

# STATES' USE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE TO DETER THREATS

*Gurpreet Rai, Simon Fraser University*

## **Abstract**

The use of psychological tactics and methods has become an integral component of states' strategies to counter threats on a domestic and international level. Psychological warfare can be understood as the "planned use of propaganda and other psychological operations to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviour of opposition groups" (RAND Corporation, 2018). Various methods such as the use of deception, misinformation, lies, honey traps, and propaganda are used to undermine the resolve of the enemy. In the current climate of terrorism and counterinsurgency, these methods are employed to not only defeat the enemy but also to counter threats. The increase in the use of such tactics by states and non-state actors probes an analysis of their effectiveness. Thus, the question that this paper aims to answer is: How effective is the use of psychological methods in countering and deterring threats?

**Keywords:** Psychological warfare, states, intelligence, US

In an attempt to answer this question, this paper will focus on three countries as the main case studies and delve into their adoption and employment of psychological methods: The United States (US), Russia, and India. These three countries have distinctive governing and military approaches, and thus will provide disparate insight into the operations of psychological warfare. Prior to World War II, the US considered psychological operations to be "too dirty and too ineffective to practice" (Wall, 2010). However, considering the US's current strategy in its pursuit against terrorism and overall, within its military operations, the use of psychological methods has been paramount. Similarly, Russia has also actively engaged with psychological warfare methods in its military and "counter-information" operations (Kovalev, 2017). More recently, the Kremlin has been involved with misinformation campaigns in the US, more commonly referred to as "fake news" (Reston, 2017). Furthermore, India has also adopted psychological warfare techniques in its perpetual conflict with Islamist terrorism both at home and with its neighbour Pakistan. In the pursuit of offsetting terrorism within its borders, India has manipulated the education system, employed "people-friendly operations", and engaged in "minority appeasement politics" (Dheeraj, 2018).

Taking all of this into consideration, this research paper will delve into the various methods employed by these countries and evaluate their effectiveness. Overall, the main purpose of this research is to ascertain whether employing psychological warfare operations are successful, and to determine if some methods are more rewarding than others. The objective of this paper is that through this research and with the analysis of the diverse case studies, more insight will be provided on this unconventional method of warfare.

### **Psychological Warfare**

Many scholars have written about psychological warfare as a military and counter-terrorism mechanism. The importance of employing psychological methods during warfare can be traced back to Sun Tzu. Although, he did not use the exact terminology that is used today, Tzu emphasized on the significance of defeating the enemy's strategy without using physical force (Freedman, 2013). This is not to say that psychological warfare methods cannot constitute the use of physical force, states utilize a variety of mechanisms to psychologically target their intended audience. Sun Tzu's recommendations included unconventional methods of war, such as the use of deception, intelligence, and surprise in order to undermine the enemy's morale rather than simply defeating the enemy (McNeilly, 2015). However, in order to better comprehend psychological warfare, it is important to examine the various tactics and strategies in which these methods are used.

Ryan Clow (2008), a civilian employee with the *Canadian Special Operations Forces Command in the Department of National Defence*, focuses on the psychological plane of warfare and argues that although psychological methods are used during combat they have not been used to their full potential. Clow concentrates more on the application and the effects that employing psychological methods have. According to Clow, all psychological operations will have three common objectives at their core; to weaken the will of the adversary, reinforce feelings of friendly target audiences, and to gain the support of uncommitted or undecided audiences. Furthermore, when it comes to efficiently delivering psychological operations, Clow argues that all tactical commanders should carefully consider the opinion of the target audience. That is that military soldiers/officers must understand the complexity of their target audience to fully comprehend the attitudes and behaviours that construct opinions. To this end, Clow suggests that just as important as it is to use tanks and machine guns during war, it is equally as important to utilize anthropologists, linguists, and historian. It is important to understand Clow's assertions as they

provide context to the purpose of psychological operations, that is to undermine the adversarie's morale.

### **Methods**

In order to understand psychological warfare within the context of contemporary threats, it is imperative to assess the utilization of such methods by states. To this end, the US, Russia, and India will be assessed relative to the diverse mechanisms in which they use psychological operations. For the US, the focus will be on its use of psychological warfare methods in its 'war against terrorism' dialogue relative to Islamist terrorism. In the case of Russia, the concentration will be on its engagement in information warfare as related to its misinformation campaigns, hacking, and pro-Russia propaganda. Finally, in assessing India, the emphasis will be on its attempt at undermining Islamist terrorism propaganda within its own territory whilst at the same time maintaining its authority.

### **The US and Psychological Warfare**

With the increase of information sharing, psychological operations have proven to be significant in deterring the threat (Narula, 2018). In the context of the 'war against terrorism', the Pentagon and other US entities have employed psychological tactics in attempts to undermine Islamist terrorism. Managing how information flows and is received has become an integral part of the strategy at home and abroad. It is important to note that psychological warfare methods are not only used on an enemy or adversary, but they are also implemented on a state's own population. This is usually done by states as a means of deterring threats within its boundaries and to influence popular opinion. In the case of Islamist terrorism, after 9/11, the US tried to advance the 'war against terrorism' dialogue to deploy a villain and victim scenario (Louw, 2003). The US promoted this notion in order to legitimize its actions in Afghanistan, which were essentially retaliatory after 9/11. Furthermore, Louw (2003) argued that the White House wanted its citizens, especially Muslim citizens, to believe that by interfering in Afghanistan, they were liberating it from a divergent organization, the Taliban. However, in this case, the 'war against terrorism' doctrine did not convince or achieve the ends that it was set to meet.

The issue with this strategy was that Afghan refugees were not content about being liberated by the US, furthermore, the civilian casualties in Afghanistan seemed to be caused by the US rather than the Taliban (Louw, 2003). Moreover, many academics and policy advisors were quick to point out that the US could

have prevented the catastrophic events of 9/11 had it not been involved in indirectly establishing the Taliban (Ryan, 2004). Lastly, the “war against terrorism” narrative by the US had more negative consequences than positive ones. Instead of creating sympathizers, it created a culture of fear (Brzezinski, 2007). This culture of fear has had detrimental effects on American democracy, as elevated levels of fear have obscured rational reasoning, leading American people to be insecure and paranoid (Brzezinski, 2007). One example of fear superseding rationality is racial profiling, which has caused many issues for those on the receiving end of this predicament (Spann, 2005). For instance, after 9/11, the US government created a ‘special registration’ through the US Patriot Act, which essentially made it mandatory for people, who held visas from Middle Eastern countries to report to the US Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) for questioning, fingerprinting, and identification (Crawford, 2016). Evidently, this narrative has effectively demonized Muslims around the globe.

In the context of contemporary threats, the US has understood the importance of influencing a population, especially in a counterinsurgency situation. In pursuance of building capabilities in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US has employed many psychological operations and tactics. More specifically, the US Marine Corps have tailored their military messaging operations to successfully achieve the intended objectives (Brzezinski, 2007). Some methods that the US Marine Corps found to be effective include face-to-face communication, personal meetings with local elders, and establishing close ties with Afghan media. It is important to note that the purpose of utilizing these methods was to undermine Al-Qaeda’s and the Taliban’s growing support not only in Muslim countries, but also in Western countries. Considering this, US efforts have been less successful, as the US has not been able to effectively counter the Islamist propaganda against the US both domestically and internationally (Brzezinski, 2007).

Similarly, in the case of transnational threats, the US has been struggling to counter organizations, such as the Islamic State. It seems to be the case that terrorist groups have been able to excel in the information war, whereas the US has not been able to capitalize to the same effect (Gompert et. al., 2008). According to the *National Defense Research Institute* (RAND Corporation, 2008), in order to effectively counter transnational threats, the US needs to improve on three levels of information capability: networking, cognition, and psychology. In regard to the psychological domain, RAND Corporation suggests that the US needs to stop promoting a ‘pro-America’ narrative and start popularizing the idea that Islamist terrorist organizations are not capable of representing or providing for ordinary people (Gompert et. al., 2008).

On the other hand, it is not only states that employ psychological warfare methods to undermine the resolve and power of the adversary. Non-state actors, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIS), also engage in these tactics. For instance, ISIS has been successful in using propaganda to gain supporters and momentum around the globe. Thus, in an effort to counter this psychological threat, the US created the *Centre for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications* (CSCC), with the purpose of undermining ISIS' recruitment propaganda, and effectively put an end to their operations that were winning the hearts and minds of people, on an international level (Hamiti, 2016). As an attempt to undermine ISIS' message, the US launched its own "tough and graphic propaganda counteroffensive", which included using ISIS own images of inhuman acts against other Muslims (Hamiti, 2016). Furthermore, as a means of contacting people in ISIS-occupied territories, and to effectively deceive ISIS members of an imminent attack, the US has dropped leaflets in these locations, urging the residents to evacuate the area (Bertrand, 2018). This tactic has been effective as the fear of an attack causes ISIS members to leave those areas and relocate, ultimately resulting in lost territory (Capelouto and Alkhshali, 2016). However, regarding information on the internet and social media, the US has been less successful in countering ISIS influence in North America. Thus, although the US is progressing in its military operations of defeating ISIS and recovering occupied territory, its psychological operations have been less prosperous (Hamiti, 2016).

### **Russia and Psychological Warfare**

Russia has been known to subtly, and in some cases overtly, interfere in the affairs of other countries, often to create doubts about that state's governance and/or to undermine the state's authority (Diamond, 2016). It does this by employing psychological warfare methods such as spreading inaccurate information, censoring the media, deception, and other forms of propaganda.

Russia's psychological warfare strategies are premised around the control and manipulation of information. As Dejean (2017) argued, by stirring "chaos, confusion, and discontent abroad," the Kremlin hopes to strengthen its own position and divert the attention from the economic and political issues at home (p.6). Russia has attempted to do this in the Baltic States by cutting off their internet access, in Ukraine via hacking its electoral system and wiping out part of its power grid, in the Netherlands by attempting to hack government files, in Germany through misinformation campaigns and cyberattacks, and in France by hacking local media outlets (Dejean, 2017). Evidently, within the realm of

information control, Russia has the capability to successfully use methods, such as hacking, to undermine the opposing state's authority.

Furthermore, the most prominent case of Russia using tactics to psychologically meddle in another state's affairs, is Russia's obstruction in the US. It is apparent that the relationship between Russia and the US is strained, and the Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election has not ameliorated these relations. This predicament worsened with the alleged Russian hacking of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), and the emails of the DNC coordinator. These emails revealed controversial content regarding the Clinton Foundation and the mechanisms that resulted in Hilary Clinton defeating Bernie Sanders in the Democratic leadership (Sakwa, 2017). These alleged Russian-led leaks are relative to psychological tactics, as the disclosure of these emails created serious doubts in the minds of Americans not only about the Democratic Party and Hilary Clinton but also concerning American democracy. Despite there not being any direct evidence of the allegations of election-meddling against Russia, American civilians are becoming increasingly weary of Russia and their own political system (Lo, 2017). Nonetheless, Russia's reputation in information warfare and propaganda utilization has progressively become significant.

One of the mechanisms in which Russia influences public opinion in the US is through its international television network (Russia Today), which is funded by the Russian government. This network subtly promotes the interests of Russia by camouflaging its own crimes, and highlighting US disputes (Oates, 2017). For an ordinary American, it would be hard to ascertain that this network actually represents Russian interests as it employs native English speakers alongside modern audio-visual technologies, that very much fit the American perception of the media (Oates, 2017). This adaptation of American culture and technology has made it easier for the Kremlin to spread inaccurate and incomplete information, but because it is relatively imperceptible, it has successfully impacted the hearts and minds of the American people. This winning of the hearts and minds does not refer to the support that Americans have for Russia but to the effective manipulation and influence that will guide their political, economic, and social activities. To this end, Russia has created fake social media profiles, and used targeted advertising to promote themes that echo Donald Trump's political platform, essentially molding people's opinions (Morris, 2018). Now, it is important to keep in mind that it is difficult to determine quantitatively how much sway these psychological methods have and how effective they are.

However, it can be argued that Russia's information warfare and use of psychological warfare methods such as spreading misinformation and propaganda is successful because it creates challenges for American democracy and civilization. For instance, by having the capability to shut down part of a country's power grid, and the ability to hack government websites, Russia has presented itself as a threat and a force that needs to be countered. Civilians becoming more apprehensive whilst engaging with media and discriminatory dialogue has become more prevalent, which portrays the effects of Russian propaganda and infiltration in the US.

### **India and Psychological Warfare**

India mainly uses psychological warfare to counter terrorist propaganda at home, and to deter threats from its neighbour Pakistan (Narula, 2008). One of the core disputes between India and Pakistan is regarding the state of Kashmir, in Northern India. This state is relevant primarily because of its location, as it borders both Pakistan and China. The reason behind the tensions between India and Pakistan are because some parts of this state are administered by Pakistan (Fayaz, 2016). Moreover, in the midst of this conflict, the people residing in Kashmir desire complete independence from both India and Pakistan, which has led to political uncertainty, affecting the millions of people living there (Geelani, 2016). Within the Indian administered areas in Kashmir, people have acquired a great level of resentment towards the Indian state, and thus have organized armed rebellions as a means of undermining India's authority in Kashmir (Geelani, 2016). To maintain its authority and power, India has focused its resources to counter any threats coming from Kashmir.

One method in which India attempts to dilute the tensions and gross human rights violations in Kashmir is through its media broadcasting of Kashmir, which often distorts the real situation and events. Another mechanism employed by the Indian state are concentration camps (Geelani, 2016). Within these camps, Kashmiri people are tortured, mutilated, humiliated, and sexually abused as a means of creating fear and discouraging other Kashmiris from protesting for independence (The Economist, 2016). However, these methods have not been successful in countering the militant forces in Kashmir, as the militancy is revamping and becoming more determined to gain independence from India (Masood, 2018).

Furthermore, Islamist terrorism is also on the rise in India, mostly originating from Kashmir. Although there is no documentation of an official psychological warfare strategy of India, the use of psychological elements is apparent, and can

be examined by looking at the operations directed at domestic adversaries (Indian Muslims), Pakistan, and international audiences (Dheeraj, 2018). One tactic used by Indian agencies is to promote the narrative of national secularism, which allows for the integration of Muslim minorities into the wider society of India (Dheeraj, 2018). However, this method has been ineffective as India's major political parties undermine the concept of secularism and inclusion, by pushing Hindu-motivated agendas (Komireddi, 2009). Furthermore, in an attempt to discourage Indian Muslims from following ISIS ideologies, India has also altered the education system by decreasing the importance of teaching a religious curriculum in Muslim Schools (Dheeraj, 2018). Furthermore, to win the hearts and minds of Indian Muslims, Indian agencies applied intelligence-based methods, which have been effective in Kashmir, as soldiers were able to isolate the terrorists and gain the confidence of civilians (Dheeraj, 2018). However, with the increase of transnational terrorism and globalization, it has been difficult for India to effectively influence the hearts and minds of its own population, or Pakistan's population (Dheeraj, 2018).

### **Findings and Conclusion**

After assessing the US, Russia, and India in relation to their use of psychological warfare methods to counter and/or deter threats, it is apparent that this is a topic that requires extensive research, one that completely evaluates a state's use of psychological warfare methods in all facets of countering threats. However, within the scope of this paper and the extent to which the three states were analyzed, it is evident that in order for psychological operations to be successful, states must acquire appropriate intelligence. It is only with good intelligence that states can determine who to target, how to target, and the consequences of the operations. For instance, the US was ineffective in promoting the 'war against terrorism' propaganda as it inadequately assumed that it would generate a desired result of sympathy and support. Instead, this propaganda fueled the motivation of Islamist organizations and their advertising of anti-American sentiments. Furthermore, India has also been less effective in using psychological warfare methods to counter home-grown Islamist rebels/terrorists. This is attributable to the rise of globalization and the transnational nature of terrorism.

Despite this, Russia has been effective in creating doubt and fear in its adversaries. For instance, by allegedly hacking the DNC email and meddling with the elections, Russia has effectively created doubt and fear in the minds of the American people. Furthermore, it has created a position for itself, one that is capable of interfering with the power grid, internet, media, and electoral systems



of another state. Therefore, although psychological operations are long-term and thus more time needs to prolong to truly determine whether these operations are successful, from this research, Russia has been the most effective in using such methods.

Therefore, based on this research it can be argued that psychological tactics such as hacking and those that relate to information warfare, are more effective in undermining the target's morale and authority. However, hacking and spreading misinformation encompass many moral issues. Thus, if this research was to be continued and expanded, the focus would be on the implications of using such tactics. A further research topic would look into the debate about the morality and legitimacy of employing psychological warfare methods, primarily those that have to do with deception and false propaganda.

In conclusion and to re-address the research question, it can be argued that the effectiveness of employing psychological warfare methods depends on the type of threat, the different methods used, and the purpose of using such methods. For instance, in the three case studies, all three states applied psychological warfare methods to meet different ends and within different contexts. The US focused on Islamist terrorist threats coming from abroad, Russia concentrated on its own political power in the global world, and India focused on domestic Islamist terrorism in the context of its deeply rooted tensions with Pakistan. Thus, it is evident that the success and effectiveness of using such methods is contingent on the logistics of the application of the methods. Russia's use of psychological warfare methods is more effective because it is advanced in technology and is not constrained by the same moral and ethical principles that the US may be restricted by. Therefore, in order to answer the research question, success depends on the state who is applying the methods and the purpose of applying them. Furthermore, in order to truly determine the effectiveness of states' utilization of psychological warfare methods, the cases in which they are used need to be further examined and scrutinized, over a prolonged period of time. In conclusion and to reiterate, psychological warfare methods are effective if and when they are utilized by a state who is not bound by moral/ethical issues and when a state has the ability to successfully incorporate intelligence/information into its operations.

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