

CPI (MAOIST) AND THE MMC ZONE

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In a major anti-Maoist operation in the forests of Madintola in Dhanora sub-division of Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra on 13 November 2021, 26 Maoists, including six women combatants, were reported to have been killed. The 10-hour-long operation conducted by the elite C-60¹ commandos of the Maharashtra Police led to fierce exchange of fire between the police and the Maoists at multiple sites and resulted in the recovery of bodies of the slain Maoists and 29 weapons, comprising five AK-47 rifles, an AK-47 with UBGL attachment, nine SLRs, an INSAS rifle, few .303 rifles, etc.² The kind of weapons recovered indicates presence of many hardcore Maoists at the encounter site.

Top Maoist leader and Central Committee Member Milind Teltumbde alias Deepak Teltumbde was one among the Maoists killed during the operation. Milind was a member of Maharashtra committee of the CPI (Maoist) and had a reward of Rs 50 lakh on his head. He was brother of a renowned scholar, writer and civil rights activist Anand Teltumbde, who is currently in judicial custody for his alleged involvement in the 2017 Bhima Koregaon case. Keeping into consideration Milind's stature and decades of contribution to the organisation, the Party high command tasked him with developing the tri-junction of the Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh (MMC) states as a potent guerrilla zone for the Maoists, similar to the Dadakaranya Special Zone Committee (DKSZC).

The CPI (Maoist) has often been undertaking organisational restructuring to consolidate its position in the existing core areas. Amidst increasing reverses suffered by the Maoists in south Bastar (Chhattisgarh) in the last five years,³ the Party has been consistently trying to carve out new zones for its operations. Two such potential areas/zones are the tri-junctions of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh (MMC) and the Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu (KKT).⁴ This is mainly to divert the attention of the security forces from its core area of Bastar and also to save and replenish their depleting armed strength (cadres and leaders) in the Bastar stronghold.⁵

CPI (Maoist) 'New' Maharashtra–Madhya Pradesh–Chhattisgarh (MMC) Zone

Figure 1

The CPI (Maoist)'s initial forays into the MMC confluence zone started in 2015. After deeply studying the topography and carrying out an in-depth socio-political survey of the adjoining areas along the inter-state borders, three potential stretches were identified by the CPI (Maoist). The new areas cover forested pockets in districts of Gondia in Maharashtra, Balaghat in Madhya Pradesh and northern Rajnandgaon in Chhattisgarh.⁶ Initially, 58 senior and middle level commanders headed by Darbha divisional commander Surrender, were sent to activate this new zone.⁷ The terrain and demography of the areas were found to be conducive for the expansion of Maoist activities and operations as the areas in the region are mostly backward, densely-forested with sparse tribal inhabitations and more importantly, scantily policed. A small division of the CPI (Maoist) with an estimated strength of 20–30 cadres already active in the region—GRB (Gondia, Rajnandgaon, Balaghat) division—was merged with the team from Bastar to consolidate and further expand their operations up to erstwhile strongholds of Gadchiroli in Maharashtra, Mandla in Madhya Pradesh and parts of Kabirdham and Mungeli districts in

Chhattisgarh.⁸ While Maoist violence is sporadically reported from Rajnandgaon district; Kabirdham and Mungeli districts of Chhattisgarh and Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh are relatively violence-free till now. Mungeli and Dindori have been added to the Ministry of Home Affairs' list of 'Maoist-affected districts' recently.⁹ Reportedly, around 100 Maoists had entered into Balaghat and Mandla districts of Madhya Pradesh from neighbouring states of Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra. Around six *dalams* (groups) of Maoists are operating in Balaghat and Mandla districts. Of these, Khatia Mocha Dalam in Mandla came up last year.¹⁰ A Maoist document seized by the Chhattisgarh Police suggested that there were about 200 rebels active in the MMC zone in December 2019.¹¹

Notably, the CPI (Maoist) is also believed to be relocating its armed cadres from its Bastar and Andhra–Odisha Border (AOB) strongholds to new safer core areas in the Kanha National Park, Amarkantak forests and Boramdoe Tiger Reserve, which are interconnected through impregnable patch of forests located on the borders of Madhya Pradesh (Balaghat and Mandla) and Chhattisgarh (Kabirdham).¹² Since the areas do not have many roads and are scantily policed, Maoists are believed to be cultivating their organisational roots in the region, recruiting new cadres and generating human intelligence. According to the Gadchiroli Police, two platoons of 'Vistar Dalam' of the CPI (Maoist) are active in the Kanha–Boramdeo region. Similarly, the forests of Amarkantak, being highly inaccessible for the security forces, have a strategic significance for Maoists and could prove to be a safe haven for the senior leaders who are under pressure from security forces in Jharkhand and Bastar. Besides, the forest is also close to the Maoist-affected districts of Jharkhand, Odisha, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh and could provide the Maoists easy passage to these states. The Maoists are consistently trying to develop a new 'base area' in the dense Amarkantak forests to intensify their activities/operations in the areas falling under the MMC zone.¹³

The neutralisation of 26 hardcore Maoists, including the Central Committee member and MMC secretary Milind Teltumbde, in the latest operation by C-60 commandos in Gadchiroli serves a huge setback for the CPI (Maoist)'s expansion designs in the MMC region. Notably, the Maoist stronghold in Gadchiroli has proved to be the fulcrum for not only expanding the Maoist activities in the MMC region but also helps in sustaining Maoist war machinery in south Bastar. The region enables supply of war logistics to other areas of Maoist operations and also offers safe hideouts as well as safe passage for the armed and senior leaders to escape the security radar. Nevertheless, the recent tactical success against the Maoists should not override the security forces' preparedness as the retaliatory attacks are imminent.

Presently on the backfoot in their strongholds of Bastar and Andhra–Odisha Border, the outlawed outfit is striving hard to develop and activate some 'base areas' in and around the tri-junction region (MMC) so as to consolidate its position *vis-à-vis* security forces. Currently in the 'strategic defence phase' in the region, the Party is largely focusing on socialising and identifying with the local tribal population to get their support for the 'protracted people's war', recruiting armed cadres and preserving their areas of operation in the region. The CPI (Maoist) has been increasingly making efforts in the areas to encash on the disenchantment and grievances of the local tribals against the administration.

To tackle it, there is a need to undertake a judicious mix of security and developmental interventions in the region, wherein, development should precede the security initiatives. While the security measures such as deployment of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs) should be employed to tackle the Maoist rebels, the government should emphasise more on development initiatives. As large parts of the region are inhabited by the particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) like Baiga, Abujh Marias, etc., ensuring rights and entitlements of local tribal population over the lands and forests traditionally used by them and ensuring them a dignified life in harmony with the local culture and customs may prove to be effective tools for keeping the

Maoist extremists at bay.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or of the Government of India.

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