
Maoists, Urban Naxals, China and COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities

Introduction

The human race has been brought to a standstill as governments around the world struggle to beat a microscopic peril: COVID-19. And while healthcare systems are overwhelmed by the daily increase in cases, and scientists are working around the clock to find a vaccine, State and non-State actors alike have taken upon themselves to politicize the pandemic, as counterproductive and costly as that is. Taking control of the narrative has unfortunately become a priority, as it is instrumental in shaping the future of a State in a post-pandemic world.

This is something Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in India quickly realized. In the early days of the pandemic, the government took pre-emptive actions to avoid a mass outbreak in the world's second most populous country. The economic repercussions of the pandemic, on top of the consequences of the social upheaval in the last few months of 2019 and national security threats, will prove to be a difficult trial for the prosperity of the world's largest democracy. One such internal threat, that could twist and abuse the pandemic narrative in order to achieve its ultimate aim of overthrowing the Indian government to establish a Communist State, is the largest active Naxalite faction in the country; the CPI-Maoist. Deemed "*the single biggest security challenge ever faced by our country*" in 2006 by then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the CPI-Maoists continue to pose a threat to the integrity of India to this day.

The current socio-political climate and COVID-19 might be exploited by the Maoists to expand from their established rural bases into urban areas. The social turmoil and protests that erupted in the wake of the Citizenship Amendment Act in late 2019, saw the Maoists increasing their spread of anti-government propaganda in urban areas. As the insurgents have decades of experience in manipulating the woes of what they consider to be "*oppressed*" minorities and formulating narratives that draw on animosity towards the government, recent developments could be fabricated to the Maoists' advantage in a similar fashion to increase their foothold in urban areas.

This has led to the coining of the term *Urban Naxals*, used to describe suspected Maoist affiliates in the cities and discredit them, in order to halt the Maoists' influence outside rural areas. However, the politicization of this term, especially by media outlets, could prove to undermine the real threat of Maoist advancement in India's urban and developed regions.

A Brief History of the CPI-Maoists

As explained in EFSAS Study Paper, '[A Historical Introduction to Naxalism in India](#)', the Naxalite movement started after the Naxalbari uprising of 1967, where members of the newly formed Communist Party of India- Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML), a breakaway faction

from the politically mainstreamed Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), led peasants against land reforms that would place greater power in the hands of land owners. The rebellion was crushed by the Indian Central Reserve Police Force in 1971, after a 45-day intervention known as Operation Steeplechase, and members of the movement, known as Naxalites, were forced to go underground. However, in the late 90s, splintered Naxalite groups began dialogues and negotiations to renew the movement, only this time in a more structured fashion. This resulted in the merger of the two biggest and most active Naxalite groups, the People's War Group and the Maoist Communist Center in 2004. Together, they became the Communist Party of India-Maoists (CPI-Maoists).

The CPI-Maoists have since been conducting what they call a *"protracted people's war"* in Central and Eastern Indian states. Maoist factions control pockets of territory in underdeveloped areas that are not easily accessed and where the State has little reach and cannot enforce the rule of law. In these areas, that have infamously been dubbed the *Red Corridor*, the group conducts its insurgency through guerilla tactics that strongly depend on the support of the tribal populations that inhabit these forest-dense regions. The Adivasis (an umbrella term that englobes various tribal groups) are a valuable asset for the Naxalites, as they are amongst the most alienated minorities and are currently under threat of expulsion from their ancestral lands due to infrastructure development projects. The Naxalites have skillfully manipulated this vulnerability into animosity towards the Indian government, to secure bases and civilian support for their movement. To quote its doctrine: *"The people are the eyes and ears of the army; they feed and keep our soldiers. It is they who help the army in sabotage and in battle. The people are the water and our army the fish"*.

For the past 16 years, the Maoists have concentrated their strategy on the rural, isolated parts of India and on propaganda content that would appeal to rural and tribal populations, such as alleged atrocities committed by the local police, unwanted development work, and the *"destructive"* activities of mining companies and road contractors. Yet, metropolises and urban areas have been part of the group's expansion strategy since its inception. In fact, the group published a document titled *"Urban Perspective"* in 2004, which establishes a focus on gaining well-educated leadership from urban areas. This is important for the Maoists, as its urban movement could supply not only leadership, but expertise and logistical support as well. The Maoist doctrine aims to rally the masses and as such, gaining sympathy from urban populations falls in line with their ideology. Moreover, their urban strategy is designed to target religious minorities, as to create a united front against Hindu nationalists and polarize society. Since the Maoists have recognized that establishing bases in major cities could not be as advantageous for them as establishing bases in tribal areas, considering the government's strong and active presence in such places, their strategy highlights that their urban movement should be primarily used for recruitment, logistical support and infiltration into white-collar agencies and the army.

The success rate of the Maoists' recruitment in the cities will heavily depend on the group's ability to gather enough support from urban populations. As they have already incurred heavy losses in their rural base areas, and urban areas are the epicenters of the government's presence and rule of law, it remains to be seen whether Maoists have the strength and means to diffuse their ideology in industrialized and developed environments, which are the antithesis of their bases in the Red Corridor.

Urban Naxals

In the past few years, the term Urban Naxals has increasingly been used by officials and media outlets, however it still remains heavily debated, and conflicting reports in regard to its meaning and origin cloud the term in confusion and uncertainty. Media outlets claim the term is used precisely to designate the legal persons in urban areas who provide support to Naxalite factions, and by doing so commit crimes under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). Yet, some reports claim that the term is being used to designate dissenting opinions and activities. Despite the debate, one thing is evident from the Maoists' published document, *"Urban Perspective"*, that the group has been focusing on urban areas for at least the past two decades and Urban Naxals are, whether in big or small numbers, indeed a reality.

One event that seems to have intensified the sparks of the Urban Naxal debate is the 2018 Bhima-Koregaon violence. January 1st of that year marked the 200 years anniversary of the Battle of Koregaon. This day is annually observed by Dalits, the members of the lowest social group in the Hindu caste system, as it marked their victory over Baji Rao II, the ruler of the state and a member of the Brahmin (highest) caste. The event is highly significant in Dalit history, and is often echoed by Dalit-right advocates, as this community still faces instances of segregation and discrimination.

However, the bicentenary celebrations were marked by clashes deeply rooted in historical tension, as the Dalits who won the battle were part of the East India Company troops. Thus, some opposed the commemoration, considering it anti-national. While the investigation first led to the arrest of two men associated with Hindu nationalist movements, the police then started looking into Maoist involvement. In August 2018, five prominent civil rights activists were arrested under several provisions of the UAPA and accused of having alleged links with the banned CPI-Maoist, conspiring to assassinate Prime Minister Narendra Modi and planning to overthrow the government. At the arrest hearing for three of the accused, the public prosecutor, Ujjwala Pawar, accused the activists of being Urban Naxals. She told the court: *"The word 'urban Naxal' is not defined. But the way they have been using pen drives and gadgets to spread their agenda can be the right definition of the term"*.

This arrest made national headlines, and inspired protests in New Delhi. Furthermore, the CPI-Maoists put up banners condemning the arrest of the activists for their alleged role in the clashes, appealing for their immediate and unconditional release and criticizing the government for labelling the activists as Maoists to deprive them of their rights. This move could have been perceived as criticism on the undefined and unclear definition of Urban Naxals, but is likely to be seen as a confirmation of the activists' guilt.

The fact that the media is sometimes quick in readily and irresponsibly applying the term Urban Naxals, could potentially aggravate such situations. Firstly, such headlines distribute nationwide risk creating additional publicity for the Maoists themselves, which they can then use to enhance their own propaganda campaigns to gain more popular support in urban areas. Secondly, forming an amalgamation between those who protest against government policies, and subversive insurgent groups such as the CPI-Maoists, risks undermining real security threats.

Using national issues to expand urban support

As mentioned previously, Maoists used to focus their propaganda material on issues that affected Red Corridor states, tribal populations, police violence and development projects. However, the Maoists have increasingly begun targeting sensitive national issues. In the wake of the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in late 2019, the Maoists did not refrain from expressing themselves on these matters. A statement made on 7 March heavily criticized the ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and accused them of oppressing various Indian minority groups, such as Adivasis, farmers and women. The secretary of Darbha Divisional Committee of the CPI (Maoist), Dandakaranya, known as Sainath, added that: *"By using CAA and NRC, the government has prepared a list of 19 lakh Indians and planning to declare them as non-citizens. A large number of poor people in Assam have been deported to detention centers as they failed to provide documents to prove their citizenship. By bringing in triple talaq (A divorce practice in Islamic law where a man can divorce his wife by pronouncing the word talaq three times) bill, the Modi government pretended to be a benefactor for Muslim women, which is false"*.

The Maoists' addressal of national issues can simply be explained by its desire to expand its support base and consolidate its urban strategy. Furthermore, Indian media outlets have reported that tribal support for the Maoists is faltering due to government offensives and violence on behalf of the Maoists. Thus, the strategy of marking activists as Maoists, which in turn could provoke protests and outrage on behalf of ordinary citizens, is counterproductive if the Maoists are indeed using social upheaval as a pathway towards urban centers. The media's reporting must remain proportionate and responsible, as to avoid backlash and playing into the Maoists' hands.

The COVID-19 narrative

The Maoists now have another element to add to their anti-government narrative: COVID-19. In an open letter dated 13 April, the Maoists not only criticized the central government for imposing the lockdown as it disturbed the lives of migrant workers and daily wagers, but also designated the United States (US) as the root cause of COVID-19, and not China. The letter claimed that: *"Coronavirus has been created by imperialist countries like America. Destroying the imperialists is the only way to eliminate coronavirus"*. The letter went on to call Prime Minister Modi a puppet of the United States, especially after India allowed the export of hydroxychloroquine (an anti-malaria used in some anecdotal cases to treat the Coronavirus) following the implied threat of retaliation by US President Donald Trump if India did not lift the ban on export of hydroxychloroquine. Police officials claim that the letter was sent to lift the morale of Maoist cadres and point fingers at the government, since the CPI-Maoists' supply of food and medicine is impeded due to the lockdown.

Naturally, the CPI-Maoists are not the only organization to use COVID-19 to their advantage. Islamist terror organizations, such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda, have claimed in online publications that the virus is God's wrath upon the West. The Taliban is using the Coronavirus as an opportunity to portray themselves as a more competent leading authority than the Afghan government, notably by disseminating propaganda videos where Taliban fighters can be seen distributing hand sanitizer and conducting door-to-door temperature checks. Right-wing extremist groups are capitalizing on the pandemic and using it to fuel

anti-migrants and anti-minorities discourses; there has been a surge in anti-Asian hate crimes in both Europe and the United States since the start of the virus. Despite their drastically opposing ideologies, these three forms of extremist groups - religious, far-right and far-left - seem to have found a common ground in that the Coronavirus is revealing all the faults and vulnerabilities of their enemies.

Considering that the nature of the pandemic is that of national interest, it is yet another issue that the Maoists can use to attract urban populations. Urban support is more important than ever for the Maoists, as they cannot hope to keep their support bases in rural areas if they, as well as the government, are no longer able to provide basic needs to tribal populations. Hundreds of urban migrant workers who found themselves out of a job once the lockdown began, are attempting to return to their villages. While special trains to repatriate workers were operated at first, not all were able to find tickets and as such attempted to return home through other means, including by foot. As the lockdown in India is being extended, orchestrating clashes between law enforcement and residents could well be part of the Maoists' strategy.

Post-Pandemic Perspectives

The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic present extensive public health, social, economic and political challenges on its own, for India and every other affected country. India's fight against the Maoist insurgency, including the Urban Naxals and the exploitation of the government's management and response of the pandemic by Maoist groups, is a viable menace to the country and another front on which the government has to expand counter-insurgency efforts.

As evoked above, publicly condemning opposing voices as Urban Naxals not only creates national and mainstream media attention for the Maoists, but also undermines potent threats and risks causing more social upheavals in response. In the long run, the loose and unserious use of the serious phenomenon of Urban Naxals will only prove to be detrimental. As such, it should be defined, de-politicized, and used only in the case of concrete evidence, and be dealt with as a weighty national security threat.

Maintaining social stability and addressing the woes of minorities in a constitutional fashion will demonstrate India's ability to act in accordance with democratic values, and as such reaffirm its position at the world stage and among Western powers. This will be highly relevant in the wake of the pandemic, as the international community will seek to uplift the economy, and China has fallen out of favor with major Western nations for its lack of transparency and misleading information in the early days of the Covid-19 outbreak. As explained in EFSAS commentary, '[A faltering China presents opportunities that India and other democracies can capitalize upon](#)', Western nations could be looking to divert investments towards countries like India, once the situation is stabilized. India, a democracy, as opposed to China, an autocracy, is likely to gain the favor from Western governments and multinational companies in a post-pandemic world.

India does not have the logistical infrastructure to compete with China, but an influx of Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) could slightly tip the scales in New Delhi's favor. However, the Maoists are infamous for disrupting and destroying infrastructure developments, such

as that of the mining and telecommunications industry. Increased international cooperation and development that sustain a capitalist model will surely irk the CPI-Maoists.

New Delhi needs to play its cards in a fashion that does not invite confrontation with Beijing. The Indian government has for years suspected China of providing support to the CPI-Maoists and in case China were to seriously consider India as a threat to its economy and influence in Asia, which the border clashes of last week might suggest, Beijing could flex its muscles by providing enough support to the Maoists to cause an increase in insurgent activity in India to discourage foreign investments. China, having a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, could also use its veto to impede Indian interests. As such, finding a peaceful and inclusive solution to put an end to the Maoist insurgency is a tactical and strategic priority if India wants to present itself as an alternative *“Factory of the world”*.

Despite the suspicions of support from Beijing, the CPI-Maoists’ ideological ties to China have evolved in such a way that the former can no longer idealize the latter. In September 2018, the CPI-Maoists published a document titled *“China’s Social Imperialism”*, which clearly showed that the successors of Mao Ze Dong were not held in high regard. The group called out the Chinese Communist Party for *“integrating itself in the global capitalist-imperialist order”*, denounced it as the *“enemy of working-class movements across the world”* and strongly condemned China’s *“imperialist tendencies”* for resource extraction and political interference in Third World countries. The CPI-Maoists have founded their insurgency on the narrative of minority rights, emancipation and equality and China, on the other hand, is increasingly targeting minority groups, such as the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and imposing stricter authoritarian laws to prevent dissent, such as in Hong Kong. As such, it would be inconsistent to the level of discreditation if the CPI-Maoists were to align themselves ideologically with the modern regime of the Chinese Communist Party. As such, any China-Maoist relation would appear to be based on pragmatism and opportunism and less on any political or ideological basis, which is explained by the fact that the Maoists’ failure to become a mainstream political party, on the contrary to the original branches of the Indian Communist movement, has isolated them as there are few remaining Communist regimes who have withstood the global capitalist model.

The Maoist insurgency has been active for five decades, and is unlikely to disappear overnight. While it is important to note that Chinese involvement with Maoists is founded on pragmatism and opportunism, the interesting observation is that China’s current beleaguered position with its dubious role in the COVID-19 outbreak, the escalating confrontation with the US and other Western countries, the Taiwan and Hong Kong underbellies and the South China Sea issue, have all resulted in a changed geopolitical environment and anti-China sentiments that present opportunities that India can capitalize upon – domestically and regionally.

