

# **Critical Analysis of the Nepali Army's Counter Insurgency Campaign Against Maoist Insurgency in Nepal**

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## **Abstract**

Nepal witnessed an insurgency within its territory for a decade from 1996 to 2006. Nepali army, the national armed force, along with other security forces, conducted the counter-insurgency campaign within the broader campaign of the Nepalese government. This paper examines the growth of Maoist insurgency in Nepal, the government's initial response, and finally the army's campaign against the insurgents. Using the information presented in academic and government literature as well as the experience gained by the researcher himself, it concludes that the army was successful in tactical battles against the Maoists but could not gain complete victory at the strategic level. The paper also examines the challenges faced by the army during the campaign, and the wider concepts coming out from the overall critical analysis of the campaign.

## **Keywords**

*Maoist insurgency, Government of Nepal (GoN), Nepali Army (NA), Counter insurgency (COIN), campaign plan, Operational Environment, Lines of Effort, Intelligence, operations, unity of effort, royal massacre, communist party, Nepal Police (NP), Armed Police Force (APF), Unified command, Rangers, Jungle Warfare*

## **Background of the Maoist insurgency and its growth in Nepal**

The Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) formally declared the "People's War" on February 13, 1996, and thus Nepal witnessed the beginning of a violent form of armed conflict within its territory. In the nearly two-and-a-half centuries

of the existence of modern Nepal, the Maoist insurgency proved to be one of the most radical political movements and made a lasting political and socio-economic impact.<sup>2</sup>

The decade-long (1996-2006) Maoist insurgency in Nepal is a landmark historical event of political-strategic, economic, and diplomatic significance for the Nepalese people. The end of the conflict culminated in the downfall of 250 years 250-year-old monarchy in Nepal. From the defence and security point of view, the Maoist insurgency forced the government to make profound changes within the Nepal Army (NA) and Nepal Police (NP) and also influenced the government's decision to create a new Paramilitary force in the form of Armed Police Force (APF). The then Royal Nepalese Army (the present term 'Nepalese Army' will be used from here onwards in this research paper), which was placed inside the barracks and used to do ceremonial duties and training in conventional warfare framework, was forced out of the comfort of barracks and fight a Counter Insurgency (COIN) battle against its citizens and within its own country.

The Maoist insurgency commenced with attacks on isolated posts of the Nepal Police (NP) forces and the insurgents chose six districts of western, mid-western, and eastern regions of Nepal.<sup>3</sup> The CPN (M), in its initial stages, took the approach taken by Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in Peru and it envisioned the changing political discourse of Nepal into a "people's republic" to be able to address Nepal's politico-economic problems."<sup>4</sup> In political terms, this approach meant the abolition of the long-

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<sup>2</sup> Chok B. Dhakal, "Understanding Counterinsurgency In Democratic Settings: Counterinsurgency Success and Failure In Kashmir And Nepal" (Thesis Paper, Naval Postgraduate School, 2014), 59.

<sup>3</sup> Sebastian von Einsiedel, D. M. Malone and S. Pradhan, *Nepal in Transitions From People's War to Fragile Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas A. Marks, "Insurgency in Nepal," *Strategic Studies Institute* (2003): 6.

established monarchy in Nepal through a constituent assembly, which would then be mandated to rewrite the country's constitution.

When the Maoists openly began staging a rehearsal for the "people's war" in October-November 1995, the Nepalese government addressed it to be a "law and order problem" and responded accordingly with the deployment of Nepal police to tackle the problem. Police suppression during 'Operation Romeo' culminated in mass arrests and legal actions against hundreds of suspected 'law violators'. The police repression against the insurgents as well as the local population began immediately after the Maoists attacked the isolated police stations in Rolpa, Rukum, and Sindhuli in February 1996.<sup>5</sup>

An important shift in conflict dynamics occurred in June 2001 when the then King Birendra and much of the royal family of Nepal were killed in a rampage by Crown Prince Dipendra who later committed suicide.<sup>6</sup> Whereas King Birendra was not in favor of putting the army against its people, the newly enthroned king, Birendra's brother Gyanendra, decided to deploy the Nepalese Army in November 2001, six months after the royal massacre.

### **COIN campaign conducted by the NA as part of the overall efforts of Nepalese Government**

The U.S. government's Counterinsurgency Guide mentions that COIN consists of the "comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to simultaneously defeat and

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<sup>5</sup> Krishna Hachhethu, "The Nepali State and the Maoist Insurgency, 1996-2001," in *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*, ed. Michael Hutt (London: Hurst and Company, 2004), 61.

<sup>6</sup> The event is known as "Royal Massacre" and took place on 19 June, 2001 inside the royal palace in Kathmandu. The then Crown Prince Dipendra was blamed to have shot his whole family before killing himself.

contain an insurgency and address its root causes."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Kilcullen describes "counterinsurgency as an umbrella term that describes the complete range of measures that governments take to defeat insurgencies. These measures may be political, administrative, military, economic, psychological, or informational, and are almost always used in combination."<sup>8</sup> Subba and Nepali mention that the first division-level exercise "Chakrabyu" held by the army at the beginning of 1998 in the West and mid-west regions was designed to assess the operational readiness of a division in a COIN role.<sup>9</sup>

### **NA-initiated Internal Security and Development Programme (ISDP) to conduct COIN**

Khatri mentions that the government adopted the policy of addressing the insurgency with the unveiling of ISDP (modeled and designed by the Army) in August 2001 in Gorkha district, which then expanded into several mid-western districts in the country.<sup>10</sup>

Marks argues that the purpose of ISDP was to ensure the government's presence was felt in rural and underdeveloped areas through the execution of a range of activities focused on improving economic conditions and social inclusion of marginalized communities. In the end, however, the NA was the only element of the government that achieved its

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Government, "Counterinsurgency Guide," *Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative*, (2009): 12, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> David J Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Prakash Nepali & Phanindra Subba, "Civil-Military Relations and the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 16, no. 2, (2005): 98.

<sup>10</sup> Purna B. Khatri, "An Analysis of Nepalese Government's Counter Insurgency Operations (1996-2006)" (Thesis Paper, United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2007), 19.

desired role in the ISDP. The Maoists' attack on army barracks in November 2001 brought the ISDP to a halt.<sup>11</sup>

### **NA's "Campaign Plan"**

Dhakai mentions that the first two attacks by the Maoists in Dang and Mangalsen, and the army's failure to respond proactively during those operations proved that the army had underestimated the capabilities of the Maoists and army was taken by surprise.<sup>12</sup> However, these setbacks alerted the NA and it drafted the "civil-military campaign plan" in 2002.<sup>13</sup> Letch mentions that the NA's campaign plan outlined the following tasks: offensive operations against Maoist bases; securing the road and air lines of communication; conducting search and destroy missions; counter-smuggling operations along the border; securing district official facilities; collecting and sharing intelligence; psychological operations; and civic actions (development projects).<sup>14</sup>

### **Challenges faced by NA during the COIN Campaign**

According to Subba, one of the biggest challenges faced by NA was the inability of the subsequent unstable governments to frame a comprehensive COIN strategy and utilize all the elements at their disposal, including NA, against the Maoist insurgents.<sup>15</sup> Dhakai argues that the NA was restricted to conducting purely military operations and that approach never garnered enough public support towards the NA or the

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<sup>11</sup> Marks, *Insurgency in Nepal*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> Chok B. Dhakai, "Understanding Counterinsurgency In Democratic Settings: Counterinsurgency Success and Failure In Kashmir And Nepal" (Thesis Paper, Naval Postgraduate School, 2014), 80.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>15</sup> Dil Bikram Subba, "Government's Strategy Against The Maoist Insurgency In Nepal" (Thesis Paper, U.S. Army C&GSC, 2010), 62.

government.<sup>16</sup> Mehta and Lawoti argue that the NA's direct support to the unconstitutional move by the then king put the parliamentary political parties, media, human rights groups, intelligentsia, and international actors squarely against the army and the state, thus denying the legitimacy needed for the COIN campaign.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, Marks points out that various departments and sources for information gathering within the police, APF, NA, and National Investigation Department (NID) failed to deliver precise and accurate intelligence.<sup>18</sup>

### **Overall analysis on NA's CI Campaign**

This part carries the critical analysis of the COIN campaign conducted by NA, as part of the overall campaign carried out by the GoN against the Maoist insurgents. Scholars and students alike have had intense debates as to whether the NA was successful or completely failed in its campaign against the Maoist insurgents.

For a more in-depth critical analysis of the NA COIN campaign, this part is linked and related to the 'Tenets of Counterinsurgency' taken from the Joint Publication (JP) 3-24 Counterinsurgency (2013). The tenets presented here were not only useful in relating to the NA experience in its conduct of the COIN, but they also provided important clues and broader concepts on how to conduct the COIN campaign, if needed, in the future.

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<sup>16</sup> Chok B. Dhakal, "Understanding Counterinsurgency In Democratic Settings: Counterinsurgency Success and Failure In Kashmir And Nepal" (Thesis Paper, Naval Postgraduate School, 2014), 83.

<sup>17</sup> A. K. Mehta and M. Lawoti, "Military Dimensions of the People's War: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Nepal," in *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Revolution in the Twenty First Century*, eds. M. Lawoti and Anup K. Pahari (New York: Routledge, 2010),186.

<sup>18</sup> Marks, *Insurgency in Nepal*, 19.

The JP 3-24 mentions that the "operational tenets" of COIN are to provide the forces with proper guidelines. These tenets focus on how to conduct a successful COIN. These tenets are further supported by the tactical percept of COIN.<sup>19</sup>

- Understand the Operational Environment (OE). The OE is the detailed study of the conditions circumstances and influences that determine how the forces use the capabilities at their disposal and make their decisions. The OE comprises of the relevant actors and the physical areas and factors of the physical domain and the information environment.<sup>20</sup>
- It can be argued that the NA had an understanding of the OE from the very initial stage of the insurgency in Nepal. The NA had carried out a field study of the mid-western region ever since the police were deployed in the initial stage and concluded that the insurgents were exploiting the grievances of the poor and uneducated population and that the movement needed to be addressed timely. However, the government at the time simply did not have enough confidence to allow the army to operate against the Maoists.
- Develop the COIN Narrative. It should be remembered that being successful in military objectives is only one of the parts of the overall COIN effort. The more important aspect is to be able to convince all the relevant actors that the government and its agencies are fighting for the cause of the people and their actions are justified. This ability to convince and demonstrate the government's efforts is achieved by developing a compelling COIN narrative that can address the issues of the insurgent narrative and compete with it.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Joint Publications 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, III-7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, IV-1.

<sup>21</sup> JP 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, III-9.

- This would suggest that it was a complete failure on the part of the then GoN, including the NA and other security apparatus, in not being able to deliver a compelling narrative, followed by strong actions, to gain the confidence of the exploited population. This prevented the NA from gaining legitimacy in the eyes of normal citizens, which is crucial for the success of any military component.
- Primacy of Politics. During the initial stage of the COIN operation, the military actions seem at the forefront because of the military-focused approach taken by security forces to give security to the population and kill or capture the insurgents. But it must be remembered that military action is meaningful only as long as it supports the political strategy.<sup>22</sup>
- It could be argued that the Nepalese COIN campaign could not achieve the desired results primarily because there was no political ownership of the campaign at any stage.
- Secure the population. For the neutral population caught amid the COIN, security is of primary concern to them. Hence, the physical and material security of the population should be the central focus of COIN efforts because it is a prerequisite for lasting stability and the ultimate success of the COIN campaign.<sup>23</sup>
- The Maoist insurgency in Nepal was no different when it came to the concern of the neutral population all over the country. The population wanted security, physical as well as material. The lack of good governance and absence of state authorities, including the security forces, had established a sense of insecurity amongst the local population long before the insurgency started in Nepal. One can argue that the Maoist leadership exploited this very sense of insecurity that

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<sup>22</sup> JP 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, III-10.

<sup>23</sup> JP 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, III-11.



prevailed in the population to exploit their cause during the initiation of the insurgency.

- Synchronize and Integrate Lines of Effort (LOEs). In COIN, it is imperative that the "lethal" and "nonlethal" are not designed and implemented in isolation. Rather, their synchronization at the operational and tactical levels is essential for them to be able to reinforce each other and thus support the COIN narrative.<sup>24</sup>
- When this tenet is linked to the COIN campaign conducted by the NA, it can be argued that the NA's aggressive operations meant to engage with insurgents were not aptly supported by operations meant to support the population and win their support too. Dhakal mentions that most scholars believe the Nepal army put more focus on military-focused lethal operations against the insurgents.<sup>25</sup>
- Unity of Command and Unity of Effort. For achieving unity of effort in any military operation, the preferred option is the military unity of command. The whole purpose of command relationships is for military forces, police, and other security forces to establish effective control. Unity of effort is imperative for the success of a single mission, which is COIN.<sup>26</sup>
- Subba mentions that in the case of Nepal, the government and the security forces failed to maintain 'unity of effort' in their COIN effort.<sup>27</sup>
- Intelligence drives Operations. Timely and reliable intelligence is an absolute imperative for an effective COIN campaign. This intelligence is analyzed and gathered at all levels and then disseminated to the force on a need-to-know basis.

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<sup>24</sup> JP 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, III-14.

<sup>25</sup> Chok B. Dhakal, "Understanding Counterinsurgency In Democratic Settings: Counterinsurgency Success and Failure In Kashmir And Nepal" (Thesis Paper, Naval Postgraduate School, 2014), 16.

<sup>26</sup> JP 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, III-15.

<sup>27</sup> Dil Bikram Subba, "Government's Strategy Against The Maoist Insurgency In Nepal" (Thesis Paper, U.S. Army C&GSC, 2010), 84.

However, it must not be forgotten that intelligence should also be produced at the lowest practical level.<sup>28</sup>

The researcher felt, during 2 years of involvement in the COIN campaign of NA, that one of the most crucial factors that hindered the success of operations conducted by NA (including other security forces) against the insurgents was the lack of accurate, timely, and actionable intelligence. The researcher himself took part in many 'Cordon and Search' operations in rural as well as urban areas without any precise knowledge about the location or movement of the insurgents.

### **Conclusion**

The COIN campaign conducted by the NA is significant because it laid the foundation for the modernization and evolution of the national army. The NA got the opportunity to test its battle worthiness through its involvement in the COIN campaign against the Maoists. The Maoist insurgency forced the largely ceremonial army to come out of its barracks and engage in real combat situations. Hence, the insurgency in Nepal proved pivotal in changing the organizational culture of the NA from having a traditional and ceremonial mindset to a modernized, forward-thinking organization. The central argument of the research paper was that the NA's campaign against the Maoists could be judged to be successful at the tactical level; however, its limitations and the wider politico-strategic developments at the time prevented the NA from gaining complete victory at the strategic level over the Maoist insurgents.

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<sup>28</sup> JP 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, III-15.

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