

## The Gravest Threat to India's National Security

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**Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram** has virtually tiptoed over a division between external and internal dangers in designating the Naxalites as the gravest threat to India's national security. "They have declared a war on the Indian state," he told a media conclave in Delhi on March 10. Comparing the Maoism-driven Naxal violence to the jihad-motivated Islamic militancy as the two biggest threats, he rated the former as the more serious. "Jihadi terrorism can be countered, usually successfully, if you are able to share information and act in real time," said Chidambaram. "But Maoism is an even graver threat." Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had previously described the Naxalites as the biggest *internal* threat to India's security leaving open an implication that a greater *external* danger was posed by the Pakistan-based jihadi militants, like those who committed the first-ever act of terror by foreigners looking for foreigners on Indian soil in Mumbai on 26 November 2008. Made months earlier than Chidambaram's, the Prime Minister's comments came amidst an intense public debate over India's preparedness to meet the multiple threats to its national security at the onset of the second decade of the 21st century.

The Indian security establishment stepped into the 21st century with a hangover from a military confrontation with Pakistan on the snowy Kargil in November 1999. Almost to date in 2009, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh alerted a combined conference of the chiefs of army, navy and air force that Indian troops should be "trained to fight anywhere, anytime and under any conditions." Around the same time, strategic doctrine planners and operational field commanders assembled in a closed-door brainstorming session with security policy analysts to debate if India should revisit its voluntary commitment to a No First Use of nuclear weapons policy to meet the double jeopardy of a reported increase in Pakistan's minimum nuclear deterrent and the incremental conditions being attached to its No First Use pledge by China. By December last year, General Deepak Kapoor, Commander in Chief of the 1.13 million person Indian army, reported "a major leap" with a cold start strategy to go to war promptly on the two fronts of Pakistan and China within 96 hours of a red alert as compared to the 25 days taken by the Indian army to mobilize at the border in 2003 after a foiled terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament by Pakistani nationals whose dead bodies were never claimed. Throughout the last year and in early 2010, Defense Minister A.K. Anthony repeatedly called attention to "the hostile security environment" to announce the biggest-ever single hike in the country's defense budget: by 25% in 2009 followed by another 10% in 2010. The Indian public and media mostly accepted or endorsed what they heard.

Be it in the lingering threat of another military confrontation with Pakistan over the mostly undefined Line of Control; the jihadi militancy in Jammu and Kashmir and its sporadic incidence elsewhere; the dozen on-again, off-again insurgencies in India's North East; the expanding reach of renewed Naxalite violence; or a risk of nuclear blackmail, terrorism now looms larger than ever before in public perceptions of grave threats to Indian national security. In addressing those concerns, a pledge document of the Ministry of Home Affairs commits itself to treat terrorism as "a challenge that any responsible government must address *on a war footing*" (emphasis added).

Using force simultaneously to defeat both the external and internal dangers of terrorism is central to this pledge by the Congress party led United Political Alliance (UPA) government. And for now the UPA has accorded its highest priority to overpowering the Naxalites violence as a *threat* that is already here while raising its military capabilities to defeat the *danger* of Jihadi militancy.

With terror as a tool of combat to wage a war against the state on behalf of the country's marginalized people, the 43-year old Naxalites violence is driven by a Maoist ideological commitment to armed revolution. In an unusual public disclosure of the nature and intensity of the Naxalite threat today, Chidambaram says that the Naxalites have a presence in 200 of India's 626 districts, are capable of striking in 84 districts and virtually dominate 34 districts. Insiders familiar with the government's counter-Naxal strategy estimate that starting with less than 300, the permanent armed cadre of the Naxalites has grown into a force of nearly 40,000 with 100,000 militia members who control a "Red Corridor" consisting mainly of dense forests stretching from West Bengal to the border of Nepal. Indian security officials believe that the Naxalites plan to expand their activities into major cities including Mumbai and Kolkata. Since 1998, they have killed about 7,500 people according to government figures with close to a 1000 in a single year in 2009. As compared to the earlier attacks, mostly on the state police and state run means of transport like railways, they are targeting schools, public buses and primary health care centers. Among their most gruesome recent acts of terror was beheading a primary school teacher for being an informer in view of a traumatized class full of school children in a remote village in West Bengal. Shortly thereafter they faced condemnation by an enraged crowd before they let go an express train detained by them in route to Delhi from Jharkhand.

Acknowledging that Naxalite violence is an outcome of poverty in some tribal regions that remain "the poorest of the poor because the nation's development activities did not yet reach them," Prime Minister Manmohan Singh upholds a holistic approach to Naxalism with a promise of investing more national economic and political energies to end the alienation of the people. "But observance of the law of the land would be a precondition to any social and economic development. The Maoists can't be taking the law of the land into their own hands," he warned as the Indian government initiated its largest ever security operation in all the Naxalite strongholds in November 2009. By March 2010, Home Minister Chidambaram expressed his confidence that the government would defeat the Naxalites within two to three years and accept no "ifs, buts" and conditions for peace talks with their leaders unless they renounced violence. "We are confident that before the term of UPAn (the Government's second term) ends, we will get rid of Naxals and will have considerably strengthened our security to face any threat," he said.

In all the years since the first Maoist uprising in 1967 by peasants in the village of Naxalbari in West Bengal, the Indian government has never before given itself a deadline to defeat the Naxalites by force. Nor was there another time when a security operation simultaneously aimed at the strongholds of Naxal presence in 8 of the 28 states in the Indian federation, including the most densely populated and severely affected West Bengal. Hitherto handled mostly by the governments of the states where they were active, the Naxalites now are confronting a federally-led swoop whereby the central government is assisting state governments with paramilitary forces, intelligence sharing and technical help. Referred to as Operation Green Hunt by the media, the fighting core of the ongoing security operation is estimated to consist of 40,000

paramilitary personnel, several thousand state police forces from the affected states, along with 7,000 commandos especially trained in jungle warfare. The operation is focused on the worst Naxal-affected sectors in the adjoining states of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Orissa and West Bengal. A multi-million dollar plan for the districts dominated by Naxalites is in the offing in parallel with the security operation.

Indian military forces are not engaged in fighting the Naxalite threat and remain wary of getting involved. "Decision would have to be taken at the highest level," said Air Chief Prasanna Vasant Naik in December 2009 referring to the Indian political leadership as the ultimate authority. He was reacting to media speculation over whether the Indian Air Force (IAF) was being authorized to strike back after the Naxalites had fired at an IAF plane in Chhattisgarh. "Conditions under which my air crew are going to fire are very very stringent. We put up a set of Rules of Engagement, RoE, as it is called. And these RoE are very very stern. No excessive force, no collateral damage, positive assurance, positive identification, only then," he said after a meeting with Chidambaram and the Cabinet Committee on Security that considered authorizing the IAF to "take adequate counter-measures to protect its choppers and pilots from Naxal attacks." Chidambaram subsequently invited Naxalite leaders for talks within 72 hours of their renunciation of violence. A ping-pong of peace offers has ensued in the months since with a 72 days ceasefire overture by a Naxal leader who had previously ignored Chidambaram's call.

In February this year, Koteswara Rao - known as Kishanji - offered to renounce violence between February 25 to May 7 if the government agreed to his pre-conditions. A demand for the release of four Communist Party of India-Maoist politburo members; a call for government security forces to stop their operation; and an appeal to "intellectuals and human rights organizations and mass organizations to mediate between the two sides" were among the conditions first put forward and then replaced one after another by Kishanji. The government let pass the February 23 deadline without reacting. It has instead made its offer of peace talks conditional not merely on a Naxalite renunciation of violence but actually laying down their weapons. Close to 100 of the Naxalite leaders have been captured within the last two months as compared to a dozen taken into custody over the last decade.

Insiders privy to homeland security plans share Chidambaram's confidence about defeating the Naxalites before the national elections in 2013, not only because of a very determined and extremely well coordinated security operation without precedent. The Naxalites are also losing the battle for the hearts and minds of the Indian peasantry that has been both their political base and the major source of manpower as well as fighting cadres. Without any clearly spelled-out political agenda, the Naxalites' mostly agrarian political appeal rested upon putting the peasantry in a category separate from the other under-privileged sectors of society including the backward classes. With a 60% electoral turnover the national elections in 2009 however, saw more peasants voting along the natural bonds of their caste rather than the ideological affinities of their class. "A thin stratum of rich peasantry, a bulky presence of middle class peasantry and a sizeable number of poor peasants now distinguish the peasantry as a class from the other backward classes," says Javeed Alam, a long standing activist in and a critical observer of the emerging predicament of leftist politics in India (1).

Since 1971, when they were reported to have been approached by China to support Pakistan during the Bangladesh War of Liberation with the assistance of the Indian Army, the Naxalites got mixed ideological and scant material support from the 30-odd splinter groups of the Communist Party Marxist-Leninist CPI (ML), which broke away from the Communist Party Marxist CPI(M) in 1969. During its thirty-years rule in West Bengal, making it the world's longest-running democratically elected communist government, the CPI (M)- led Left Front did little either to meet Naxal demands for poverty alleviation or to restrain it from resorting to violence in the rest of the country or to draw it into the political process of decision making at the state level. After years of reluctance to do so, the CPI (M) led coalition has asked for direct help from the Central government to crush the Naxal violence by force in West Bengal. The Naxalites have moved a distance from their Maoist supporters in Nepal who successfully contested the national elections in 2009 and are now engaged in drafting a new constitution along with the Nepalese Congress party. Alongstanding supplier of weaponry and training to the Naxalites, the Liberation Tamil Tigers Elam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka was militarily routed last year by President Rajapaksha who got re-elected this year with a clear majority vote including some by the Sri Lankan Tamil population that was the staunchest popular base of LTTE.

Facing heavy odds against continuing the armed struggle and lacking a clear political agenda, the Naxalite violence in India is turning into a threat unto itself with increasing alienation from those on whose behalf it is committed. It need not be so in the world's largest democracy with an open offer for the Naxalites to "disarm, disband and join the political mainstream." Among all the pre-conditions that they put forth this year for renouncing violence, missing is one that would be hard to ignore. The Naxalites should ask the UPA government to commit itself to a two to three year deadline for a more equitable distribution of its promised socio-economic developmental assistance to all the 84 districts under the Naxal influence and not only the 33 districts facing intensified violence. Were the Naxalites to reconsider their hitherto unshakeable avowal of non-participation in the electoral process, such a commitment could be an innovative part of their own political platform to adapt a theoretically rigid division between the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie to the reality of an expanding middle class in India.

Upwardly mobile and robust, its neo-liberalism is seen by some disheartened left front ideologues in India as stealing their socialist agenda while remaining apathetic to their ideology. Counter-insurgency veterans in India proudly proclaim that their objective is not forcibly to resolve the impasse between the government and the insurgents but to persist in confronting the Naxalites until they are willing to negotiate. When the Naxalites are ready, they would need more than insistence upon armed struggle as both an objective and a strategy for the undefined cause they are upholding unless it is to pose the gravest threat to India's national security. Asecuritization of the danger of external terrorism and a criminalization of the threat of internal terrorism, with or without external support is for now on the top of the UPA government's agenda on national security. As a first real time threat to test it out, and unless they opt out of violence to join the political mainstream, the Naxalites are likely to become more of an irritant rather than the gravest obstacle to accomplish that agenda. This could possibly happen sooner than the next general elections when the UPAGovernment would be accountable for its commitment to the entire nation to "get rid of the Naxals."

*(1). Javeed Alam. "Class trapped in Caste: Left's Predicament in India" at the Columbia University conference in New York. April 1, 2010*