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Sunil Narula ^a

^a Research Fellow at DDSA,

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Psychological Operations (PSYOPs): A Conceptual Overview

Sunil Narula

Abstract

The psychological dimension of a conflict is as important as its physical dimension and psychological Operations (PSYOPs) have become even more relevant in this age of information, especially for a nation-state where the threat in the socio-psychological domain is more pronounced. While combating the menace of terrorism, the psychological dimension assumes great significance, as terrorists use violence as a psychological weapon by terrorising the multitude, rather than physically affect a few, and in this sense, they fight a psychological war also. The relevance of psychological operations is much greater than the successful conduct of tactical operations. This article is an attempt to conceptualise the term PSYOPs in the Indian context.

The changed dynamics of international relations following the end of the Cold War and changes in the South Asian strategic landscape, post-September 11, have made PSYOPs more relevant for the region. It is also important to know that differences between various related concepts like Propaganda, Information Warfare, and Perception Management are wafer-thin, and may lead to contested perceptions amongst various agencies working under the overall ambit of national security, if not viewed in the current perspective.

Therefore, clarity of the concept will set the stage for an effective implementation of policies and help in setting up of a policy structure in India (which does exist today in loosely knit shape) for national level coordination of PSYOPs. Alongside the need for a disciplined, trained, and well-equipped manpower to combat national security challenges, it is also essential to have a comprehensive and effective machinery to conduct psychological operations. Such a machinery must then cover the entire spectrum of the socio-psychological threat in all its varied forms without losing sight of the emerging global trends.

— * —

“There are but two powers in the world, the sword and the mind. In the long run the sword is always beaten by the mind” – Napoleon Bonaparte

Historical Perspective

Propaganda and psychological warfare are as old as the history of mankind itself. The weak have always sought to portray themselves stronger than they actually are. The Byzantine Empire, in its efforts to prolong its existence, resorted to such acts. The emperor on his throne used to be raised, as if by divine intervention and lowered again, while the stuffed lions which served as the arm-rests of his throne belched forth fire and smoke and uttered terrifying roars as the ambassadors from foreign lands lay prostrate before him.¹

The terms ‘Psychological Warfare’ and ‘Psychological Operations’ are often used interchangeably to identify an activity or function which is as old as human conflict or inter-cultural group relations. The first known application of the term Psychological Warfare was in 1920 and Psychological Operations in 1945.² The British military analyst and historian, J.F.C. Fuller, is believed to be the one who coined the term ‘Psychological Warfare’ when, in 1920, in his scholarly analysis of the lessons learned during the First World War, especially those related to deployment of such new weapons as Armour. He allowed his mind to wonder imaginatively about the character of the future battlefield.² In his treatise on tanks, he prophesied that, “the so called traditional means of warfare might be replaced by purely psychological warfare, wherein weapons are not used or battlefields sought ... but dimming of the human intellect, and the disintegration of the moral and spiritual life of one nation by the influence of the will of another is accomplished.”³

The earliest recorded use of the term ‘Psychological Warfare’ in an American publication occurred in January 1940, when an article entitled “Psychological Warfare and How to Wage It” appeared in a popular American journal.⁴ The term ‘Psychological Operations’ was also used in early 1945, when Captain (later Rear Admiral) Ellis M. Zacharias, US Navy, employed the term in an operation plan designated to hasten the surrender of Japan. Without any description or explanation, the term suggested, “All psychological operations will be coordinated both as to times and trends in order to avoid reduction of effectiveness of this main operation.”⁵

This term was again used in 1951, when the Truman Administration

renamed an inter-agency strategy committee, calling it the Psychological Operations Coordination Committee. Although the US Army made the change in 1951, it was not until the 1960s that psychological operations more commonly used psychological warfare as the all-inclusive term. This development was due to the fact that Americans had become increasingly concerned about the continued use of a term that includes the word 'warfare' to describe an activity that is directed at friends and neutrals (see the discussion on definitions later in the paper) as much as or more than to hostile or potentially hostile people. This featured in the Lebanon crisis of 1958 and the Dominican Republic intervention of 1965.⁵

As late as the 1980s, the term PSYOPs was repeatedly used but it was considered a 'nasty term — too bad' and Fred W. Walker wrote one chapter titled the same in McLauren's most authentic book on military propaganda. In that, he also wrote:

Too often, psychological aspects of operations are placed at the back of the book and completely neglected. Commanders and staff officers usually fail to consider these aspects because the term is misunderstood. Many are unaware of PSYOP's true nature, and intangibility makes it difficult to quantify or measure its effectiveness. To compound this, one enters a dense forest of obscurity when seeking official guidance. No clear direction is established for the military services except in wartime. As a result, the services are reluctant to deal with it at all, and operational effectiveness suffers.⁶

Notwithstanding the above predicament (relevant even today), PSYOPs remain a key element in both combat and peacetime situations and is an important non-lethal force multiplier.

Historically, the application of psychological operations in one form or another has proven to be almost as essential to the successful waging of war as the use of manpower and weaponry. However, in spite of its long history of successful usage, "the potential for using the power of persuasion through psychological operations as a force multiplier to achieve national objectives with a minimum of destruction, has been recognised by very few even among the most perceptive military leaders and statesmen."⁷

Alexander the Great perfected a method of psychological harassment, which was the hidden cause of many of his victories. Alexander developed psychological procedures and his actions were similar to modern-day

psychological operations. He developed the following practices: -

- Maintain good relations with pacifist elements within neighbouring people in order to take advantage of favourable opinions and sentiments.
- Use secret agents to infiltrate and spread rumours and news.
- In moments of crisis, bury the enemy — with public opinion — under an avalanche of information, true or false, that can produce concern, demoralisation and chaos.

Genghis Khan, 'the true father of psychological warfare', is credited with leading huge hordes of savage horsemen across Russia and into Europe. Agents, planted in advance to spread rumours and other forms of propaganda, exaggerated the size of his army. To supplement his PSYOPs activities, Genghis Khan also used rapid troop manoeuvres to confirm the illusion of invincible numbers. Since the Mongols created an image of total barbaric domination, target groups never believed they were the victims of astute psychological warfare.⁸

Other than the above, there are numerous examples in recent times wherein the application of PSYOPs has been a key winning factor, including the current war in Iraq (on this a comprehensive case study will be presented separately). During the Second World War, all sides made extensive use of PSYOPs. The 'Tokyo Rose' of Japan and 'Axis Sally' of Germany are well remembered by veterans. The subtleties of these radio programmes remain unmatched till date. Even the BBC had the most innovative use of PSYOPs when they broadcast English language lessons for the Germans, the would-be invaders from across the English Channel. These were presented in flawless German and the stated purpose of these broadcasts can be analysed from these examples:⁹

"...and so it will be best if you learn a few useful phrases in English before visiting us. For your first lesson, we take 'DIE KANAUEBERFAHRT'. The channel crossing."

"Now, just repeat after me: 'DAS BOOT SINKT.' The boat is sinking. The boat is sinking"

"DAS WASSER IST KALT. The water is cold. SER KALT. Very cold"
"Now I will give you a verb that should be very useful. Again, please repeat after me. ICH BRENNE. I am burning. Du Brennst. You are burning. ER BRENNT. He is burning. WIR BRENNEN. We burn. IHR BRENNT. You

are burning. SIR BRENNEN. They are burning.”

History is replete with examples of PSYOPs applications. Some interesting examples can be seen from the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War I.¹⁰

Korean War

One published report mentioned that Van Fleet banknotes were airdropped over North Korea sometime in 1951 by helicopters assigned to the United States battleship, *New Jersey*.

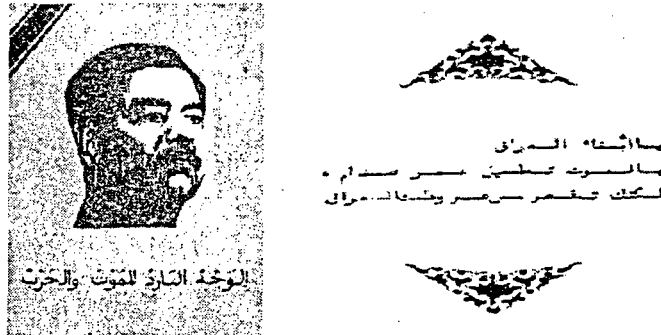


The Ridgway Banknote Leaflet

General Ridgway was appointed commander of all the United Nations forces in Korea on April 11, 1951. One of the most important surrender leaflets printed during Ridgway's tenure was a safe conduct pass altered to

look like the North Korean 100 Won note of 1947. His troops were able to place more than one thousand Ridgway leaflets in an artillery shell and 'sprinkle them like snow'. They were fired at the enemy whenever their troops in the line were changed. The Communists considered possession of these surrender passes to be proof of intent to desert, a charge usually punishable by death which caused significant confusion among the Koreans.¹⁰

Gulf War 1991



Sample of one of the leaflets dropped over Iraq

Translation

Front — The Cold face of death.

Back — O' Sons of Iraq. In your death you lengthen the life of Saddam, but you shorten the life of your homeland Iraq.¹⁰

Information Age and Warfare

Alongside the above mentioned examples of the usage of PSYOPs in conflict situations, civil society had also been making a transition to a new age. Twenty-three years ago, Alvin Toffler referred to this transition as the Third Wave, in his book of the same title.¹¹

According to Toffler, the pattern of societal development follows a series of waves, each of a lesser time-span than the previous one. Toffler writes:

Until now the human race has undergone two great waves of change, each one largely obliterating earlier cultures or civilisations and replacing them with ways of life inconceivable to those who came before. The First Wave of change — the agricultural revolution — took thousands of years to play

itself out. The Second Wave — the rise of industrial civilisation — took a mere three hundred years. Today, history is even more accelerative, and it is likely that the Third Wave will sweep across history and complete itself in a few decades.¹¹

The Third Wave, and the societal revolution, that Toffler predicted, is readily acknowledged today as the Information Revolution/Information Age. The *US Army Field Manual 100-6, 1996 on Information Operations*, describes Information Age as:

The future time period when social, cultural, and economic patterns will reflect the decentralised, non-hierarchical flow of information; contrast this to the more centralised, hierarchical, social, cultural, and economic patterns that reflect the Industrial Age's mechanisation of production systems.

In this age of information, one gets to hear the application of PSYOPs as an important tool in both military and non-military scenarios. There is thus a need to examine the interplay of PSYOPs with Information Warfare. In chapter seven of the RAND Report titled "Strategic Appraisal of Changing Role of Information in Warfare", Brian Nichipauk writes:

"One of the major features of information warfare research is the pot-pourri of different definitions for the term *information warfare*. Without engaging in that debate, this chapter will simply define information warfare as the process of protecting one's own sources of battlefield information and, at the same time, seeking to deny, degrade, corrupt, or destroy the enemy's sources of battlefield information. This is taken to include six pre-existing sub areas that have only recently been grouped together under the heading of information warfare: operational security, electronic warfare (EW), *psychological operations (PSYOPs)*, deception, physical attack on information processes, and information attack on information processes. Since operational security is all about defensive information warfare, it is not as important to us here as the other five sub areas. Therefore, *offensive information warfare* consists of the *aggregation of EW, PSYOPs, deception, physical attack, and information attack*. PSYOPs are all about using information dissemination to weaken the enemy's morale and, ultimately, to break his will to resist."¹²

Thus, this definition of information warfare makes PSYOPs appear as one of the tools of information operations rather than an application/concept, when viewed in the overall ambit of warfare using information. Most of the discussions presented on the websites on information warfare describe

PSYOPs as one of the key elements of information warfare, which uses information to affect enemy reasoning.¹³ In a study at the Swedish Institute of International Relations, an attempt was made to describe different perspectives of the concepts for information warfare itself, and the main conclusion of that study was that the philosophies behind the concepts of information warfare are not something new, but it is the new technology, which is opening up new possibilities. One such example is the attack on the source of information as a weapon. The main focus of discussions on information warfare has been on using the right technology for controlling the information flow surrounding a crisis.¹⁴

As more and more vistas of information technology and cyberspace open up, the understanding of the concept of information warfare is likely to become clearer. In a study at The Emirates Centre of Strategic Studies and Research, Joseph Moynihan writes:

At the greatest level of abstraction, Information Warfare is thought by some to include the public diplomacy programs of US information agency, the covert action programs (propaganda and political actions) of the CIA, perception management, PSYOPs, Command and Control Warfare (C2W), Command, Control and Communication Counter Measures (C3CM) and Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence (C4I) programs of US Department of Defense.¹⁵

Here an attempt is made to come out of the abstractness, to arrive at the authentic domain of definitions, which guide the strategy planners and those involved with the very application of theories and concepts.

The Definition Clutter

Psychological operations may broadly be defined as the planned use of communications to influence human attitudes and behaviour, to create in target groups, behaviour, emotions, and attitudes that support the attainment of national objectives. This form of communication can be as simple as spreading information covertly by word of mouth or through any means of mass media. Interplay with forms of communication and information also explains the mix up with Information Warfare discussed above. Numerous connotations of psychological dimensions of war and related terms are being laid out in the paper to afford better comprehension of the conceptual framework of this subject of considerable depth.

The most comprehensive source of definitions is the Joint Chief of Staff publication titled *US Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms* foreworded by Drew Middleton (Military Correspondent, *The New York Times*). Interestingly, PSYOPs find a special mention in his Foreword. Middleton writes as follows (leaving a doubt about his own understanding of the concept in those times):

At first glance 'psychological operations' and associated terms might seem to offer an entirely new field. But psychological warfare, although not identified by that term, is as old as war itself. All the great captains from Alexander onward have practiced it, although of course they did not use such a high-toned term. In fact, 'psychological operations' and 'military deception' are old friends from over the ages.¹⁶

In this publication, each definition is attached with symbols, i.e., *DOD*, *IADB*, *NATO* and *I*. These symbols denote that the particular definition is to be used by this agency and its components.

(*DOD*) Established for use by all Department of Defense components, which will use the terms and definitions so designed without alteration unless a distinctly different context or application is intended.

(*I*) US Government inter-departmental approval has been achieved for national usage.

(*IADB*) Established for use by the member nations of the Inter-American Defense Board, consisting of: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, United States, Uruguay and Venezuela.

(*NATO*) Established for use by the member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, comprising: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, UK and USA.

Psychological Operations

DOD: "Planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behaviour of foreign governments, organisations, groups, and individuals. The purpose of psychological operations is to induce or

reinforce foreign attitudes and behaviour favourable to the originator's objectives." Also called PSYOP.

IADB: "These operations include psychological warfare and, in addition, encompass those political, military, economic, and ideological actions planned and conducted to create in neutral or friendly foreign groups the emotions, attitudes, or behaviour to support the achievement of national objectives."

NATO: "Planned psychological activities in peace and war directed to enemy, friendly, and neutral audiences in order to influence attitudes and behaviour affecting the achievement of political and military objectives. They include strategic psychological activities, consolidation of psychological operations.

US Army Field Manual 33-1: 'Psychological Operations' definition
"Psychological operations (PSYOPs) include psychological warfare and encompass those political, military, economic, and ideological actions planned and conducted to create in neutral, friendly, and non-hostile foreign groups the emotions, attitudes, or behaviour to support the achievement of national objectives."

Psychological Warfare

DOD, IADB: "The planned use of propaganda and other psychological actions having the primary purpose of influencing the opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviour of hostile foreign groups in such a way as to support the achievement of national objectives."

US Army Field Manual 33-1: 'Psychological Operations' definition):
"Psychological warfare is the planned use of propaganda and other psychological actions to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviour of hostile foreign groups in such a way as to support the achievement of national objectives."

Propaganda

DOD, US Army Field Manual 33-1: 'Psychological Operations' definition):
"Any form of communication in support of national objectives designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behaviour of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly."

Perception

US Army Field Manual 33-1 'Psychological Operations' definition: "...The process of evaluating information which has been received and classified by the five physical senses (vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) and interpreted by *criteria of the culture and society* (emphasis added)."

Perception Management (DOD): "Actions to convey and/or deny selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning; and to intelligence systems and leaders at all levels to influence official estimates, ultimately resulting in foreign behaviours and official actions favourable to the originator's objectives. In various ways, perception management combines truth projection, operations security, cover and deception, and *psychological operations*."

Having gone through the definitions clutter, it is evident that the wafer thin differences between these inter-related terms are difficult to identify, in the first place, and harder to resolve while conceptualising PSYOPs, especially in the Indian context. The NATO definition of PSYOPs can be left out of the discussion due to its structure being specific to usage. As regards *US Field Army Manual 33-1 'Psychological Operations'*, it takes into account the IADB usage. Strangely, the DOD definition allows space for many connotations by bringing in objectives of the originator rather than that of the nation. The rigour of national objectives cannot be diluted at any stage and they act like unquestionable terms of reference for all actions related to PSYOPs, especially in the Indian context.

Also, the denial of information as included in perception management has defensive connotations, whereas, inclusion of 'intelligence systems and leaders' brings in the offensive covert operations to its fold. The purpose of influencing official estimates in the same may require strategic deception and is not a desirable activity for conduct of PSYOPs in the Indian context. Accordingly, a balanced definition of PSYOPs in our context could be on the following lines, taking into consideration the key elements, without being sinister, and away from the mystique of psychology, as suggested below:

Planned use of all forms of communications/information and other psychological actions including political, military, economic and ideological actions, with the purpose of influencing the opinions, emotions, attitudes and behaviour of hostile and non-hostile groups, both foreign and indigenous, in such a way as to support the achievement of national objectives.¹⁷

In this definition, an attempt has been made to answer two basic queries

of what and how. Although, the application of this concept may appear more relevant in the non-military context, it is actually not the case. As in military applications, it is the following three levels which lay down the objectives and nature of PSYOPs without any conceptual modifications. This becomes clearer from their textbook definitions as given below:¹⁸

Strategic PSYOPs: “They are conducted at a global/regional plane to support national strategy. At [the] strategic level, it may take many forms including diplomatic initiatives, aggressive military posturing, policy statements, threat of use of force, military deployment, etc., to send a powerful psychological message of national intent and impending penalties for an act of aggression.”

Operational PSYOPs: “It is conducted within a defined geographic area in support of a theatre commander’s overall plan or as part of joint operations. Conduct of War manoeuvres close to [the] international border/line of control, forward deployment of army units, deliberate disclosure of target vulnerabilities etc., are effective deterrents and potent means of subjugating the enemy into adopting reactive/defensive posture.”

Tactical PSYOPs: “At the tactical level, they are targeted at the individual engagements in consolidation of the overall effort against an opposing force or audience. Publicity of destruction of [the] enemy’s vital installations, images of the dead, propaganda in the form of make-believe planned stories of human rights violations such as cruelty against women and children, invincibility of own forces, etc., have a strong impact on adversary’s morale.”

PSYOPs and Communication

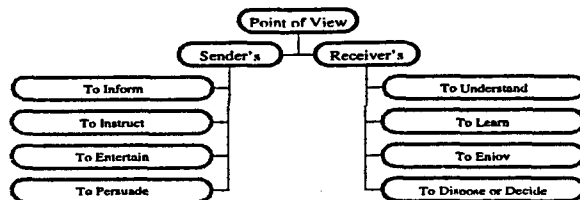
From the examination of a wide variety of definitions, it becomes clear that whatever may be the context, PSYOPs are applicatory in nature and these are related to the conditioning of the mind of the target group. As Phillip P. Katz argues, the function of PSYOPs is to use communication to influence behaviour. Therefore, a basic understanding of the nature of communication in a social environment, and the process of communication (how people communicate with each other) is necessary, in order to develop a meaningful PSYOPs programme. According to him, communication in a very broad sense, includes the various processes by which one person influences another, and involves the total spectrum of human actions, including speech, written matter, music, drama, the pictorial arts, and other forms of behaviour.¹⁹

Melvin L Defleur in his book, *Theories of Mass Communication*, describes human communication as the basis for group norms. It is the means by which social control is exerted, roles are allocated, coordination of effort is achieved, expectations are made manifest, and the social process is carried on.²⁰ Communication then can be considered as a great relating tool. It relates individuals to each other and to their historical perspectives. This makes group functioning possible and allows societies to live in harmony. Link it up with the definitions of perception given above, where emphasis has been added to the fact that human perception is interpreted by the criteria of the culture and society.

Therefore, PSYOPs, being applicatory in nature, deal directly with human behaviour and must come to grips with attitudes, opinions, emotions, and behaviour of the target groups, for, these shape their perceptions, which leads to their reactions to the persuasive nature of PSYOPs communications. In his chapter on “Objectives and Policy: The Nexus”, in a book a Military Propaganda, edited by him, Ron D. Mclaurin writes:

The interests of any single country in the drama of international politics are threatened, protected, served, undermined, or altered as a result of human behaviour. That is, both individual and group behaviour affect national interests, and this is so whether the behaviour be active (such as individual’s speech or a nation’s waging [of] war) or passive (such as beliefs, attitudes, opinions, thoughts, emotions).²¹

Even Cantril, who developed a theory, which brings together perceptual research and the individual’s relations to society and social movements, holds the view that we must deal not only with the ‘objective’ world surrounding a person, but also with his perceptual world as he sees it.²² Accordingly, while planning and conducting PSYOPs, we must have a clear understanding of social communication and the related theories of mass communication, wherein social communications are classified in four categories both from the sender’s or the receiver’s point of view, as follows:²³



It is important that a PSYOPs programme/campaign is designed and developed in a manner that it performs one or more of the above-mentioned functions of social communication depending on the objective and nature of the application.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this paper to understand the conceptual framework of Psychological Operations evolved in the recent times, where the threat to a nation-state exists in the socio-psychological domain and the psychological dimension of a conflict is as important as the physical.

PSYOPs, when used in conjunction with other activities, can make an important contribution towards achieving the overall national objectives by influencing attitudes and behaviour of the affected parties to the conflict, both in times of war and peace. Along with the need for having disciplined, trained, and well-equipped manpower to combat national security challenges, the requirement for a comprehensive national response on a psychological plane cannot be ignored. This response must cover the entire spectrum of the socio-psychological threat in all its varied forms without losing sight of the emerging global trends. There is no denying the fact that we need to first evolve a national philosophy of PSYOPs, including its thrust and a centralised structure, to monitor the same. This will then pave the way for the adoption of that philosophy by respective security agencies in the form of operational doctrines dealing with PSYOPs.

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Lt Col Sunil Narula is a Research Fellow at IDSA. He has been pursuing his specialisation in Psychological Operations since his days in MI-1 at Army HQ during the Kargil War. He is a war wounded and decorated Infantry officer of the J&K Light Infantry, with a Q'I grade in Senior Command Course from College of Combat, Mhow.

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