

## **Dynamics of Low Intensity Conflicts**

*Low Intensity Conflicts in India: An Analysis.*  
by Lt. Col. Vivek Chadha. 2005. USI and Sage, New Delhi.

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Low intensity conflicts in India, despite a long history and a major threat to national security, have remained substantially under-researched. Though a number of books have been written on the various aspects of low intensity conflicts, one still finds gap in the scholarship, particularly in areas relating to its varied dimensions, factors that sustain them, extremist groups – their interests, leadership, mobilisation strategy, financial resources, and other dimension of state intervention, including the role of various security forces. Moreover, the lack of proper documentation, empirical studies and constraints of official confidentiality and secrecy have added to the complexity and resulted in simplified perspectives, generalisations and a reductionist approach in many cases.

In this context, the present volume, *Low Intensity Conflicts in India: An Analysis*, is a valuable contribution to the study of internal conflicts and their security implications. Written by a serving army officer, Lt. Col. Vivek Chadha, the book seeks to fill some of the gaps in our understanding through a generalisation of various kinds of anti-state conflicts in India under the rubric of low intensity conflicts (LICs). The book is derived from a research project under the auspices of the USI. Backed by the author's own first hand experience, this comprehensive account of LICs in India from 1947 to the present, covers both definitional and historical facets, and various conflicts such as militancy in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir, multiple insurgencies in the Northeast, the agitation for Gorkhaland and the Naxalite movement, as well as the various dimensions of state intervention. The author is aware of the complexities associated with the term LIC, which is a post-Vietnam American classification as well as the difficulty in its application to the Indian context. Therefore, in the very beginning, he makes it clear that LIC by itself does not signify any form of operation in particular and must be seen merely in the

“perspective of classification of warfare, rather than as another definition, in an attempt to define a specific nature of warfare... This research is based on one such model in consonance with the author’s perception of the classification of warfare.” (p.22)

The idea of classification of LICs into violent and non-violent, border skirmishes, ‘no war no peace’ scenario along the Line of Control (LOC) and Siachin, and the inclusion of even India’s struggle for independence into this category is indeed a broad one. Such classifications have been subject to intense debate within the academic community and scholars have attempted to re-define the term through their area of specialisation, individual experience, ideological orientation, national interest and understanding of the subject. Thus, we find differing perceptions and views on the delineation of the threshold of low, middle and high intensity operations, and the definition of and distinction between insurgency, terrorism and revolutionary warfare within the broad framework of LICs. For example, there are a number of books available in India that tend to classify all the LICs in the country under the prism of terrorism. The 9/11 incident and the subsequent discourse on terrorism have also influenced the prevailing understanding on the subject. Acknowledging that in security studies LICs probably are the widest and most varied in scope, the author has made an attempt to address some of these issues in the beginning itself when he makes it clear that it is a form of warfare and by itself does not signify any form of operations in particular. Hence, it must be seen merely in the perspective of classification of war from a military viewpoint.

The classification of conflicts in the book also appears to be based on the author’s view that “LICs have generally remained a people-centric method of fighting rather than through the professionally trained use of firepower, technology and regular soldiers.” (p. 21) He further avers, “The form of conflicts that can take place under this category can vary from absolute non-violent struggles like subversion to bloody conflicts like limited wars short of an all out war, civil wars and revolutionary wars.” (p. 25) Such definition may not appear “reductionist” if the reader combines it with the aim behind the exercise, which is “to narrate the history of LICs in India with the ultimate objective of learning lessons both from the follies committed and successful policies adopted, which helped resolve conflicts to the satisfaction of both the parties.” (p. 16) And it is probably with this aim that the author has attempted a readymade reference material for both academic and policymakers. A brief background of the conflicts is of immense help to the reader to understand the present dynamics.

While explaining the causes of LICs, the author warns against the danger of

simplifications, i.e., employing stereotypes relating to causes of conflicts as common yardsticks. In this context, apart from causative factors, which have been grouped under four heads – political, social, economic and external – the attempt to look into the problem of governance assumes importance. The poor performance of civil administration and other institutions of governance in areas afflicted by violent conflicts and frequent breakdown of law and order probably allows conflicts, such as those prevailing in India's Northeast, Jammu and Kashmir and Naxalite-affected states, to find varying degrees of acceptance among the local population. Thus, despite his professional background, the author has gone beyond the simplistic law and order approach.

The author mentions the degeneration in the role of groups like the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) that has occurred over time. Such groups have become a threat for the people for whom they were purported to be attaining the professed goals such as 'independence' or 'self-empowerment'. Despite the supposedly underlying causes of long-term neglect by successive governments and economic and social underdevelopment, these groups have acquired a *raison d'être*, where their survival and stake in the underground economy appears to be the prime motive of their sustenance. This is true with almost all the groups currently active against the Indian state, and the author calls it a degeneration from 'insurgency' to 'terrorism'. For example, he observes that, "the initial uprising in Jammu and Kashmir in 1989 was an expression of popular discontent and could, therefore, be categorised as an insurgency. However, with waning popular support for the insurgents, over time it has morphed into cross-border terrorism." (p. 403) Similarly, writing about the emergence of ULFA in Assam, he notes that "(desire of) secession by majority Ahoms" and "greater political autonomy" (p. 21) were the two dimensions. ULFA organised itself between 1979 and 1988, and also weighed the chances of its success among the Assamese population in the wake of the 'anti-foreigners' movement under the All Assam Students' Union (AASU). In its initial phase, the group adopted the strategy of playing a vigilante role, but "corruption and personal gain took over the (so called) cause" and "slowly the movement transformed from an insurgency into a terrorist movement with limited support." (p. 243) This is further manifested in the case of militant Naga groups, which fund their activities through "regular taxation, smuggling and drug money." (p. 301)

One of the significant features of the book is that it also looks at LICs through the prism of tensions and contradictions which a plural civil society faces while consolidating its national identity. The author has identified certain common factors

that have influenced LICs in the country. These are political opportunism, political neglect, corruption and social neglect. These factors may play a role in exacerbating the conflict. At varying stages in India's post-independence history, political opportunism, the state's understanding of a particular movement and electoral compulsions led to polarisation of ethnic and religious groups, which in turn led to the emergence of struggle. The author finds these factors playing an important role in the emergence and continuation of LICs. Thus, the author also highlights the limitations of the thesis that a 'contrasting and conflicting' ideology is the seed of any conflict.

In a plural democratic society, this process becomes much more complex if we examine how this ideology is articulated and differences constructed in violent forms. The author contends that ideas can also be made to germinate artificially for political advantage by igniting flames of separatism in a plural society. This can be examined in the context of the movement for Khalistan in Punjab and the articulation of ethnic identities in the Northeast. This raises serious questions not only about identity and popular support but also about the character of the insurgent groups. For example, while describing the characteristics of militancy in Nagaland, he points out, "Militancy has become a business in the state, with much rivalry between militant groups in the extraction of the spoils of corruption and smuggling rather than ideological grounds." The way militant groups act as hired criminals during elections in militancy-infested areas further strengthens the argument that ideology has hardly any role to play in such conflicts. This is evident in the case of Manipur. Chadha opines, "Allegations of politico-militant union in elections held in 2000, and literal use of the gun by the militants on hire to the 'highest bidder' have cast a shadow on future elections in the state (of Manipur) and the representative character of the elected members." (p. 320) Thus, these militant movements also tend to undermine the existing democratic arrangements. Similar is the case of Tripura. Here, too, militancy "has become a business", even though marginalisation of a section and lack of education among the local population adds complexity to the situation. Such trends are visible in other theatres of conflicts, including areas affected by Naxalite violence.

Given India's geo-politics and its porous borders, external factors have played an important role in exacerbating internal conflicts. The 'foreign hand', inimical as it is to India's interest, has facilitated migration, movement of extremist groups, narco-terrorism and proliferation of light weapons. These have impinged on internal conflicts in varying degrees. This raises the question whether these conflicts could be called indigenous. Regarding LICs in India, the author says, "the near future

promises the continuance of LIC in a variety of forms. These are likely to vary from limited conflicts on the LOC to insurgencies, which will emerge as the underprivileged classes are fast learning the art of using this cheap means of waging war against the state machinery.”

However, he finds a downward trend in secessionist and revolutionary tendencies in some of the theatres. For example, in Jammu and Kashmir, the growing awareness of global ramifications of terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11, the changing geo-political scenario and India’s growing influence in political and economic affairs are likely to resolve the conflict in India’s favour, even though the solution is unlikely to be achieved in the near future. In the case of the Northeast, LICs are likely to be arrested because of the growing importance of the region in India’s relations with the ASEAN countries and the opening up of trade with Myanmar and Bangladesh. However, the projection in medium and long term will depend to a large extent on India’s ability to deal with its ethnic and religious diversity.

Overall, this is a useful and timely volume that will not only contest the conventional wisdom relating to various aspects of conflict but has also identified areas for further research and policy review.

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