

## CHINA'S PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE AND INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

To explain or define Psychological warfare is complicated. However, it is at the core of every warfare since ancient times. This kind of war has been talked about by Kautilya, in Arthashastra, and Sun Tzu too focuses on the same in his work, the Art of War. So does a modern strategist such as Carl von Clausewitz in his work On War. This ancient method of warfare is being used by China against India, and it must be said, quite effectively. As a recent example, months after the Galwan standoff, it became apparent that China remained in strength at different points along the Line of Actual Control, even as talks continued at military and diplomatic levels. Beijing also let loose a number of official statements explicitly blaming India for the whole crisis along with reporting of the prowess of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), was a part of strong psychological warfare against India. However, India was seen reluctant and unsure to release statements against China in this issue. China's psychological tactic works to confuse and affect decision making even in a boisterous democracy like ours. This paper highlights the use of Psy-war between China and India and suggests how India should respond.

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### INTRODUCTION

Months after the Galwan standoff, it became apparent that China remained in strength at different points along the Line of Actual Control, even as talks continued at military and diplomatic levels. Beijing also let loose a number of official statements explicitly blaming India for the whole crisis along with reporting of the prowess of the PLA, was a part of strong psychological warfare against India. It works to confuse and affect decision making in a boisterous democracy like India. On the other hand the Indian Ministry of Defence quickly removed the first official version recording of Chinese transgressions (India Today, 2006), leaving Indians wondering why their government was so nervous about revealing the extent of Chinese perfidy. The once grazing grounds of Ladakh have been lost (The Hindu, 2021) to China's control as part of so called peaceful process and emphasis on 'building bridges' as per Chinese Ambassador, Sun Weidong (The Economic Times, 2021). Such dubious and aggressive engagement by China definitely has had an effect of psy-war against India.

Information superiority over the adversary is an essential prerequisite for a nation to be successful in military operations. Historically, strategists and soldiers have recognised the role of knowledge in warfare. The age-old warfare principles of surprise and deceit embolden the creation and exploitation of an information differential. The same can be recognised in the creation of the Trojan Horse and the subsequent deception; the use of signal mirrors by Hannibal to keep track of Roman movements during the Second Punic War, giving him the benefit of decisive tactical

surprise; (Lt. Col. Fredrick Okello, *et. al.*, 1996) the assertion to have informational supremacy over the enemy in order to achieve victory by Sun Tzu in his treatise the *Art of War* etc. Similar tactics have been used in gulf wars by Iraq, and by countries such as Israel, Iran, United Kingdom, etc. Information today is easily available at one's fingertips. This can be attributed to the growth in information and communications technology (ICT) over the years. The growth of ICT has produced some undesired effects such as the spread of fake news, disinformation campaigns, rumour mongering, etc. The growth of ICT has penetrated the battlefield as well, thus enabling the use of information as 'weapons of war' (Anashwara Ashok, 2020). Information warfare (IW) aims at achieving informational superiority over the adversary by targeting its populace so as to influence their beliefs, opinions, decision making capacity etc. Information Warfare consists of electronic warfare, operational security, psychological operations, deception, physical attacks on information infrastructure, in either offensive or defensive roles (Lt. Gen. (Dr.) Vijay Kumar Ahluwalia, 2020). The three prominent elements of IW in today's day and age are Electronic Warfare (EW), Cyber Warfare (CW) and Psychological Warfare (PSYWAR).

Psy-war targets the cognitive domain whereas EW and CW are more inclined towards the digital and physical domains. The origin of the concept of PSYWAR can be traced back to Sun Tzu, who in his Art of War wrote 'Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting'. Psy-war involves targeting an adversary's populace cognitive domain (political, military and civilian) to reduce its motivation for fighting, disrupt its decision-making capacity by creating elements of doubt, instigating anti-leadership sentiments etc. This can be achieved by sending signals through various channels public or private diplomacy, the use of media (both domestic and foreign) in official statements or opinion pieces; non-military actions like, economic sanctions, travel restrictions etc. or by military exercises, deployments etc.

#### UNDERSTANDING PSY-WAR

To explain or define Psychological warfare is complicated. However, it is at the core of every warfare from since ancient times. This kind of war has been talked about Kautilya, in Arthashastra, who had an entire chapter on winning a fort without entering it and China's Sun Tzu, focuses on it in his The Art of War. So does a modern strategists such as Carl von Clausewitz in his work On War.

Kautilya states that the king is responsible for protection of the state from external aggression. Kautilya defines war broadly and does not confine it to only the physical or active component of hostility. The four kinds of war are: war by counsel (Mantrayuddha), describing the exercise of diplomacy employed by a weaker king when he considers it unwise to wage an open war; open war (Prakasayuddha), specifying time and place; concealed war (Kutayuddha), which refers to irregular warfare and psychological warfare, including instigation of treachery in the enemy camp; and clandestine war (Gudayuddha), using covert methods to achieve the objective without actually waging a battle. To engage in clandestine war, the king uses his agents, double agents, allies, vassal kings, tribal chiefs, and supporters of the enemy (R.P. Kangle, 1965). Kautilya strongly advocates the use of psychological warfare and propaganda against the enemy forces.

Back in the 1940s, the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) defined psy-war as part of wartime measures which included overt as well as covert ear methods. By 2010, psy-war transformed further into psy-ops or psychological operations with expanded scope. In the globalised world it became part of 'information warfare' as brought out in the Joint Publication by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (Colonel Maxell S. Thibodeaux, 2013). It defined psy-ops as "the key

capability that supports Strategic Communication” by influencing foreign audiences in support of US objectives. It included the role of Special Operations Command, and an array of weapons for commanders and political heads, designed to win the war without fighting.

### CHINA AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE

The concept of psychological warfare was formally inducted in China when, in the month of November 2003, the Communist Part of China's (CPC) Central Committee and the Central Military Commission introduced the concept of the 'Three Warfare' (*san Zhong zhanfa*) (3W) for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) i.e. Public Opinion Warfare (media) (*yulun zhan*), Psychological Warfare (*xinli zhan*) and Legal Warfare (*falu zhan*). Further, the Academy of Military Sciences edition of Science and Military strategy in 2013, followed by the National Defence University's edition of Science and Military strategy in 2015 along with the teaching material used by the National Defence University, *An Introduction to Public Opinion Warfare, Legal Warfare and Psychological Warfare*, helps one understand the extent of the integration of the strategy into the PLA. The Public Opinion Warfare is focussed on using both electronic and print media (including social media) to influence domestic and international public opinion. Public Opinion Warfare targets the cognitive domain of the populace (military, political and civil society) in order to achieve particular political, diplomatic and military goals. Legal warfare is aimed at providing a legal justification for a country's actions and absolving it from any legal liability. Hence the three types of warfares, though distinct from each other, cannot be studied in isolation.

Successful implementation of the 3W strategy involves an effective communication which is ensured by the autocratic hold over military, media and the government by the CCP. The Chinese Military i.e. the PLA is not an army of the state, but is rather the military wing of the CCP (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2015). As outlined by the former Chinese Military Chief, Hu Jintao, 'loyalty to the party' came first, ahead of “ardent love for the people,” and “service to the country” among the five core values of the PLA (James Mulvenon, 2009). The defence policy of China aims to achieve the goal of modernisation of its national defence and armed forces by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, while laying emphasis on the need to make major progress on informationization by 2020 (Ministry of National Defense, The People's Republic of China, 2022). Accordingly, the PLA Strategic Support Force, (PLA SSF) was established with the aim of enhancing space and information warfare capabilities as part of the military reforms of 2015 (S.L. Narasimhan, 2018). The 2019 White Paper on Defence, acknowledges the growing role of the PLA SSF in the integrated development of new combat forces (*The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019*) enhancing the Psywar capabilities of the Chinese.

The CCP's control over the media has been an important tool to guide public opinion within and beyond China so as to help establish the narrative. Global outreach of prominent state sponsored media outlets such as the China Global Television Network (CGTN), the global service of state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV); the English-language newspaper *China Daily*; the CCP mouthpiece *People's Daily*; China Radio International (CRI); and two news agencies, Xinhua and China News Service have increased manifold on all platforms. This exponential outreach can be attributed to increase in funding for these media outlets over the past decade (The Economist, 2017). They ensure that that 'positive propaganda' as promulgated by the CCP coupled with disinformation campaigns is amalgamated, on the international sphere (Anne-Marie Brady, 2015).

## CHINA'S PSYWAR AND INDIA

The economic rise of China has fueled its expansionist aspirations to establish a Sino-centric Asian order, the biggest obstacle to which is India and her multi-polar Asian order. China has accordingly enhanced her Psywar capabilities *vis-a-vis* India. The recent standoff in the eastern Ladakh region and the Doklam standoff in 2017 and related events, present a classic example of China's Psywar against India using diplomacy (including military), media and law. In both instances, the Chinese focussed on three aspects; *one*, China is a just power, *two*, portraying India as the hegemon who had violated China's sovereignty and, *three*, claiming the area of contention as Chinese territory, citing traditional and legally binding treaties. In the 2017 Doklam standoff, the Chinese blamed India for provoking them and violating relevant legal agreements, asserting its claims over the contested territory by referring to the Convention of 1890 which demarcated the boundaries of Sikkim and Tibet. The same was emphasised and endorsed by the State sponsored media of China. The recent standoff in the eastern Ladakh region, is a replay of the Chinese strategy employed in that of 2017. The PLA in its statement, endorsed by the Global Times stated that China has always owned sovereignty and it was the Indians who had violated the terms of the agreement and crossed into their area. A video was released by the Global Times, which showed the PLA carrying out live fire drills and military exercises in the plateau region. Further, in the Pangong Tso region, the Chinese had inscribed a massive mandarin character and a map of China on disputed territory (D.H. Web Desk, 2020). Other instances include (but is not limited to) the modernisation of infrastructure and increased military exercises over the past decade in the plateau of Tibet; (Abhijit Singh, 2013) the practice of Cartographic aggression via the publication of distorted maps to include the Indian territories of Aksai-chin and Arunachal Pradesh as part of Chinese Territory (Lt. Gen. Prakash Katoch, 2017); the warning issued to INS Airawat, operating in off the coast of Vietnam, emanating from a Chinese source in 2011, (Abhijit Singh, 2013) etc.

In response to the Galwan Valley clash, the Indian Government banned 59 Apps of Chinese origin which is said to have caused significant economic loss the Chinese (Byte Dance, 2020). Chinese companies investing in Indian infrastructure projects are undergoing strict scrutiny. The surprise visit of the Hon'ble Prime Minister and the Defence Minister to eastern Ladakh close to the LAC can also be understood to be an effective response. These measures, though effective are not sufficient to tackle psychological warfare in the long run. The Indian Armed Forces recognise the importance of IW and its relevance in modern and future battles. IW has also been emphasised on in various doctrines of the armed forces including that of 2004 and 2018. The 2018 Land Warfare doctrine stresses on the importance of IW as follows:

“Due to increased threat of hybrid warfare, the Indian Army will prosecute operations with designated forces, equipped and mandated to effect attacks/retaliation in the Information Warfare (IW) domain. Adequate capabilities will be developed to dominate the hybrid warfare environment, both along our Northern and Western borders and in dealing with internal security, in coordination with earmarked services and agencies.”

It is imperative that India enhances her IW capabilities and reforms to achieve the same are necessary.

Chinese media messaging is the first level of executing Psywar. The ongoing Chinese psywar effort used strong media messaging, including CCTV footage of the swift mobilisation of troops by air and train from Hubei province to the Indian borders, in a 'few hours'. That claim was aired on world media, and believed entirely, given the Chinese road and rail networks to the border.

No one pointed out that the troops were from the Wuhan area, the birth place of coronavirus and the possibility of the troops being infected. And also, that India had troops already accustomed to high altitudes at the location as compared to the Chinese troops being brought to high altitude from sea levels. All this could have been part of India's psywar ops. However, India missed.

Another set of reports were on the deployment of an array of high-altitude advanced weapons, including the Z-10 attack helicopter, and videos of exercises. The devil, however, lies in the details. The Z-10 was inducted into the Pakistani Air Force in 2015. Its underpowered engines made it unsuitable for high altitudes, in particular, which led Islamabad to lobby for Turkish helicopters powered by American engines just two years later (Eurasian Times, 2019). Little of this reality was apparent in the Indian media coverage.

Other psywar tools included reports of karate fighters being deployed in Galwan, which was lapped up on WhatsApp. A separate set of claims related to naval capabilities aimed at the three US aircraft carriers in the South China Sea were also floated. That didn't work much, and the powerful fleet continues to be in the area. It didn't work because it was quite contrary to reality. The US and China know that the Stars and Stripes prevails at sea.

Wolf warriors (The Daily Guardian, 2020) is another level of China's method of destroying psych of the opponent, India. The ministers, officials including the ambassadors of China, use 'strategic' messages that portray President Xi Jinping as China's deliverance rather than the power grabber that he is. It includes 'power messaging', like his directive to the PLA to prepare for war, and the strong imagery evident in the 'wolf warrior' terminology.

Predictably, one of the first 'wolf' diplomats was Zhao Lijian, the former Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, whose tweets alleging racism in the US raised a furore last year. Later, he was 'promoted' to his present post of foreign ministry spokesperson. Another 'wolf warrior' is Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi. Then there was the most subtle psywar of all. Recently, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a rather staggering statement that "freedom, democracy and rule of law are codified in the Chinese constitution". There's more of this kind of talk from other Chinese sources, all aimed at convincing 'friendlies' in the West, especially those with business interests of the benefits of working with China rather than 'de-coupling' from it.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Kargil Review Committee of 1999 recognised the importance of IW, and stressed upon bringing in reforms to enhance India's IW capabilities. An analysis of the threats and capabilities of IW was carried out by the Group of Ministers (GoM) on National Security (Report of the Group of Ministers on National Security, 2001). This led to the creation of institutions such as Computer Emergency Response Team- India (CERT-In), National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) to tackle IW. These institutions have helped in combating IW, but reforms are necessary to tackle modern day challenges. The following recommendations are suggested in order to enhance India's IW capabilities.

### 1. Military restructuring pertaining to IW

The three services have their own Public relations departments which deal with the planning of IW. However, these work in silos due to which there is a lack of co-ordination to effectively tackle IW. Currently, in the Indian Defence structure, no unified machinery to tackle IW exists. Hence, at the strategic level a Directorate for Information Warfare should be set up, which would deal in all aspects of the warfare, as mentioned in the 2004 land warfare doctrine: Command and Control Warfare (C<sup>2</sup>W), Intelligence Based Warfare (IBW), Electronic Warfare



(EW), Psychological Warfare, Cyber Warfare, Economic Information Warfare and Network Centric Warfare (NCW). This would help in tackling the disinformation and false/subversive propaganda in all forms. The Additional Directorate for Public Information (ADGPI) can work in synchronization with the new directorate, providing factually correct information and conducting fact checks across the news disseminated to people.

## 2. Effective Communication Policy

In order to be ready to engage in IW, communication among various stakeholders at the strategic level is of prime importance. It is imperative that all the stakeholders are on the same platform. This will ensure, that disinformation campaigns and rumour mongering is negated. In order to elicit a united and effective response, a coordinated approach has to be adopted by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MoI&B). This is in tandem with the suggestion to establish an institutional framework for border management and security as laid out in the report of the Group of Ministers (GoM) on National Security. The soldiers stationed along the India-China border, are comprised of men and women of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police and the Indian Army who come under the aegis of the MHA and the MOD respectively. The MHA is also responsible for the maintenance of public order within the country. The MEA engages with its counterpart to establish diplomatic channels, while the MOI&B is responsible for the dissemination of information within the country, by providing factual, correct and real time information to the public by the means of press/media releases. The action taken by these four ministries has a bearing on the civil society. Hence the Government of India, must adopt a policy that ensures the smooth flow of information from the borders (under the ambit of MHA and MoD) to the ministries (MEA, MHA, MoD, MoI&B), and finally to the general public in order to bridge the gaps between the general populace and the government and present a united front. The platform of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is not to be undermined. As it can provide a perfect pitch to India in order to showcase China's shortcomings and to weaken its image. At the same time India has been projecting its claim as a formidable and dependable force of the region at SCO (The Diplomat, 2022).

## 3. Narrative Building

One of the primary aim(s) of Psychological Warfare is to target the cognitive domain of the adversary to create confusion among the populace. The Chinese have been successful in achieving this owing to the effective control of the CCP over its state sponsored media. The media engages in warfare by means of spreading disinformation and skewed campaigns targeting the state and its functionaries, while diplomatic channels are engaged in resolving the differences. This helps in establishing a narrative that absolves the Chinese of any wrongdoing or liability. The onus has always been on India to respond with a counter narrative that debunks the Chinese narrative. It is essential that India establishes the narrative, to gain an upper hand. The media (both electronic and print) is one of the most effective means to establish and maintain a narrative, which India must use to provide factual and correct information to her citizens, the Indian diaspora and to other countries as well. The 2004 Land Warfare Doctrine has in the following words acknowledged the role of the media as a proponent of Psychological Warfare and advocates the use of the same.

'Psychological warfare is achieved through mass media such as newspapers, radio and television broadcasts and distribution of leaflets. The prevailing state of information technology allows effective psychological warfare to be conducted in a very subtle manner. In order to be effective, psychological operations need to be

conducted in conjunction with other operations.'

The same has been reiterated in the 2018 Land Warfare Doctrine. Thus, an effective strategy must be developed to disseminate factual and correct information to the general public, keeping in mind National security interests while adhering to constitutional principles. This will help the general populace to disregard the misinformation campaign(s) and doctored narratives of the Chinese and help establish a narrative that cannot be debunked.

#### 4. An Effective Perception Management Policy

Perception management comprises of actions that are aimed at influencing the adversary's opinion and decision-making capacity to favour that of the originator's objective. The advancement of ICT has made easy, the availability of information. China by means of cartographic aggression and the use of the state sponsored media, seeks to dent India's standing among both the domestic and global audience. In the battle of narratives, it has been a pattern for China to establish the narrative and India to counter the same. The Galwan Valley clash, saw the Chinese establish the narrative that India had not adhered to the agreements which led to the said clash. India had to establish a counter narrative to bring to light the truth behind the unfortunate clashes. Thus, it is essential that an effective policy to counter the same is necessary. The dissemination of factual, correct and true information by the GoI to the general public, both within India and beyond will help in establishing China's designs and debunk China's fallacious claims. The role of social media as a tool of perception management has been acknowledged in the Land Warfare Doctrine of 2018 in the following words:

Psychological Warfare will be used to promote own objectives and the Indian Army shall graduate to a state where mass media becomes an organic part of future operations. Social Media, which has emerged as a powerful tool for Public Information and Perception Management, will also be used meaningfully and responsibly to yield desired dividends. (Indian Army Land Warfare Report, 2018).

The effective use of media, particularly social media, can help in establishing a narrative that gives India the upper hand in the battle of narratives and a policy in this regard must be put in place.

#### 5. Integration of Society

An integration all the members of society which include the academic, military, and the civilian population must be undertaken in order to strengthen the national fabric. The government must take into confidence all members, in order to establish a united front. The government must also share factual and true information with the general public, who can disseminate the same via social media. This will ensure that propaganda, fake news and rumours that tarnish the image of India will be debunked within India and abroad.

#### CONCLUSION

The nature of warfare is shifting from conventional means to that of hybrid warfare, thus stressing on the importance of the use of non-kinetic means to achieve kinetic goals. It is essential for India to enhance her Information Warfare capabilities in order to keep at pace with the changing needs of warfare. IW not only affect the strategic mechanisms but the entire society as whole. Thus, there is a need for a strategic revamp if not overhaul of the existing mechanism, while also taking the entire country on board. This will ensure the collective security of all members of the country and that of the country as well. Psy-war will defining the relationship of the two

neighboring powers of Asia and India is in a strong position to use it in its favor. Developing a strong scholarship in this field from a diverse points of view, i.e. in different disciplines, is need of the hour.

**NOTE:** The paper includes the observations from the National level Round Table Discussion organized by the author on the topic of Psychological Warfare of China against India in 2020.

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