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Abstract

Contrary to popular discourse, the threats emanating from the internal security issues pose serious security threats to the Indian state and its people. Faced with numerous internal security challenges, the Indian experience of dealing with them has been a mixed experience. Arguably, no other country has ever faced such multiple internal security threats, in various forms and intensity than the Indian state. While the threat perception emanating from the internal security challenges have de-escalated over the last few years, they refuse to die down. Considering the immediacy of the issue, this paper critically engages with the contemporary internal security challenges that the Indian state encounters. In doing so the paper reflects upon the very process through which each of these internal security threats operates and highlights the nature and the intensity of threat perception. Through providing a conceptual framework, the paper also evaluates the state responses to the internal security issues. The paper limits its scope to four major internal security issues in India: The Left-Wing Extremism (LWE), the violent conflicts in the Northeastern states,

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Separatism and terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), and communal violence and religious radicalisation.

Mapping India's Internal Security: An Introduction

In order to offer a better conceptual framework to 'internal security,' it is important to distinguish it from the ordinary understanding through a 'law-and-order' framework. While scholars find it difficult in coming to a consensus, a widely acceptable definition of internal security was offered by the Commission of Centre-State Relations' report on 'Internal Security, Criminal Justice and Centre-State Co-operation'. This Commission, in the process of engaging with various dimensions of internal security, highlighted the important convergence points with 'National Security' discourse. Stepping away from the conventional understanding which limits the scope of national security to deal with the external threat and economic development, this report makes case for both national and internal security to be addressed from a common platform. According to this report, internal security in India is defined as:

"Security against threats faced by a country within its national borders, either caused by inner political turmoil, or provoked, prompted or proxied by an enemy country, perpetrated even by such groups that use a failed, failing or weak state, causing insurgency, terrorism or any other subversive acts that target innocent citizens, cause animosity between and amongst groups of citizens and communities intended to cause or causing violence, destroy or attempt to destroy public and private establishment".[1]

This definition merits a detailed engagement. An important aspect of this definition is about the larger scope of internal security. Contrary to the binary that we often encounter, it engages with both external and internal issues and stakeholders in understanding the internal security discourse.

Similarly, it doesn't limit the threats only to the state. Rather the threat perceptions to the citizens and to the communities are very much accommodated. This definition goes on to distinguish between insurgency and terrorism. The Western scholarship mostly understands terrorism and insurgency from a common platform. The use of 'irregular army'[2] in carrying out militant activities, among many other factors, is considered as commonality between the two. Often used interchangeably, insurgencies and acts of terrorism offer different connotations. Insurgencies are consciously planned violent political movements wherein the non-ruling parties tries to dislodge the ruling regime through acts of violence.

Going by this understanding, the Maoist conflict in India can be called as an insurgency. Similarly, few of the militant groups operating in the Northeastern states also can be called as insurgents. Terrorism, on the other hand, at least in the Indian context, has always been understood and engaged through the prism of external actors/countries. The role of Pakistan indirectly supporting and sustaining the terror activities in India hardly finds a miss in understanding and engaging with the issue of terrorism. More importantly, the acts of resorting to terror methods are a commonality between the insurgents, militants, and the terrorists. Despite this commonality, these groups depart from each other in terms of their ideology, objectives and the nature of stakeholders involved. In the Indian context, the dimension of irregular army as a commonality between insurgency and terrorism does not fit well. The insurgent groups like the Maoists continue to carry out their militant activities through a regular (if not a conventional) army. Functioning through an irregular army may be a truism to the terrorist groups.

Along with insurgency and terrorism, the subversive acts perpetrated by the communal and criminal groups also pose serious internal security threats. In this context, one would find it difficult to extricate internal security threats either from criminal activities[3] or from the ordinary law-and-order problem. For example, the potential roles of petty cases of bank

robbery or an inter-personal fight between two individuals belonging to different religions in contributing to terror financing and communal riots cannot be diluted. In the Indian context, we often tend to overlook converge these issues in addressing the internal security challenges. A cohesive internal security discourse, therefore, would address the threats as nation-wide, threats to the state as well as to the citizens and should also take in account both the internal and external factors in addressing the threat. It is through the prism of this cohesive internal security discourse; this paper reflects upon the following four major internal security challenges in India.

Left-wing Extremism: The Largest Internal Security Threat?

The Left-wing Extremism or the Maoist insurgency led by the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-Maoist), is arguably the largest internal security threat in India as once declared by the former Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh. Starting from the Naxalbari areas of West Bengal state in 1967, the Maoist insurgency has evolved through various forms and shades. The Maoist insurgency is mostly engaged through two dominant positions,[4] one supporting the so-called revolutionary violence terming it as a fight by the downtrodden and under-privileged for their rights and entitlements and the other rejects the violent movement terms them as militants. While the Maoists garner substantial support from the first category, the Indian state rejects the violent movement.

Influenced by the political thoughts of Karl Marx, Lenin, and Mao (as claimed by the Maoists), the Maoists' objective is to seize political power and herald a 'New Democracy' through a protracted armed struggle. In doing so, the Maoists reject the parliamentary and democratic forms of governance in India and term them as a sham. It is through these ideological orientations and the romanticisation of 'revolutionary violence' the Maoists, in their movement in last five decades, have been

able to establish their presence over 180 districts in ten states. However, presently, the spread of the Maoists is claimed to be limited to fewer districts. Over more than five decades of their existence, the Maoist insurgency has caused large scale violence in the areas of their presence posing a direct threat to the Indian state and creating an environment of fear in the minds of common people. The following table offers testimony to this.

Table 1: Fatalities in Maoist Violence: 2004-22 September 2021

Year	Civilians	SFs	Maoists	Not Specified	Total
2004	89	82	87	22	280
2005	259	147	282	24	712
2006	249	128	343	14	734
2007	218	234	195	25	672
2008	183	214	228	19	644
2009	368	334	299	12	1013
2010	628	267	264	20	1179
2011	259	137	210	0	606
2012	156	96	125	1	378
2013	164	103	151	0	418
2014	127	98	121	4	350
2015	90	56	110	0	256
2016	122	60	250	0	432
2017	109	76	150	0	335
2018	108	73	231	0	412
2019	99	49	154	0	302
2020	61	44	134	0	239
2021*	41	48	75	0	164
Total	3330	2246	3409	141	9126

Source: SATP (2021)[5]

Apart from violent activities, the Maoist insurgency poses threats to the state and the people. Wherein, the Maoists by rejecting the democracy and the parliamentary form of governance challenged the sovereignty of the Indian state. The killings of civilians, government officials and the security forces by the Maoists reflect on this aspect of the security threat. In this context terming it as the single largest internal security threat to India makes sense. The Maoist insurgency also poses threats to the common people. The very presence of the Maoists creates an atmosphere of fear in the kinds of the Maoist affected areas. The tribal and other marginalised communities dominated areas of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra, where the presence of the state machinery is relatively limited, the Maoists have taken advantage through their acts of violence to create a fearful atmosphere and garnering support of the local people. Legitimising violence by non-state actors is another serious threat that the Maoists and their over-ground supporters also posethreats to the Indian society and polity. While the state and the Maoists appear to be the most important stakeholders, the role of a certain section of the intelligentsia in legitimising the Maoists, hence an important stakeholder, should not be overlooked.

In terms of responding to the threats posed by the Maoist insurgency, the Indian state has taken multiple measures. The twin-track approach-security and development- has been the dominant response. The security approach[6] derives its rationale from the fact that the Indian state terms the Maoists as an armed group and hence, a counter-insurgency measure has been adopted to minimise the violence and threat perception. The deployment of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) in the Maoist affected areas along with the security forces by the respective states have been successful in minimizing the Maoist activities. Similarly, the development response by the Indian state is primarily aimed to win away from the support of the local people from the Maoists. Arguably, the erstwhile Planning Commission of India's report on 'Development Challenges in

the Extremist Affected Areas'[7] has been a reference point towards the Indian state's development initiatives. Measures such as Integrated Action Plan (now Central Assistance Scheme) in the worst affected districts, Security Related Expenditure, Road construction initiatives have been initiated with a motive to develop the areas and, secondly to address the grievances of the local people to win them away from the Maoists. Along with the security and development responses, the present regime has also initiated a policy of 'ensuring the rights and entitlements of the local communities' as a response to fighting the Maoists. The long-standing grievances of the local communities in the forms of demands over land and forest rights are addressed.

It is through the above-mentioned responses; the successive governments have been able to contain the Maoists substantially. At present, the Maoists are limited to a few pockets of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra. As one can observe a substantial fall in the Maoist related violent incidents, several leaders of the former have been either neutralised or arrested. To this extent, the threat perception emanating from the Maoist insurgency has been contained, but the threat, though on a much smaller scale, refuse to die down. Though there has been a lesser number of violent incidents by the Maoists, the banned outfit under the new leadership, Namballa Keshava Rao, alias Basavaraj as their General Secretary and Madvi Hidma as the chief of military affairs have been targeting the security forces through surprise attacks. Ever since Basavaraj has taken over the leadership, the Maoists have carried out four major attacks in the last two years. On 1 May 2019, the Maoists killed fifteen security force personnel in Gadchiroli district. Earlier on 9 April 2019, the Maoists attacked the convoy of Chhattisgarh BJP MLA Bhima Mandavi, killing the MLA and two others just before the first phase of the general election. Through these attacks, the new leadership wants to scotch the growing understanding that the Maoist movement is on its last legs.[8] Considering the protractive nature of the Maoist

insurgency and lessons from the history, the state response to this security threat should not take delinquent approach.[9] While the state responses, so far, have been effective against the Maoists, the very presence of the latter highlights the gaps in the policy framework. Along with the above-mentioned responses, the government should also think of investing in public perception management which would help in delegitimising the movement and its supporters in the intellectual circles. The government should also think of engaging in a peace talk and negotiation with the Maoists. Since the ideological contestation is an important factor in this violent conflict, a dialogue between two parties would help dilute the threat perception.

Militancy and Ethnic Conflict in the Northeast

The long-standing militancy and violent ethnic conflicts in some of the Northeastern states have been a serious internal security concern for the Indian state. Contrary to a dominant position that conceptualises the violence and conflicts as 'freedom struggle' against the 'homogenizing state'[10], most of these conflicts are often guided by distorted sentiments overshadowing the realistic issues. Rightfully, the Standing Committee of the MHA puts these conflicts in three broad categories: Separatist insurgencies demanding independence; autonomist insurgencies asserting sub-regional aspirations; and intra-ethnic conflicts among dominant and smaller tribal groups.[11] Among other factors, aggressive assertion of identity and sense of alienation among the dominant as well as the minority ethnic groups in various states have contributed to the long-lasting militancy in some states in Northeast. The historical roots of alienation induced by the failure of the colonial rule to integrate these states with 'mainland' India continue to be there in some form or the other. The political elites of the Northeastern states have often integrated the economic backwardness and insufficient political representation with this sense of alienation. Moreover, the internal conflicts between

the dominant and the minority groups often blame the Indian state as a common enemy and hold the latter responsible. Apart from these, the external implications on the internal conflicts and militancy, in terms of sustaining them and providing them safe houses in their territories, have been an important factor. While in the last few years the levels of violence have come down drastically, still a number of militant groups (though very small in sizes) and the inter and intra ethnic conflicts refuse to die down. The following table highlights the violent incidents and fatalities in the Northeastern states of the last decade.

Table 2: Fatalities in Militancy in Northeast (January 1, 2011-22 September 2021)

Year	Civilians	SFs	Militants	Not Specified	Total
2011	73	31	138	2	244
2012	99	18	216	1	334
2013	95	21	134	2	252
2014	243	22	204	0	469
2015	64	49	163	3	279
2016	63	20	85	0	168
2017	35	13	58	1	107
2018	20	15	38	0	73
2019	18	5	11	0	34
2020	5	5	17	0	27
2021*	11	3	31	0	45
Total	**726**	**202**	**1095**	**09**	**2032**

Source: SATP (2021)[12]

The nature of security threats that emanates from the militancy and ethnic conflict is multi-fold. First, the separatist militant groups like the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN)[13] in Nagaland-both the factions, Isak Muivah and the Kahplang, challenge the sovereignty of the Indian state. Similarly, the United Liberation Front (UNLF)[14] of Manipur also

poses a security threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Indian state. The sub-regional aspirations leading to violent conflicts among the ethnic groups dilutes the democratic and constitutional ethos of India. Moreover, the involvement of bordering states like Myanmar and Bangladesh in harbouring the militant groups is also a serious matter of concern. Apart from the violent incidents, several states of Northeast have been vulnerable to drug and human trafficking. The states like Manipur have particularly been badly affected by illicit drug trafficking[15] across the border. Similarly, the dumping of Chinese goods, through Manipur, in the Northeastern states also poses serious security concerns. The militancy and the ungoverned territories[16] in and around the borderlands of Northeast substantially contribute to the threat to the Indian state.

The state response to these threats has been in four distinct yet integrated ways. They are a security approach in dealing with militancy; ensuring local autonomy through the provisions of Sixth Schedule; peace talks and negotiations with the militant groups; and development measures including special economic packages.[17] This integrated policy framework has proved to be a successful to a great extent. However, some of these responses have had unintended and deleterious consequences as well. A security response to the militancy has brought down the violence drastically (refer to Table 2). Similarly, the sustained peace talks with majority of the prominent militant groups have also yield good results. For example, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) completely disbanded its armed cadres through signing an agreement with the Government in January 2020. Further, in January 2020 hundreds of armed cadres belonging to eight different militant groups including the United Liberation Front of Asom-Independent (ULFA-I) surrendered in Assam. While the peace talks with multiple militant groups offer a good sign, such agreements also create a sense of apprehension and insecurity among the less privileged and minority groups and promote them to take up arms.[18] The emergence of smaller armed groups in the

states of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam is a testimony to the sense of growing insecurities. On the other hand, the competition among the ethnic groups to have dominance over territories and resources alike, also contributes to the sustenance of ethnic conflicts and thereby contributing to the security threats. While the successive governments have been successful to some extent in responding to these security threats, the poor implementation of the cease-fire agreements, the involvement of the militants in criminal activities, indeterminate peace talks are some of the drawbacks in governments' policies in effectively handling the issues. On the external front, Myanmar territory continues to offer safe houses to some of these militant groups. A robust bilateral engagement with Myanmar would potentially offer a solution to this problem.

Separatism and Terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir

The issues of separatism and terrorism in the state of J&K blur the distinction between external and internal aspects of security threats. In fact, it is the combination of the external and the internal dimension that contributes to the security challenges in the J&K. The external dimension emanates from the direct involvement of Pakistan in harbouring and supporting the terrorist groups in its territory and supporting terrorist activities in J&K. The internal dimension of the security threats can be linked to the religious radicalisation wrapped with fig leaf of Kashmir nationalism asserting for separate statehood. This complex interplay of several interconnected issues makes it difficult for the Indian state to deal with the security threats effectively. Some scholars observe that the territorial defensibility of the Indian state, the assertion of Pakistan over the same territory and the aggressive religious-Kashmir nationalism[19] offers a vicious cycle of security challenges for the Indian state. Apart from Pakistan, the role of China in sustaining the conflicts and violence cannot be ruled out. The episodes of the Chinese state issuing loose visas to the people of J&K can be seen as attempts to dilute the sovereignty

of India. Scholars argue that a sustained Kashmir conflict serves the best for the Chinese interest.[20] To this extent, the Chinese state is very much a stakeholder in the Kashmir conflicts along with Pakistan and Pakistan supported terrorist groups.

The nature of security threats emanating from J&K with the involvement of Pakistan, China and the terrorist groups are multifold. The territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Indian state face a direct threat. The rising religious radicalisation among the youth in J&K continues to have negative implications on the secular fabrics of India. The assertion of Islamic fundamentalism has been instrumental for the mass exodus of the Kashmir Pandits from their native place. Moreover, decades long militancy and terrorism in Kashmir also poses a serious threat to human security. Though in the last decade the violence-related incidents and killings have been on a declining path (see the table below), J&K continues to be one of the most volatile states in India.

Table 3: Fatalities in Militancy in J&K
(January 2012 to 22 September 2021)

Year	Civilians	SFs	Militants	Total
2012	19	18	84	121
2013	19	53	100	172
2014	28	47	114	189
2015	19	41	115	175
2016	14	88	165	267
2017	54	83	220	357
2018	86	95	271	452
2019	42	78	163	283
2020	33	56	232	321
2021	19	25	129	173
Total	333	584	1593	2510

Source: SATP (2021)[21]

In the last five years, the security situation in J&K has improved substantially. One can attribute the improvement in security situation to three important factors; identification and elimination of local and foreign terrorists; abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A putting an end to the special status and privileges of the state and implementation of development activities. The elimination of Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) leader Burhan Wani on 8 July 2016, is often cited as a reference point in India's strong action against the militancy and its local support in Kashmir. Since then the security forces have been successful in neutralising several terrorists in J&K, especially post-abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A.

Despite the strong military and police actions against terrorism in J&K, the success against the radicalisation and anti-India sentiment among certain sections of the population needs further actions. So far the radicalisation in Kashmir is concerned, one can witness three threads of narratives: pro-Pakistan, pro-Azadi, and pro-Salafist Islam – with calls for Nizam-e Mustafa, and Khalifat-e Rashida.[22] While the active involvements of the terrorist groups like the HuM, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) in carrying out militancy have come down, the emergence of The Resistance Force (TRF), believed to be an offshoot of LeT,[23] has been responsible in carrying out most of the terrorist activities in Kashmir. Considering the change of guard in the neighbourhood, Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, and the active role of Pakistan in the process, the Indian state should be prepared for any kind of eventualities in the future. The implementation of people-centric development measures, sustained dialogue process with the local stakeholders and a strong security approach would help minimise the security threats that emanate from militancy and terrorism in J&K.

Communalism and Religious Radicalisation

Unlike the above-mentioned issues, identifying the threat perception emanating from communalism is trickier. Communalism, as widely

understood, is conflict between two or more religious groups over secular issues.[24] These conflicts between two religious communities often receive certain political and social acceptance. In the Indian context, it is safe to argue that the communal violence is often socially and politically condoned unless it crosses a certain threshold. The involvement of the socio-political elites in initiating, pursuing, and determining the processes of communalism and the role of communalism in furthering the political objectives of respective groups make it trickier to articulate it around the larger discourse of internal security. While the existing literature engages with communalism through the prism of elections, religious intolerance, and social division, the security threats that it poses to the state and to the people have not been adequately understood. It is important to mention that the MHA also does not factor in communalism/communal riots as one of the internal security issues.[25] However, considering the regular occurrence of communal riots and their implications on religious radicalisation, this paper reflects upon communalism and radicalisation as an internal security issue.

The communal violence and riots in India have their deep root in the history of religious division and disharmony. The country has witnessed multiple communal riots, in various forms and scales, for centuries. While the successive governments claim to contain the communal riots, the last five years witnessed as many as 3399 communal riots (2016-869, 2017-723, 2018-512, 2019-438 and 2020-857)[26] in various parts of India. The communal riots pose a direct threat to the diversity of India.[27] Further, the communal tensions leading to fuelling religious radicalisation is a major security threat to the Indian state. The indoctrination of extreme religious ideologies leading to the radicalisation often finds its source of legitimacy through the communal divide and riots.[28] It has been observed by the scholars that terrorist organisations have shown an affinity to leveraging violence against a particular religious community to recruit and further their activities.[29] To cite an example, the "Voice of Hind", a propaganda

material released by the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) in 2020 makes attempts to indoctrinate and recruit the Indian Muslims through manufacturing fears and grievances owning to the communal divides in the country.[30] We have also the examples of the Indian Mujahideen (IM) operating through taking the advantage of communal divides and riots in India. In the recent past, the role of external actors in fuelling and taking advantage of the Delhi riot and the Anti-CAA protest was highlighted by the security agencies.

While the successive governments have focused more on addressing the communal riots, there is an immediate need to focus more on the security threats that they pose. Merely containing the number of episodes of communal riots offers very limited scope for minimising the security threat. There is a need to investigate how these episodes are used as propaganda in radicalising and recruiting people for terrorism. A De-radicalisation measure directed towards delegitimising the radical ideologies along with strong police action would address the issue better.

Conclusion

The internal security threats in India are complex in nature. Considering this complexity and the role of certain external actors in enhancing the threat perception the response from the Indian state, contrary to criticism by some scholars,[31] has been fairly robust. Containing the Maoist violence to a few pockets of central India, the de-escalation of violent related activities in the Northeastern states and actively pursuing peace talks with several militant groups in Northeast, bringing down the levels of militancy and terrorism in J&K offers testimony to effective internal security strategy of the Indian state. The comprehensive strategy of the Indian state in responding to the internal security issues can be summed up as: a strong security approach; development measures in the affected areas; addressing the grievances by ensuring rights and entitlements; and peace talks with the armed groups. However, in the areas of public perception management

and de-radicalisation of indoctrinated people, the state needs to engage effectively. Similarly, the ongoing peace talks with various militant groups in Northeast need to be expedited to win the trust of the people. The governments of the day should also think of replicating the peace talk models of Northeast in the Maoist affected areas.

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