

By Fred Burton and Ben West

On July 6, the Indian government issued a warning to railroad operators and users after Maoist rebels known as Naxalites declared a "bandh," a Hindi word meaning threat of attack, in eastern India. When a bandh is declared by the Naxalites, it means they have declared open season on a particular target set, in this case the public transportation system over a two-day period. It is widely understood that trains and buses in eastern India during this time would be subject to Naxalite attack.

Naxalites are an array of armed bands that, when combined, comprise the militant arm of the Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPI-M). Some of the most violent attacks conducted by the Naxalites have been against freight and police transport trains, killing dozens of people at a time. Civilians have typically not been targeted in such attacks, but they have been collaterally killed and injured in the mayhem. Whether targeted or not, civilians generally believe that Naxalites always follow through on their threats, so strike warnings are enough to dissuade people from going about their daily lives. The Naxalite "bandh" is a tactic that shows just how powerful the rebels have become in the region, and it demonstrates their ability to affect day-to-day activity merely by threatening to stage an attack.

The Naxalite declaration on July 6 was in retaliation for a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) operation that killed senior Naxalite leader, CPI-M Politburo member and spokesman Cherukuri Rajkumar (alias Azad) on July 2 in Andhra Pradesh. The news of Azad's death was unexpected, since India has had little luck capturing or killing key Naxalite leaders, but his absence is not expected to seriously hamper the movement. The Naxalites are a large, well-organized force that will be able to replace him with little or no visible effect on operational capability. What was not surprising was that Azad's killing elicited a Naxalite response.

It is unclear exactly what precipitated the Andhra Pradesh operation by the CRPF (India's federal police force) that killed Azad, though it did come after a busy spring in Naxalite territory. On April 6, Naxalites mounted a textbook armed ambush that killed 76 CRPF members conducting a patrol in Chhattisgarh state, at the time the deadliest attack the Naxalites had carried out in their 43-year history. Then, on May 17, they detonated an explosive device along a road in Chhattisgarh and destroyed a bus, killing nearly 50 civilians and police officers. At the time, Azad issued several statements to the press indicating that the group regretted the death of so many civilians but blamed them for riding on the bus with police officers, something they had been warned against numerous times. Indeed, police in this region are typically not allowed to ride on public transportation due to the threat of Naxalite attacks and the possibility of collateral damage.

On May 28, less than two weeks after the bus attack, an act of sabotage against a railway line in West Bengal state caused a train carrying only civilians to derail. It was subsequently hit by a freight train, resulting in the deaths of nearly 150 people. While Naxalites initially denied that they were involved in the incident, they later admitted that a rogue gang trained by them had sabotaged the railway line without permission from Naxalite central command. (There is also the possibility that the Naxalites were attempting to derail the freight train a much more common Naxalite target but mistakenly targeted the wrong track.)

Finally, on June 24, in the wake of these deadly (if not all intentional) attacks, the Naxalites reiterated their intention to drive multinational corporations (MNCs) out of India and that they would use violence to do so. This most recent threat reflects the primary interest of the Naxalites, and it is backed by a proven tactical ability to strike economic targets, which is a top concern for the Indian government. It is this situation that leads STRATFOR to look at one of the world's longest-running insurgencies to see what makes it tick.

Background on a

Rebellion
The Naxalites get their name from their place of origin, the village of Naxalbari in West Bengal, where in May 1967 a local Communist Party leader promised to redistribute land to the peasants. This was not the first time such a proclamation by a Party member had been made in eastern India, but earlier attempts to foment a peasant rebellion in the region had faltered. This one, however, triggered a wave of violence in which workers intimidated or killed landowners, in many cases running them off their land and reclaiming it as their own. The actions were based on sentiment among the peasants (made up largely of tribal members) that they were merely taking back what they had been forced to give up to wealthy prospectors from central India. These newcomers had gained the land from the local tribes, the peasants believed, through schemes in which the land was taken as collateral for the tribes' outstanding debts.

On a grander geopolitical level, the Naxalites can be viewed through the prism of Chinese-Indian rivalry. The Naxalites adopted the ideology of Mao Zedong, the Chinese revolutionary and leader who converted China to communism and who had just begun the Cultural Revolution there in 1966. In the beginning of the Naxalite movement, there was mutual rhetorical support between the Maoist regime in China and the Naxalites in India. While there was little evidence of material support (and there is no indication of such support today), the advent and growth of the Naxalite movement certainly did serve China's goal of weakening its largest neighbor to the south.

India was able to dampen the Naxalite movement significantly in 1971, but the regional belief that the government in New Delhi had robbed tribal groups of their land in eastern India persisted. The Naxalite movement continued in a somewhat dormant phase throughout the 1970s, '80s and early '90s. Violence resumed again in the late '90s and has been escalating in the years since.

The increasing violence corresponds with India's economic growth, and this is not coincidental. India has experienced a boom in economic growth over the past 20 years that has seen per capita income rise roughly 100 percent. By comparison, it took India 40 years to complete its last doubling of per capita income. Foreign investors have sustained this growth by pumping billions of dollars into India's economy. However, economic growth in India has not trickled down, a political liability that the Naxalites have leveraged both to revive their movement and challenge India's more mainstream political parties.



Geography and Development
India as a whole has a disparate geography and some 1.1 billion inhabitants, and the government in New Delhi thus has a tough time extending its writ throughout the land. The Naxalites are not the only militant movement in India; groups in northwest and northeast India also take advantage of the terrain and the distance from New Delhi to challenge the government for control of the territory they inhabit. The Naxalites specifically inhabit an area known as the "Red Corridor," which stretches from West Bengal state southwest to Karnataka state. The most violent states in this corridor have been Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Orissa. The region is defined by rolling hills covered in dense jungle and has few improved roads, which allows the Naxalites to control access. The dense jungle also protects them from government aircraft.

The region's geographic isolation has created a tribal mentality, and while the government lumps militant groups in the area under the Naxalite umbrella, the militant community is actually quite diffuse, with small units acting with varying levels of autonomy throughout the region. For example, there is little indication that a unit from Chhattisgarh would also be able to conduct operations in West Bengal. Transportation is expensive and

dangerous, so people tend to stay close to home and defend it fiercely. This makes it difficult for outsiders to gain influence in (and access to) the area. It also means the area is extremely poor. Although the region has an abundance of raw materials in its hills and forests, the state of India has been hard-pressed to get at those resources because it cannot effectively control them. And while Naxalites call for the improvement of the lives of the people they claim to represent, they have resisted any government attempt to develop the area's economy. Indeed, the low level of trust between the Naxalites and New Delhi creates the conundrum of how the government can possibly provide security without developing sufficient infrastructure and how infrastructure can possibly be developed without sufficient security. An example of this can be seen in the Naxalites' constant sabotaging of area roads by planting improvised explosive devices (IEDs) under road surfaces or simply digging roads up. Roads are necessary for development, but Naxalites view roads as a means for the government to send its forces into their territory.

Eager to stimulate growth in the region, the central government promised foreign investors land without communicating, much less negotiating, with locals inhabiting the land, which naturally led to disputes between the locals, the foreign companies and the government. A famous example of an ongoing dispute involves the South Korean steel conglomerate POSCO, which is in the process of acquiring some 4,000 acres in Orissa state on which to build a \$12 billion steel mill. The project has been delayed by protests and violence by locals opposed to the project, and police have been unable to secure the area to permit construction. Only now, some five years after the government promised the land to POSCO, is local compensation being negotiated.

India's economic success has meant that foreign investors like POSCO are increasing their presence in India, which means that locals like the Naxalites are faced with both a threat and an opportunity. Outside business interests (whether investors from South Korea or wealthy prospectors from central India) in partnership with the government pose the greatest threat to the Naxalite movement. On the other hand, outside investment could bring jobs and development to an area that is desperately poor. But Naxalites are skeptical of letting the government control anything in their region, and successful economic development would have a calming effect on the region's radicalized militants. Movements like that of the Naxalites have an array of motivations for why they do what they do, but self-preservation is always a very high priority.

The other opportunity is to force the central government or foreign investors to pay the group directly for any land in the region. Naxalites can raise the stakes by organizing more militant force to deny access to certain areas, sabotage transportation and commercial activity and otherwise mobilize the locals. This would essentially be a large-scale protection racket. The model has been implemented and followed successfully by other militant groups, most notably Nigeria's Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which manages to extract concessions from energy giants operating in Nigeria's oil-rich but dimly poor Niger Delta, and even from the Nigerian government itself. While Maoist leaders in eastern and central India do make statements about how commercial projects in the area need to provide locals with jobs, it is clear that Naxalites are also trying to enhance their capability to pursue the second option.

The Threat

Naxalites are honing the capability to construct and deploy IEDs, conduct armed raids and maintain an extensive, agile and responsive intelligence network. As seen in the examples above, Naxalite fighters can be opportunistic in their attacks. The April 6 raid on the soldiers in Dantewada and the May 17 bus attack were both actions that took advantage of opportunities to target and kill police forces. The April 6 raid was the culmination of two or

three days of stalking the CRPF unit in the forest and waiting for the right time to strike. The May 17 bus attack was organized in a matter of hours, with spotters noticing the police on the bus and alerting other cadres who planted the device further down the road. This flexibility and autonomy among its various component parts, along with the group's local support and indigenous knowledge of its turf, make the Naxalites a dangerous adversary against the slower moving, more deliberate and more predictable CRPF.

New Delhi insists that, according to the constitution, the Naxalite problem is one of law and order and, thus, a responsibility for the states to address. New Delhi has deployed the CRPF, but it has not gone so far as to deploy the military, something that many Indian politicians have called for as the only solution to the problem. While military advisers have been sent in to train local and federal police forces in the Red Corridor, they have not engaged in any known anti-Naxalite operations. India has unpleasant memories of past deployments of its military forces to address domestic threats. In the 1980s, use of the army to deal with Sikh militancy was criticized as being too heavy-handed. Military action at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, codenamed Operation Blue Star, also fanned the flames of Sikh militancy and sparked a series of serious reprisal attacks that included the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who had ordered the operation.

Also, the Indian military insists it is currently focused on fighting Islamist and separatist forces in Jammu and Kashmir in northwest India, along the disputed border with Pakistan, and is dealing with multiple ethno-separatist movements in the northeast region of India surrounded by China and Bangladesh. While Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has labeled the Naxalite issue the biggest threat to the country's internal security, incidents like the 2008 Mumbai attacks provide evidence to most Indians that Pakistan and the militants who hide there pose a greater external threat.

In the end, Naxalism is fairly contained. Despite threats and indications from Naxalites that they will attack urban targets throughout India, the group has yet to demonstrate the intent or ability to strike outside of the Red Corridor. But the group's leaders and bombmakers could develop such a capability, and it will be important to watch for any indication that cadres are developing the tradecraft for urban terrorism. Even if they do not expand their target set and conduct more "terrorist-type" attacks, the Naxalite challenge to the state could materialize in other ways. The Naxalite organization is a sophisticated one that relies not only on militant tactics but also on social unrest and political tactics to increase its power. Naxalites have formed sympathetic student groups in universities, and human-rights groups in New Delhi and other regional capitals are advocating for the local tribal cause in rural eastern India.

Instead of using violence, these groups stage protests to express their grievances against the state. And they underscore the Naxalite ability to use both militant violence and subtle social pressure to achieve their goals. Even if the government did decide to deploy the military to combat the Naxalites in eastern India, it would face a tough fight against a well-entrenched movement ♦ something New Delhi is not likely to undertake lightly or any time soon.

(c) Stratfor <http://www.stratfor.com/>
Reproduced with permission. All rights reserved