
India Must End Protracted Conflicts to Create a Stable Environment for Development

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Abstract

India has been suffering from protracted internal armed conflicts in different theatres for the last nearly fifty years. Indigenous and Transnational terrorism, pose a formidable challenge to the country's security. The separatist movement in Jammu & Kashmir, aided and abetted by Pakistan, has forced India to deploy huge security forces in the state. The northeast has been having multiple insurgencies. Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura have all been affected by insurgencies at different periods of time. Nagaland continues to fester. The Maoist movement, which had engulfed large areas of central India, has since been contained to an extent, but it continues to be a major threat. Security forces have generally established their dominance, but the socio-economic dimensions of the problem still remain unresolved and needs to be addressed more comprehensively. The protracted conflicts are essentially due to flaws or lacunae in our doctrinal approach, strategic vision and tactical handling of the challenges. The country must have an internal security doctrine and the security architecture must be completely revamped.

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Introduction

Kautilya wrote in the *Arthashastra* that a state could be at risk from four different kinds of threats—internal, external, externally-aided internal and internally-aided external. The internal security scenario of the country has a mix of all the shades of threats visualised by Kautilya.

The major challenges on the internal security front which have bedevilled the Indian State for a long are the threat from indigenous and transnational terrorism, the separatist movement in J&K aided and abetted by Pakistan; insurgent movements in the north-east; and Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) in the resource-rich Central India. The worrying fact is that protracted conflicts progressively become routine and the focus slowly shifts to the management of conflict rather than the resolution of the conflict. This aspect of national security requires urgent attention since it has serious economic, social, political and security implications.

Protracted Conflicts

The protracted conflicts largely emanate from unresolved social, political and economic grievances of the people. Such conflicts, if not addressed properly and in good time, have a high probability of relapse. The fault lines become platforms for adversaries to interfere and give impetus to the conflict. Insurgencies in the north-east and cross-border terrorism in J&K have been exploited by inimical forces. Allowing such conflicts to simmer for a prolonged period has a heavy cost on the state and civil society. The onus for the resolution of internal security conflicts rests with the government of the day. If the conflicts fester for a longer period, they become that much more complex and difficult to resolve.

Terrorism a National Security Challenge

Indigenous and Transnational terrorism pose a formidable challenge to the security and stability of the country. The terrorists are opposed to the very idea of India and they want to destroy India politically, economically and culturally. According to *Global Terrorism Index, 2022*,¹ India is among the countries which have a “high impact” of terrorism. According to the US State Department Report, India witnessed 679 terror attacks during the year 2020 as compared to 655 in 2019. The largest number of these attacks were in J&K which recorded 257 or 37 per cent of all the terror attacks in the country.²

Al-Qaeda is committed to raising the “flag of jihad” in the sub-continent and bringing back Islamic rule in the region. According to a Committee of the UN Security Council, Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) operates under Taliban protection from Kandahar, Helmand and Nimruz provinces.³

The emergence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in the Middle East and its concept of Caliphate gave a new dimension to the terrorist threat. The Islamic State vowed to expand the organisation’s war against India, citing apocalyptic religious prophecies which talk of a global war. The death of Baghdadi on October 26, 2019, and the subsequent elimination of his successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qureshi, on February 3, 2022, caused a setback to ISIS.⁴ However, according to Iran’s Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, the Islamic State is shifting its base from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan and that geographical proximity would mean continued, if not a greater threat to countries in the region including India.⁵ The Home Ministry has been maintaining that the Islamic State has a very limited impact in India, but there are disturbing reports of Indian Muslims being increasingly attracted to its ideology. Kerala and Tamil Nadu have emerged as safe havens for Islamist terrorists operating from South India.

Pakistan is the greatest nursery of terrorists in the world. The US President recently described Pakistan as “one of the most dangerous nations in the world”, one that has “nuclear weapons without any cohesion”.⁶ The Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) and Hizbul Mujahideen are the major terrorist outfits operating from Pakistan and launching attacks on India. The former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, himself admitted, while speaking in Washington on July 24, 2019, that there were 30,000-40,000 terrorists on its soil who had fought in Afghanistan and Kashmir.⁷

The indigenous terrorist outfits which have been perpetrating incidents at regular intervals are the Indian Mujahideen and the Popular Front of India (PFI). The former has lately been dormant. The Government of India recently banned the PFI and its associates, affiliates, or fronts as “unlawful association”. The PFI had come to adverse notice for engineering communal tension, organising violent protests, and radicalising youth to join global terror organisations like Islamic State to “establish the rule of Islam in India by 2047”.⁸

There is, presently, a well-organised attempt to revive terrorism in Punjab. The state witnessed a series of targeted murders, including that of RSS workers, in 2016 and 2017. An investigation by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) revealed that there was a transnational network of conspirators affiliated with the Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF) and backed by Pakistan’s ISI with linkages running through Dubai, France, UK, Italy and Pakistan. Radical Sikh diaspora in Europe, North America and Canada have formed ‘World Sikh Organization’ and ‘Sikhs for Justice’ to revive the demand for Khalistan. There have been several reports in the recent past of arms dropping with drones in Punjab to be used by pro-Khalistan elements within the country. In a sinister development, the Khalistani groups have started using criminals and gangsters to promote their political objective. The ISI is also learnt

to have floated a new platform, Lashkar-e-Khalsa, to train and provide logistics to these criminal elements.⁹

According to the South Asia Terrorism portal,¹⁰ there are a total of 173 terrorist/extremist/insurgent outfits in the country: out of these 79 are proscribed, 76 are active and another 18 are engaged in peace talks with the Government of India.

Jammu and Kashmir Inexorable Conflict

The government of India's policy in J&K has been to secure the borders from cross-border terrorism and to contain militancy; redress genuine grievances of the people within the legal framework; ensure economic development of the area; and integrate the state with the rest of India.

Ever since the advent of militancy in the state in 1990, a total of 14,091 civilians and 5,356 security forces personnel have lost their lives till 2020 in the incidents of violence. The relevant figures of 2016 to 2020 are as follows:¹¹

The Trends of Terrorist Violence in J&K since during 2016-2020, as per Ministry of Home Affairs, Annual Report 2020-21

Year	Incidents	SFs killed	Civilians killed	Terrorists killed
2016	322	82	15	150
2017	342	80	40	213
2018	614	91	39	257
2019	594	80	39	157
2020	244	62	37	221

It would be seen that incidents of terrorist violence touched a peak in 2018. It was the bloodiest year insofar as the number of terrorist incidents and the casualties of both security forces and the terrorists were the highest in the last five years.

According to P. Stobdan, Pakistan has been conscious, since 2016, trying to “indigenise the movement”.¹² The killing of Hizbul Mujahideen Commander, Burhan Wani, by the security forces on July 8, 2016, led to prolonged agitation by separatists in the Valley. The popular upsurge was fully exploited by Pakistan. On September 18, 2016, JeM terrorists attacked an Indian army post in Uri along the LoC, killing 19 soldiers. The Indian army responded by carrying out a surgical strike inside Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK) in the early hours of September 29, 2016, inflicting heavy casualties and damage to the terror launch pads in the region. A German political scientist, Hein Kiessling, has stated in his book *The ISI of Pakistan* that Pakistan’s ISI will continue its proxy war against India regardless of any change in its leadership and that Kashmir will remain “an area of activity *sui generis*”.¹³

On February 14, 2019, in a devastating terrorist attack, 40 CRPF personnel were killed in a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack by militants in the Lethpora area on Srinagar-Jammu national highway in Pulwama district. The Jaish-e-Mohammad claimed responsibility for the attack. This was the highest fatality suffered by security forces in the State ever since the beginning of terrorism in 1988. The incident caused deep resentment across the country. The Government of India responded aggressively and, on February 26, 2019, the Indian Air Force fighter jets hit a major JeM training camp in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province deep inside Pakistan territory. The Ministry of External Affairs described it as a “non-military pre-emptive strike” to prevent the terrorist outfit from planning another attack. The MEA claimed that the camp headed by Maulana Yousuf Azhar, brother-in-law of Masood Azhar, was decimated. A large number of terrorists are believed to have been eliminated.

In a bold initiative, The Government of India abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution on August 5, 2019, thereby effectively ending the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. The state was further bifurcated

to create two separate union territories—Jammu and Kashmir with a legislature and Ladakh without a legislature.

According to a statement by the State Police on August 5, 2022, over 500 terrorists have been killed in J&K following the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 while the number of security forces personnel and civilians killed in terrorist incidents has come down from 481 to 284 (SF 174 and civilians 110) in the last three years.¹⁴ According to another statement by the Army on April 4, 2022, as many as 172 terrorists including 79 foreigners are currently active in J&K.¹⁵

North-East Simmering Conflicts

North-east has been convulsed with separatist and secessionist movements of different hues. The nature of protracted conflict in the north-eastern states makes it difficult to determine when the multiple conflicts will be over. The states and the people are stuck in a conflict trap and ironically successive governments have not found a solution to the unending separatist and secessionist movements. Though the incidents of violence have decreased over the years enduring peace is still eluding the people of north-east. The profile of violence in the region as a whole during the last five years has been as follows.¹⁶

The Profile of Violence in NER as a whole during 2016-2020, as per Ministry of Home Affairs, Annual Report 2020-21

Years	Incidents	Extremist arrested	Extremist killed	Arms recovered/surrendered	SFs killed	Civilians killed	Extremist surrendered
2016	484	1202	87	698	17	48	267
2017	308	995	57	432	12	37	130
2018	252	804	34	478	14	23	161
2019	223	936	12	379	4	21	158
2020	162	646	21	739	5	2	2644

There has been a gradual improvement in the security situation. The number of incidents as also casualties amongst the civilians and the security forces have all come down.

Nagaland has been the epicentre of armed insurrection in north-eastern India. There is a suspension of operations in the state since 1997. A framework agreement was signed on August 3, 2015, to pave the way for a final settlement. There have been prolonged discussions between the Government of India and the various Naga groups, but the intransigence of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah), which has been insisting on a separate flag and constitution for the state, has delayed the final settlement. In 2020, there was a 45 per cent decline in the total number of violent incidents in the state as compared to the figures for 2019.

As per South Asia Terrorism Portal, there are approximately 42 insurgent groups in Manipur. Twenty-five of them are inactive, five of them are in negotiations with the government and the rest continue to operate in the Valley and the Hill districts. In 2020, there was a 23 per cent decrease in insurgency-related incidents in the state.

In Tripura, the activities of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) and All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), the two main rebel outfits, have been contained.

In Assam, the sharpness of ULFA has been blunted, thanks to Bangladesh's cooperation. Leaders of the insurgent outfit have shown a willingness to negotiate with the Government of India and abandoned their insistence on recognition of 'sovereignty' as a pre-condition for talks. Paresh Baruah, commander of the armed wing of ULFA is, however, opposed to any talks with the Government of India until the "core issues" of sovereignty and independence of Assam are discussed. In 2020, insurgency-related incidents declined by 12 per cent in the state.

A number of Islamist extremist groups are also active in Assam. These include the Muslim United Tiger Force of Assam (MTFA) and the Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA).

Left-Wing Extremism

Left-wing extremism (LWE) was once described as the biggest internal security threat to the country. The salient features of the movement today are its spread over a large geographical area; potential for violence; expansion in the northeast; and nexus with other extremist groups.

Geographical Spread: The movement which started from a small village in 1967 has spread over a vast swathe of the country over the last 50 years. According to a statement made by the Minister of State for Home on July 26, 2022, the number of LWE-affected districts has come down from 70 in 2014 to 46 in 2021. The Minister also said that the incidents of Naxal violence have also significantly dropped from 1091 in 2014 to 509 incidents in 2021.¹⁷

Potential for Violence: The CPI (Maoist) is the most potent among the various LWE outfits in the country and was responsible for 86 per cent of the total violent incidents and 96 per cent of the resultant deaths during 2020.¹⁸ There has, however, been considerable depletion in the strength of the Maoist outfits during the last few years.

Expansion in North-East: The Maoists are spreading their tentacles in the north-east and there are reports of their trying to forge links with the insurgent outfits active in the region. Himanta Biswa Sarma, Chief Minister of Assam, recently said that this is the “third wave” and that there had been similar attempts in 2008 and 2013-14 also.¹⁹ Maoists’ foray into the sensitive north-eastern states is fraught with serious strategic implications.

Nexus: The Maoists’ nexus with the other extremist organizations has added to the complexity of the problem. They have some kind of *entente cordiale* with the NSCN (IM). Some batches of Naxals received

arms training from the ULFA. The Communist Party of India (Maoist) has also fraternal relations with the Communist Party of Nepal. The ISI has been trying to reach out to the Maoists.

The level of Maoist violence in the affected states during the five-year period 2016-2020 has been as follows:²⁰

**State-wise Extent of LWE Violence during 2016-2020, as per
Ministry of Home Affairs, Annual Report 2020-21**

State	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	Incident	Death	Incident	Death	Incident	Death	Incident	Death	Incident	Death
Andhra Pradesh	17	6	26	7	12	3	18	5	12	4
Bihar	129	28	99	22	59	15	62	17	26	8
Chhattisgarh	395	107	373	130	392	153	263	77	315	111
Jharkhand	323	85	251	56	205	43	200	54	199	39
Madhya Pradesh	12	2	3	1	4	0	5	2	16	2
Maharashtra	73	23	69	16	75	12	66	34	30	8
Odisha	86	27	81	29	75	12	45	11	50	9
Telangana	7	0	5	2	11	2	8	2	15	2
Others	6	0	1	0	0	0	3	0	2	0
Total	1048	278	908	263	833	240	670	202	665	183

In 2020, Chhattisgarh with 315 incidents and 111 deaths was the worst affected state followed by Jharkhand (199 incidents and 39 deaths), Odisha (50 incidents and 9 deaths), Maharashtra (30 incidents and 8 deaths) and Bihar (26 incidents and 8 deaths).

The Government of India has adopted an integrated and holistic approach to deal with the problem. There is a ‘National Policy and Action Plan’ with a multi-pronged strategy that seeks to strengthen security, accelerate development and ensure the rights and entitlements of local communities. In a press release on September 21, 2022, Union

Home Minister, Amit Shah, claimed that the security forces have achieved “unprecedented success” in the year 2022 against the LWE in *Operation Octopus*, *Operation Double Bull* and *Operation Chakrabandha* in the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar.²¹

The socio-economic dimensions of the problem nevertheless cause concern. There are disturbing reports of economic inequality in the country. According to the *World Inequality Report 2022*, India is among the most unequal countries in the world, with rising poverty and an affluent elite. The report highlights that the top 10 per cent and top 1 per cent in India hold 57 per cent and 22 per cent of the total national income respectively while the bottom 50 per cent share has gone down to 13 per cent.²² In Human Development Index, India ranks 132 out of 191 countries and territories.²³ These statistics are not flattering.

Protracted Conflicts Need to be Contained

It is distressing that the north-east has been in a state of turmoil for the last more than 60 years; the Maoist rebellion has been haunting us for the last more than 50 years, and Jammu and Kashmir has been witnessing unrest for the last more than 30 years. Obviously, there have been serious flaws in our efforts to tackle these problems and, as a consequence, they continue to fester.

The country has been paying a heavy price for these continuing internal security problems. According to an estimate for the period 2010-14, the Maoist targeted the railways in 119 incidents, telephone exchanges/towers in 153 incidents, school buildings in 82 incidents, forest roads/culverts in 613 incidents, panchayat bhavans in 57 incidents, power plants in 4 incidents and mines in 17 incidents.²⁴ During the Jat Reservation Agitation in Haryana (February 2016), on a conservative estimate, property worth Rs 20,000 crore was devastated; it is estimated that 1,196 shops were set ablaze, 371 vehicles were damaged or set on fire, 30 schools and colleges were burnt, 75 houses were set on fire, 53

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hotels/marriage places were devastated, 23 petrol pumps were attacked and 53 religious institutions were vandalised.²⁵ According to an international think tank, Institute for Economics and Peace, violence cost the country 7 per cent of its GDP in 2020.²⁶

It is absolutely necessary that the protracted conflicts which have been bleeding the Indian state for the last 50 years or more are contained, if not resolved. The country needs a stable environment for a faster rate of economic growth. It is a sombre thought that due to the aforesaid continuing internal security problems, which have substantially sapped our economic strength, India would probably have been a superpower today.

What needs to be done?

To start with, the country should have an internal security doctrine that should lay down the principles that would govern the tackling of problems in any region. Unfortunately, we have not cared to define these principles and codify our internal security doctrine. The result is that every party in power views these problems from its own political lens and adopts strategies as per its own perception. It is high time that the doctrine is clearly defined. We also need to take corrective measures in our handling of the major challenges to internal security.

Unfortunately, we have to date no anti-terror policy. There is no clarity about how is it to be combated, what training and equipment the police forces need at the state level and what kind of coordination must be ensured between the Central Armed Police Forces, the State Police formations and the central and the state intelligence. The handling of the Kandahar incident, in which an Indian Airlines Airbus (IC 814) was hijacked to Afghanistan at the end of 1999, was a disaster and showed

the flaws in our anti-terrorist operations. The terror attack on Mumbai on November 26, 2008, also showed the chinks in our armour. It is also unfortunate that there has been no consistency in the legal framework to combat terrorism. Initially, we had the Terrorist & Disruptive Activities Act (TADA) which was later modified to the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and subsequently to the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). It is also a pity that the National Counter-Terrorism Centre (NCTC), which was proposed in the wake of the terrorist attack in Mumbai, has yet to be set up.

In Jammu and Kashmir, the region's status as a full-fledged state should be restored. The abrogation of Article 370 was fine, but lowering the status of J&K to a Union Territory caused unnecessary humiliation to the people of the state. The political process in the state needs to be revived and a popular government installed. There should be a well-coordinated effort to bring about all-round development of the state. The common man should feel that integration with India has brought economic prosperity.

In north-east the term of suspension of operations in Nagaland should be strictly enforced. The rebel Nagas continue to indulge in extortions, collection of taxes, forcible recruitment and other unlawful activities. It should also be made clear to the NSCN (IM) that the Government of India would not agree to dilute the authority of the Union Government in any manner which would impinge on the territorial integrity of the neighbouring states, and that their demand for a separate flag or constitution could not be considered. The government must also ensure accountability in the utilisation of development funds, a major chunk of which is either siphoned off by the rebels or pocketed by the corrupt establishment.

In tackling Maoist insurgency, it must be impressed upon the state governments that their police should be at the forefront of anti-Maoist operations; the Central Armed Police Forces can play only a supporting

role. The genuine grievances of tribal, particularly those relating to the Forest Rights Act, must be addressed. The door for peace talks should also be kept open. There should be a whole of government approach to win over the hearts and minds of the people.

Summing Up

The protracted internal security conflicts must be contained and, in due course, resolved. To tackle these effectively and ensure a faster rate of economic growth, we must have a comprehensive Internal Security Doctrine so that officers in the field are clear about the objectives and the methods to be adopted to achieve those. The legal framework would also need to be strengthened. These measures must however be accompanied by radical reforms in the police so as to strengthen the law enforcement machinery at the grassroots level. The capabilities of the state police need substantial augmentation and modernisation in terms of manpower, infrastructure and other resources. The Central Armed Police Forces must develop more teeth. The intelligence organisations would need to improve their penetration by human intelligence and incorporation of technology. There are no shortcuts to tackling the challenges. We shall have to comprehensively revamp the entire internal security architecture. A grievance redressal system and transparency in the delivery of governance in conflict-affected regions would be an essential tool to create capacity for enduring peace.

Notes

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