

THE MAOISTS ARE STILL A THREAT

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The road in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh where 10 jawans and a civilian were killed in an attack, allegedly carried out by the Maoists. | Photo Credit: AFP

On April 26, 10 personnel of the District Reserve Guard (DRG) and a civilian driver were killed in a blast, which the police said was caused by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) planted by Maoists, near Aranpur village in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh. The blast occurred some six months before the Assembly elections, and amid claims by the government that the Maoist insurgency has waned. The DRG personnel were returning in a van after carrying out an anti-Maoist operation based on a tip-off, which could have been a trap. The IED was planted underneath the metalled surface of the road. It is not clear whether it was deployed the night before the attack or months earlier, when the road was under construction.

While it is a fact that the Maoists have been on the back foot for some time, to dismiss their capability to strike at will, especially in their stronghold, would be a mistake. A strike such as the one carried out on April 26 cannot be the brainchild of a local Maoist unit; it is highly likely that this was a trap laid out under the directions of the Maoist Central Committee, indicating the sustained hierarchy of the Maoists. The primary motive seems to be to send out a message of 'continued control' by the guerrillas.

This attack, like many of the proscribed group's previous attacks, was carried out during the tactical counter-offensive campaign — the period between February and June every year when the Maoists carry out maximum attacks against security forces. Out of a total of 17 major strikes in Chhattisgarh (2010-2023), two were carried out in February, four in March, six in April, two in May, and one each in June, November and December. The data clearly point to a pattern that should give the government enough leads to plan its strategy. Most importantly, it is imperative that the security forces remain extra cautious during the months of the tactical counter-offensive campaign by strictly adhering to standard operating procedures and protocols, which seem to have been blatantly flouted during the unfortunate strike on April 26.

It is widely acknowledged that effective policing in insurgency-affected regions is the function of a strong State police force, and that Central police forces ought to supplement and not supplant the State police. According to data of the Bureau of Police Research and Development, there are many vacancies in the State police forces. As on January 1, 2021, the share of vacancies in State police cadres in left wing extremism-affected States was 24.41%, which adversely affects the police-population ratio. It is hoped that this number has improved over the last couple of

years. Without comprehensive transformation of the State police, Central forces would achieve little beyond random and, at times, 'misplaced killings.'

In the context of employing local tribal youth for the DRG, a few facets are ignored. First, the local youth, when armed, often get a false sense of empowerment and land in feuds with the Maoists. Such belligerence is due to familiarity by virtue of belonging to the same ecosystem as the Maoists. During the April 26 incident, the intelligence network of the DRG was outclassed by that of the Maoists. Second, the DRG needs to be employed in a controlled manner by the State police. Security should not be simply outsourced to them. The DRG personnel, in this case, seem to have acted independently, exposing their ad-hoc planning. Third, although the combat-worthiness of the DRG is beyond doubt, it is not complemented by the rigour of discipline, which is an imperative quality for troops in any protracted counter-insurgency campaign. The track record of the DRG regarding discipline is not too encouraging, with many of the cadres having been cashiered on disciplinary grounds and some having been found to be involved in crime.

The Maoist space is constantly shrinking. However, treating this incident as an act of desperation would be an exercise in complacency. Delving deep into the roots of this festering wound would be the key to success. The incident calls for a deeper reflection on the discontent and dispossession of the tribal people of central India, who are in all respects the most disadvantaged of citizens. The government also needs to pay adequate attention to perception management. A case in point is the extensive road construction projects in Bastar. The government says these projects will enhance the reach of the security forces instead of saying that they will ease the lives of the local population. This conveys the wrong message. Also, the futility of the Maoist ideology in current times is not adequately exposed, to weaken the insurgency. Security is no doubt necessary, in tandem with development, but the focus needs to be beyond security and development.

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