxals attack the Government by attacking its symbols, such as people's representatives, government officials, government buildings, etc. Their protection is also the responsibility of the State Govt. CAPFs cannot fulfil this role. Structures like Intelligence Security Wing and Special Protection Force , of Andhra Pradesh , would be required to be created for protection of targeted individuals and installations.

Relegating normal policing during counter insurgency is insidious. Normal police functions restore credibility of the State and assist in the fight against naxals. Police Stations and not the CAPF camps should be accorded primacy, and be located amidst people lest they should lose their legitimacy. Today police stations in some places are located inside the CAPF camps. **They would then become inaccessible to a citizen in need and do not justify their need to exist.** Police cannot be seen to be taking cover inside an armed fortified camp. It must be brought out, guarded well and yet be accessible to people in need.

Community Policing, Problem Oriented Policing and Intelligence-led Policing models would enable early detection of emergence of ferment that is exploited by insurgents. Professional policing helps in perception management of targeted group through elimination of common flaw of not recognising the problem till it becomes threat. Insurgencies tend to exploit local level ferments by mobilising masses through agitation, propaganda etc. Governments generally tend to treat it as mere localised Law and Order issue and ignore it till it emerges as a potent menace. Civil police set up would help in establishing contact with people by addressing common day to day problems and redressing them. **Locals appreciate the ground situation better than outsiders.** By that criteria itself, the local police would have a better grip on the situation than a CAPF. They can be more instrumental in gathering tactical, but difficult to gather, information, as the locals provide built-in intelligence networks. Local police has the advantage of working in smaller numbers with better information, hence are more efficient, resilient, nimble and pose a smaller target to the insurgent, unlike CAPFs.

While unity of purpose is an important strategic requirement, primacy of local command is sine-qua-non for successful counter insurgency operations. At the operational level this would translate to amalgamation of units as opposed to embedded formations. The Bijapur team comprised of disparate units like the DRG, CRPF, etc. Each unit, though professionally trained, had different work ethos. CAPF personnel keep rotating, which hampers amalgamation of forces with local milieu. Usually, Superintendents of Police in naxal-affected districts are relatively young as compared to their counterparts in the CAPF. Ranks and hierarchy in uniformed service leads to command anomaly and ambiguity. To overcome this, Government of India may consider offering trained CAPF personnel belonging to a particular State for their induction and absorption in the Police department.

Insurgency is a battle for the hearts and minds. Military approach trample over aspirations and hopes unsuspectingly. Most States have sought support of CAPFs on the plea of their limited capacity to take on the might of the naxals. This is highly specious request. Finding short cuts like augmenting numbers through CAPF battalions yield bloody results. Andhra Pradesh trusted Police leadership and invested in capacity building of its Police establishment, and the latter delivered results. Recruitment and staffing of Police department has been recommendation of many Commissions and Reforms proposals. It is high time it is done in the routine rather as an pre-election gimmick. If necessary, States could seek that trained CAPF personnel may be moved to the State Police on permanent secondment. This would be an immediate succour to the depleting strength of the State Police. The role of the Central government is critical here – and is in the spirit of constitutional ‘give and take’.

A comprehensive counter-naxal policy should incorporate people-centric, state police-led, and intelligence-driven strategy to be more effective.
