Long Live Mao: Modern Insurgency in the Republic of India

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Abstract: Economic and political changes in India have created an opportunity for the nascent Maoist movement to expand and accelerate a people’s war. Where multinational economic interests overlay any landscape of social conflict, some violent interaction is to be expected. The Communist Party of India (Maoist) is committed to armed struggle and is championing those affected by the government’s turn to rapid exploitation of natural resources. The exacerbation of perceived injustices will create a spiral of violence resulting in uncertain outcomes for all players involved.

What is India’s greatest national security threat? Is it a nuclear armed Pakistan, an increasingly powerful and present Chinese military, or Islamic terrorist attacks in major cities? In 2010 India’s Prime Minister Monmohan Singh told senior military officers and foreign dignitaries that “Naxalism and Left-wing extremism pose the greatest threat to our national security.”[1]

The forty-four year old uprising clearly has the attention of the central government of India. A decade of expanded exploitation of mineral resources in the contested areas has exacerbated the conflict between the Maoist insurgency and the state. Billions of dollars of resources and the stability of several of India’s states are at stake. As the government of India and state governments step up the military and police pressure, the Maoist leadership has also risen to the challenge. India’s Home Minister P. Chidambaram has said that the Maoists operate in 31% of India’s 626 districts, are capable of striking in 80 districts, and virtually dominate 36 of the districts.[2] This operational area is about the size of California.

The Maoists have a sophisticated leadership well versed in Maoist political thought, active in people’s movements, and increasingly experienced in guerilla warfare. The various branches of these people’s movements have successfully consolidated in the recent years.[3] Current reports of increased activities by these insurgent elements are beginning to reveal the broader strategic plan for consolidation and expansion of the Maoist movement.

Communist Insurgency in the Republic of India

Communist revolution shook the world for a century, with upheaval in Europe, consolidation in the USSR, and expansion in Asia. Western nations contained these movements directly or by proxy throughout their former colonies or areas of interest. The Cold War concluded as capitalism from without, crushed communism in the former Soviet Union and capitalism from within transformed it in the People’s Republic of China. For the Western world, the ubiquitous “Red” menace waned and was replaced by other ideologies considered radical and terroristic.
The invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) have plunged the Western world more visibly into the business of insurgent warfare. Again, nations and armies wrestle with the nature of conflict where destructive force is not the optimal answer to every challenge. Results have been mixed. Not since the jungles of Southeast Asia have the armies of the West been stymied by an unconventional force motivated by ideology and geography.

Yet this type of struggle has been continuous for several nations around the world. India is the meeting place of old school communist ideology and the expansion of insurgent warfare.

Today’s Maoist insurgency in India is complex in its issues, protagonists, and settings, staged against a backdrop of ancient land-based claims, populated with actors as diverse as India itself, and storied by a narrative of past harms, current ideologies, and future possibilities. This drama will decide the fate of indigenous peoples, the utility of past political ideals, the success of international corporations, and the aspirations of an emerging world power.

Background on the Naxalites and Maoists

Republic of India

The modern state of India was born from insurrection, insurgency, and struggle for self-determination. Those battles continued as the new nation consolidated its borders and jurisdictions. The current upsurge in disruption, destruction, and violence associated with the Maoist insurgency in India is the latest episode in a long struggle of people groups fighting for recognition, rights, and justice.

The elements of insurrection, rebellion, and revolution exist in far too many locations around the world. Withholding of basic human rights, exploitation of minorities, and demographic youth bulges lie ready to ignite into full scale upheaval. India has all of these.

Cobbled together by the colonial interests of the British, India was born from a vast and disparate mélange of peoples, languages, and topographies. The British masters had conquered Rajas, defeated moguls, faced down mutiny, and subjugated all classes and castes of the subcontinent. Consolidation of commodities, manufacturing, and wealth was a primary goal for colonial success. The structures required for this wide effort marginalized and exploited the majority of the native population. This was accomplished, by and large, with the assistance of the Hindu and Muslim elites.

A newly-independent India inherited the modern structures and institutions of nationhood from the remnants of British colonialism. India immediately embarked upon its own imperialism as it consumed kingdoms, annexed foreign enclaves, and overthrew erstwhile sovereigns. Within the bounds of the new nation, independence movements, insurgencies, rebels, and all manner of self-determinate groups chafed at the new imperial yoke.

India’s imperialism seemed more like national consolidation as it strove to establish a social democracy that would look to the aspirations of its vast and divergent peoples. India’s centrally planned economy was soon characterized by complex regulation, overall protectionism, and state ownership. The wealth of the subcontinent was no longer being extracted by the British, yet development lagged, poverty continued, and corrupt power institutionalized. The perpetual struggle for social and economic justice continued to be hampered by residual elites.

Communist Party of India (CPI)

The Communist Party of India (CPI) tried several routes to political power as India shook off British
colonial rule. Initially it supported armed struggle against feudal lords and princely states. These peasant uprisings were crushed and the CPI abandoned armed struggle, opting for political action. In 1957 the CPI became the largest opposition party in the national general elections and even won in the state elections of Kerala. This was the first time the Congress Party lost a state election to a single opposition party since independence in 1947. Years of political and ideological struggle created many factions and divisions in the CPI. Lack of progress in land reform and social justice, spurred the rise of other communist groups with more radical approaches to change.

**CPI (Marxist) and Naxalbari**

In 1964 the CPI formally split and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] was formed. Both parties were committed to the parliamentary path, but CPI (M) could not hold its first central committee meeting until 1966 because so many of its leaders and members were in jail. In 1967 a peasant uprising in Naxalbari, West Bengal, broke out under the leadership of hard-line local CPI (M) leaders. The West Bengal government, known as the United Front, was supported by CPI and CPI (M). The state government treated the Naxalite movement as a law and order issue and crushed the uprising. The CPI (M) continued to support the United Front government. This caused a rift within the CPI (M) throughout all India. In 1968, those CPI (M) members committed to revolution formed the All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (ICCCR). The ICCCR recommitted to armed struggle as the true path to obtaining social justice in a repressive state. Over the next decades political activity, armed actions, and internecine war resulted in a fractious revolutionary movement.

**Splintering of the Communist Movement**

Each faction and splinter-group struggled with their comrades and the government. Party purges, murder of “class enemies,” vigilantism, and police reprisals ensured a steady stream of beatings, rapes, and killings for forty years. Doctrinally linked to the peasants, scheduled castes, and tribal peoples, the Maoists gathered in the forests and rural areas of central India. It is here where the landless poor and tenant farmers are at the mercy of feudal systems. The tribes have long been without rights to the land and forests they inhabit and suffer exploitation by government and commercial agents. Lacking any real success in cities, the Maoists focused on the undeveloped areas of each targeted state. Here they found marginalized people to champion and jungle to melt away into.

**Consolidation into CPI (Maoist)**

The uprising in Naxalbari became the touchstone for armed struggle in the Indian communist community. Today the Government of India uses “Naxalite” and the “Naxal problem” to describe the armed movement and its actions. In the Indian media, “Maoists” and “Naxalite” are often interchangeable. Amongst themselves, names and associations vary based upon local leadership and geographic area. The “Naxalite movement has mostly been characterized by fragmented groups and innumerable splits.”[5] Repression by central and state governments has driven a survival-of-the-fittest evolution that has now culminated in the Communist Party of India (Maoist) [CPI (M)]. This current flag bearer for armed people’s war was formed in 2004, as the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) People's War merged with Maoist Communist Centre. These two groups have a historical commitment to armed struggle and have now formed the CPI (M), which is outlawed by the government of India. They now claim to be waging “the most organized and militant struggle” for the liberation of the people of India.[6] It is under this leadership that the Maoist insurgency now severely affects some 83 districts (India has 626 districts) spread across nine states.[7]

**Government of India**
With its colonial background, India has a continuous history of dealing with insurgency. Formed from the imperial leavings of the British, India immediately experienced rebellion all across its newly-formed nationhood. The Indian constitution reflects this political struggle for recognition. Originally, there were 14 official regional languages recognized. In 1967, the number rose to 18 by constitutional amendment. Today 22 languages and English are official languages. In addition, some 141 other “mother tongues” are also officially recognized by the government. Peoples continue to strive for new states in India based upon language and historical association with the land. Keeping the Republic of India from fragmentation has been a continuous concern of the government.

**Economic Reform**

Since the economic reforms of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao (1991-1996) the government of India has consistently liberalized laws regarding a market-driven economy. Foreign direct investment, privatization of industry, and the opening of the Indian market to multinational corporations have increased GDP at a rate that now rivals China.

This break from the more centralized social democratic-based economy of post-colonial India has placed much of the subcontinent’s natural resources into the open market place. State governments have signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with mining, manufacturing, and energy interests that involve trillions of dollars of commodities and construction.

**MOUs**

In 2000, two new Indian states, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, were formed at a fortuitous time for developers and politicians. Within days, much of India’s mineral wealth came under the control of these two new states.

Interestingly, Jharkhand (created from 18 districts of the State of Bihar) came into being as a State on the birth anniversary of a local tribal rebel leader, Bhagwan Birsa Munda. He is famous for revolting against the British, who were extracting the mineral wealth there. The current State government of Jharkhand points to post-independence hegemony of Northern Bihar and includes Bihar with the colonial British in gaining from the exploitation of the mineral wealth in the tribal area. Ironically the Maoists have organized a tribal-infused insurgency that once again fights exploitation of mineral wealth. The State of Jharkhand is now the sponsor of mineral and wealth extraction. It has MOUs with several multinational corporations and domestic firms. Jharkhand admits to $66.4 billion in MOUs as of 2009. These MOUs grant access to land, mineral deposits, transportation rights of way, electrical power, and water resources on a grand scale. Some of these MOUs are now under review as past government ministers have invested heavily in companies with which they had signed agreements.

The State government of Chhattisgarh touts its convenient location in central India as a logical power generation source. Large deposits of coal, iron ore, limestone, bauxite, dolomite and tin ore are present. The State government looks forward to long years of industrial development with numerous domestic and multinational corporations. Chhattisgarh admits to $11.6 billion in MOUs as of 2010. In addition to Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, the State of Orissa also boasts large deposits of mineral wealth. Its resources of bauxite, chromite, coal, iron ore, manganese and nickel ore constitute approximately 50%, 98%, 25%, 35%, 27% and 91% respectively of India’s total resources of these minerals. The state of Orissa admits to $78 billion in MOUs in steel, aluminum, power generation and general industry as of 2009.

**Clash of Commercial and Civil Interests**
Who Lives in the Forests

The surviving indigenous peoples of India, or Adivasis, make up some 8.2 percent of the national population.[17] In India this means 84.3 million people-more than the population of Germany. Officially known as “scheduled tribes,” these diverse and complex people groups are concentrated in the hills and forests of central India, much like the mineral wealth.

The Supreme Court of India recognized the Adivasis as the original inhabitants of India.[18] They also acknowledged, “as a group [they] are one of the most marginalized and vulnerable communities in India characterized by high level of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, disease, and landlessness.”[19]

Colonial history records tribal resistance and revolts throughout the eastern reaches of British India. These early Adivasis revolts set the stage for the current Maoist drama. Continually resisting exploitation, these tribal people have been forced from their villages, cut off from ancestral lands, and exploited by government and commercial agents.

Who Wants the Minerals

Several multinational and national corporations have expanded operations to extract the vast mineral wealth in the ground.

The steel industry in India was decontrolled in the early 1990s. Tata Steel, Limited has been mining ore and producing steel since 1903. Now Arcelor-Mittal, POSCO, Essar, and JSW Ispat all stand ready to advance India’s ranking as the 7th largest steel producer in the world.[20] This requires expansion in land use, water consumption, and energy requirements.

Vedanta Aluminum Ltd is now extracting bauxite and manufacturing aluminum at increasing rates. India boasts the 5th largest reserves of bauxite in the world.[21] It is hard to imagine that this lucrative resource will be allowed to remain under the bare feet of indigenous tribes. Conflicts between corporations and Adivasis have resulted in some delays in industrial site development. Yet relentless pressure for access and extraction have not ceased. With the number of MOUs between government and corporations, it seems clear that the expansion of India’s economy is the primary goal at the moment. Industry and government are on the same team.

The government of India recognizes historic systematic “expropriation and exploitation of marginal farmers, share croppers and farm servants by the upper castes” in Chhattisgarh and other Naxalite-affected states.[22] Political and social activists see these tensions as the precise cause and justification of the Maoist insurgency. Activist and author Arundhati Roy has said, “Today, it’s true that usurping of land, the colonization of the land of the poor is at the heart of the unfolding civil war in our country. If you look at the map of India today; the forests, the Adivasis [tribal people], the natural resources, the Maoists and the civil war, they are all stacked one on top of another. You have to be blind not to be able to notice the vertical connection between them all.”[23] Here is a geographic convergence of mineral wealth, scheduled tribes, and increased focus of government and commercial agents.[24]

It appears that the government and economic elites see the extraction of the mineral wealth as a prerequisite for national economic growth and security. The growing Indian middle class may unwittingly indorse the displacement of scheduled tribes and poor through their own desire for a modern lifestyle.[25] The most feared impact of the Maoists may be their drag on the continued economic growth of the nation.

State Actions in Counterinsurgency
In 2006, while speaking to State Chief Ministers, India’s Prime Minister Manmohan Singh identified the ongoing Maoist insurgency as the greatest national security challenge to the nation. He said, “There can be no political compromise with terror. No inch conceded. No compassion shown.”[26] In the five years since this first declaration, money, material, and manpower have flowed to the States involved.

An early attempt to forestall Naxal influence was to create an anti-Maoist militia in Jharkhand. This group was called the Salwa Judum (Peace Hunt) and was formed from tribal people and villagers. Government reports hailed them as a spontaneous response to Maoist terror from the Adivasis themselves. Soon deserted villages, displacement of people to camps, and claims of rapes, beatings, and murder tainted the government position. Independent reports continued to vie with media coverage as to the effectiveness and human costs of this hunt for peace.[27] The criticisms seem to be vindicated with the recent banning of these types of militia by the Supreme Court of India.[28]

In 2006 the government of India formed a Naxalite Management Division in the Ministry of Home Affairs. [29] For the past several years it has begun executing a two-prong strategy of stick and carrot to address the increasingly disruptive Naxalite – Maoist movement. As State governments enter into talks and negotiations, the central government is committed to bolstering the Ministry of Home Affairs paramilitary forces already engaged in the “Red Corridor”.

The nation’s Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) has borne the burden over the past several years. Exact numbers are difficult to attain, but some 40,000 to 70,000 CRPF personnel are operating in the Naxal-affected states. A CRPF Battalion numbers over 1000 jawans (privates or constables) and is armed with rifles. The CRPF has also organized specially-trained and armed battalions specifically for dealing with the Naxal-insurgent threat. These COBRA (COMmando Battalion for Resolute Action) units are especially aggressive in searching out insurgents.[30]

The Ministry of Home Affairs has augmented the CRPF with battalions from the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP). These forces are organized, equipped and trained as light infantry.

In addition the central government has authorized and funded 37 India reserve battalions in the nine leftwing extremist-effected states. These battalions recruit from the local area, so they provide opportunity for employment and security improvement. The central government has also authorized an additional 12,000 special police officers (SPOs) in the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. This program is under some controversy in the courts, yet is very popular with the central and State governments. [31] These officers are drawn from local tribes and villages in the areas involved. Funds have been allocated to increase police salaries, improve police stations, and to build counterinsurgency schools.[32]

The Maoist insurgency will experience more pressure from central forces in States such as Jharkhand. Jharkhand was under President’s Rule (administrated directly from the ruling government in New Delhi) before the election of the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in September 2010. Current Chief Minister of Jharkhand Arjun Munda recently said, “the government has chalked out an integrated programme under which state police, central paramilitary forces, central and state intelligence agencies are working in tandem.”[33]

The State of Orissa has responded to demands made by the Maoist insurgency after the negotiated release of a government official held by the Maoists. This is of significant concern to the central government of India and neighboring states. Many see this as a sign of weakness that will allow insurgency a safe haven. Central forces remain vigilant in Orissa and seek to provide security during these political maneuvers. Similar concerns are mounting in West Bengal.[34]
The State governments and central government are often at odds as how to confront the sources and symptoms of the Maoist insurgency. The central government is pushing vast amounts of cash into affected States for use in policing and economic relief. However, the States continue to push back against central command and control.\[35\]

**Insurgent Structure and Strategy**

The CPI (M) is made up of the survivors of four decades of government imprisonment, internal purges, and continual armed struggle in the harshest of conditions. They remain true to their vision of class struggle and armed revolt. The party General Secretary, Ganapathy aka Mupalla Laxman Rao, has said: “our party has an all India character, good political militant mass base in several states, a People’s Liberation Guerilla Army (PLGA) fighting enemy in several states and emerging New Democratic People’s power in Dandkaranya [an area in central India which comprises predominately tribal districts of five states of India namely Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashta and Orissa], Jharkhand and some other parts of India.”\[36\] They see themselves as an alternative political power who champions the oppressed people by waging a just war against the violence of the state. They see the current government of India as being in league with multinational corporations in the looting of mineral wealth and creation of an autocratic and fascist state.

True to their Maoist heritage, the movement is organized by ideological cadres working at the grassroots level. Increased paramilitary and police pressure have provided targets of opportunity for the armed insurgents. It has also necessitated and energized an increase of activity and strengthening of leadership in the jungles and villages. Maoist leader Koteswar Rao, has long stated the plan to create “liberated areas” throughout West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Orissa.\[37\]

The CPI (M) strategy appears to be one of action and confrontation rather than stepping back from the challenges of the government. The Maoists plan to wage a guerilla war against the state’s increased paramilitary and police actions. This has been demonstrated by their hit and run attacks, ambushes, and use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Armed squads and platoons of the PLGA now exist and are capable of coming together for larger-scale actions. Dalam (armed group) commanders are responsible for the military wing operating in the jungles. Deputy commanders focus on villages where they can recruit new members and organize logistic and intelligence support. These leaders have been in these same areas for years, if not decades. \[38\]

Their strategy is to mobilize the villagers and rural poor to support the insurgency with increasing numbers and effects. The government would like a quick resolution, whereas the Maoists understand a long conflict is to their advantage. The CPI (M) recognizes the need for a mass support base, a growing PLGA, and liberated areas for long-term success. The success of the Maoists in Nepal continues to inform the CPI (M).\[39\] They specifically plan to spread the conflict to other areas and prolong its duration. Ganapathi, General Secretary of the CPI (M), has said: “We shall spread the struggle against the State everywhere and strive to win over the broad masses to the side of the people’s cause. We shall fight the State offensive by mobilizing the masses more militantly against the police...”\[40\] Their ultimate goal is to expand guerilla war to mobile war as they develop the guerilla army into a regular army.

In some States CPI (M) cadres have gained sponsors, allies, and partners among the elected political leadership, local traders, and industry. \[41\] Much of this has come through a history of threats and violence. This influence could be the springboard from jungle to urban areas.
Violence

Maoists continue to operate with a large degree of freedom of movement and security. During the high profile Chhattisgarh state elections in April 2009, some sixty companies of CRPF were deployed to suppress Maoist interference. Embarrassingly, the rebels seized an express passenger train and held over 700 hostages for several hours.[42] Government forces could not respond before the Maoist chose to release them. In April 2010 the Maoists targeted paramilitary forces, killing 75 CRPF personnel in a spectacular ambush.[43] In May 2011 in the state of Chhattisgarh, 25 security personal were killed in a Maoist attack.[44]

Government forces continue to announce the killing and capture of Maoist leaders and cadre. In each incident of violence, initiated by the insurgents or government forces, civilians are killed, wounded or put at risk. Attrition and buildup of forces continues on both sides.

Army Involvement

The Army of India has avoided involvement in the many police actions across the vast nation. The Armed Forces Special Security Act enables the use of the National Army in Jammu / Kahsmir and the Assam rebellion. Now the Army has started counterinsurgency training right in the heart of the Maoist-liberated area. The Chhattisgarh district of Bastar has seen Maoist violence for decades.[45] Now regular Army units will conduct counterinsurgency training in the district.[46] The government of India has announced that the brigade in training may fire in self-defense if attacked by Maoists.[47]

Some Indians are concerned that the government will use the Army against the Maoists under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958 (AFSPA).[48] Once an area has been declared “disturbed” and the act invoked, Armed Forces have a writ to use deadly force, arrest without warrant, and to enter and search property.[49] The CPI (M) has long anticipated the introduction of the Indian Army into the struggle.

Potential Futures

The Maoist – Naxalite Movement has smoldered across central India for decades. Occasionally its fervor has been quenched and cadres decimated by violent and deadly government action.[50] After years in the wilderness, the CPI (M) is now lean and strong, gazing out from the jungles to a promised land of the growing Indian working class. If the Maoist movement continues to expand its operations and influence in the forests and villages of India, they will return with vigor to the cities and the workers there.

The currently increased government pressure of paramilitary direct action and policing serves to increase recruiting by the PLGA and bring more weapons into their arsenal. Lack of coordination between States and among all government forces allows the Maoists freedom of movement and sanctuary.[51]

Commercial interests are eager to move ahead with the mining, construction, manufacture, and largesse they are experiencing.[52] Governments, both national and State, are committed to assisting that development, but millions of people must be displaced and dealt with to allow this, and it is exactly this displacement that will provide the Maoists a sea in which to swim.

The introduction of the Indian Armed Forces into the districts of Chhattisgarh and affected states would bloody the Maoists badly. Yet the social costs of collateral damage and the sheer level of destruction could change the domestic political climate in unknown ways.

So what potential futures are there?

1. The central government continues to pour money and material into the affected States to address the
Naxal problem. This money continues to be diverted, pilfered, and misused by government agents at each level. State governments pick their own path of negotiation and policing. The Maoists, in turn, continue to expand by use of sanctuary, recruitment, and collusion with industry and State.

2. The central government uses the Armed Forces to crush the Maoist cadre and PLGA. The chaos of this conflict amongst the Adivasis and poor villagers creates a movement of concern in the Indian liberal and middle class that disrupts current political alignments. The constant call of the CPI (M) party for “all democratic, patriotic forces, national liberation activists and to all civil rights activists, organizations, students, intellectuals, teachers, writers, artistes, doctors, lawyers, media friends, workers and peasants to come out on the streets…”[53] may fall on sympathetic ears.

3. The central government uses all means necessary to crush the Maoists and accelerate the development of mining, manufacture, and power production. The middle class sees this as a necessary step in the movement to superpower status and the expansion of modernity to the nation.

The government of India has proclaimed this Naxalite – Maoist movement to be the greatest threat to national security. This may become a self-fulfilling propheesy.

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Links:
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