Shaping the Information Environment

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Winning wars in the contemporary world are not just limited to gaining victory over the enemy militarily, but also about winning the moral high ground in the public domain in the long term. Towards the end of the 20th century, the conflicts in which the US was engaged in, highlighted the fact that without a strong foundation of public and media support, a country's ability to prosecute a campaign successfully gets seriously eroded. Korea, Vietnam, Central America, Bosnia and Somalia stand out as appropriate examples. However, campaigns which successfully embraced a strong media component like Grenada, Panama, the Gulf War and the current war in Afghanistan have maintained a high degree of public support. The success in the latter cases was a result of a better messaging and communication strategy.

In their book, War and Anti-War, Alvin and Heidi Toffler argued that the way nation states wage war reflects the way they conduct themselves economically in peace. In an earlier work, The Third Wave, Alvin Toffler argued that nation states historically develop through three stages, or 'waves'. First wave societies are largely agrarian in nature, the second wave is industrial and the third wave is post-industrial or 'informational' society. Agrarian societies wage war seasonally so that the farmer soldiers can return for the harvest. Industrial societies wage industrialised warfare with machine guns, tanks, battleships and bombers. Informational societies for whom bits and bytes are the currencies of commerce thus place greater emphasis on information as a weapons system. Across the world and also in India, we see these three different waves overlapping simultaneously. The United States and other advanced societies with advanced military establishments are moving swiftly from the second to the third wave. In India, the pace of advancement is much slower and the nation is still at the infancy stage in applying these resources as a tool for achieving foreign policy and domestic objectives. India's political and military leadership is yet to exploit

the value of strategic perception management capabilities as another means of implementing national foreign and security policy objectives. This perhaps is because we have yet to achieve the level of development which will propel India into the league where we are seen as major players on the world stage. As India strives to achieve that status, it would be appropriate to develop perception management capabilities alongside.

In the battle for shaping attitudes and perceptions, the role of non-state actors is assuming greater significance. While means of communication were earlier solely in the hands of government, the situation today is more diffused. The ongoing 'Arab Spring' which commenced in Tunisia has spread well beyond its borders, overthrowing the dictatorial regime of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. This is a testament to the power of new media which includes the social media exemplified by the internet, Facebook and Twitter, mobile telephones, television and radio. These information technology and mass communication tools in the hands of the people have powered perceptions in an extraordinary effective manner. As tools they are value neutral. In terms of exploitation they could be used by both, the national and anti-national elements to a devastating effect.

A key component of the strategy of non-state actors is to attract support from the population by attaching the insurgency to a 'popular cause', whipping up support on perceived cases of human rights violations, magnifying the failures of the state and the like. This makes it necessary to have a strategy in place to bring out an alternate narrative to counter hostile designs. How this narrative will play out would remain the defining challenge for affected states and their militaries

Policy Aspects

India's external security concerns emanate from an increasingly assertive China pressing its claims on India's land border with Tibet and a hostile Pakistan rendering support to terrorist activities within India. Perception management campaigns need to be developed and executed to undermine the above. Within the country, the key challenge lies in addressing internal security concerns arising out of conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, parts of Northeast India and in areas affected by Left Wing Extremism (LWE). India's core concerns in this regard must be related to events in South Asia, China, South East Asia and the Af-Pak region. Perception management policies need to be shaped accordingly in tune with India's security concerns.

In the context of perception management where the print and visual media plays a major role in shaping perceptions, India's reach is limited. While the US

has the VOA (Voice of America) and the United Kingdom has the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), both with a worldwide reach and high credibility ratings, India's national broadcasters Doordarshan and All India Radio are limited both in reach and credibility. Private media houses in India also have limited reach and influence unlike their counterparts in the West. However, adequate capability exists to shape perceptions within India's neighbourhood. Lack of a public diplomacy division within the Ministry of External Affairs to coordinate perception management efforts hinders any viable strategy in this direction.

Another void in managing perceptions relate to the lack of a doctrine which can synthesise the effort of multiple agencies and lead to synergy in operations. As remarked by Leigh Armistead, "Information Operations crosses so many boundaries within the interagency process that it is often very difficult to quantify exactly what constitutes an information campaign."[1] At times, these operations go beyond the regular hierarchy and standard statement of purposes. Another challenge in undertaking information operations is the presence of numerous layers of bureaucracy that have so far handled the diplomatic efforts. The Army could however be a player within the ambit of a public diplomacy division and could bring its inputs into shaping a coherent policy. All intelligence agencies within India too could play a role in this regard. This highlights the need for both a national doctrine laying down objectives and guidelines for shaping the information environment and a central all-encompassing organisation to oversee the perception management effort at the national level.

Military Imperatives

The Indian Army is viewed as an extremely professional and well-disciplined force and is held in high esteem in the country. However, new challenges and an ever-evolving environment have highlighted the importance of shaping perceptions and realigning perspectives to suit India's core national interests. A positive perception of the Indian Army is an enabler in this respect, for maintaining confidence and morale at home and appropriate deterrence against inimical forces. Perceptions also need to be shaped for the men and women in uniform, the large veteran community and their families. The Force cannot live in isolation and how it perceives itself, affects its self-image.

The core objective for the Army in shaping the information environment would lie in actions that contribute to achieving the following: -

- A better understanding of the force.
- Preserve a positive image among the public.

- Create a deterrent image for the adversary.
- Uphold a professional image for the force and its allies.

Perceptions need to be managed through non-coercive methods which are spread over time to achieve long term objectives. They must be based on truth. The Indian model must be unique and based on our concerns in the region. They must not be too ambitious to be rendered unachievable. At the same time, setting very low goals will also be counterproductive. Agenda setting would also form an essential function of strategic communication. This implies ways of managing public discourse not by attempting to tell people what to think, but by telling them 'what to think about'. It is too dangerous to let adversary countries frame the discourse surrounding a conflict. The Army would have to 'push' information, so that they can 'scoop' the adversaries, pre-empt their stories, and have a pro-active media posture.

Shaping the External Environment

In the Vietnam War, the centre of gravity was correctly perceived as being the US public opinion. The image of the Americans as imperial forces facilitated the fading support for the American war in Vietnam. The enemy could also be targeted by questioning the integrity of his cause, demonising the enemy by emphasising on its ill practices and atrocities and concentrating on and exposing the enemy's fault lines and vulnerabilities.[2] We are however not in the era of long drawn out wars. Future conflict will be short and swift, though sub conventional conflict may stretch out for years. In the Indian context, therefore, the perception management campaign against external actors should cater to India's concerns in the region to promote its core interests. Each country in the region needs to be addressed separately and the campaign focused accordingly. This would lie primarily within the ambit of the Ministries of External Affairs and Information and Broadcasting and partially in the domain of the Ministries of Home and Defence. Diplomatic missions abroad and specific organisations within each ministry remain key players in the above task.

When focused against Pakistan, the stated objectives could be on the following lines: -

- Undermine the propaganda and ideologies of the Pakistan military and its intelligence agencies, especially the ISI, while remaining supportive or at least not hostile to the Pakistani people.
- Undermine Pakistan's support to terrorism activities inside India, both within

Pakistan and across the globe.

- In the event of hostilities with Pakistan, target the mind of the Pakistani soldier and undermine the country's political and military leadership.

India's soft power needs to be effectively used against an indiscriminate Pakistan audience. A carefully designed information campaign can help gain ground if it compels the Pakistani people to question their Army's rationale and actions. The anti-India stance that has made the Army-ISI's importance inevitable in Pakistan can be undermined by targeting the support system of the same. Pakistan's dismal human rights record, its fractured polity, its religious and ethnic fault lines make excellent material for a perception management strategy to be put in place. This should be designed to attain long term objectives which should be stated. The message would have to be put across to the target audience over a prolonged period of time, and periodically reviewed to determine its efficacy on ground.

During conflict and in the pre-hostility stage, the campaign must aim to induce a sense of hopelessness in the Pakistani public, target the will of its political and military leadership, create a wedge between the people and their leaders and induce a collapse of morale at the military tactical level. The activities carried out during peace should have contributed to this process. A combination of hard military actions on the ground, orchestrated world public opinion, targeting the world media trusted by the Pakistani state, use of radio and leaflet drops could contribute to the success of the campaign. These campaigns to have any value must be prepared well before the initiation of hostilities and could be used during the pre-hostilities period itself. In the era of short duration wars, unless a well-designed strategy is already in place, it will fail to have any impact. Post conflict measures must be aimed at conflict stabilisation and aid measures undertaken to assist the public in affected areas.

When focused against China, the stated objectives could be on the following lines: -

- Asserting India's position with respect to its land frontiers, both within China and also on the larger world stage. This would include the illegal Chinese occupation of Aksai Chin, the issue of the Shaksgam Valley illegally ceded to China by Pakistan, the hollowness of Chinese claims over parts of Arunachal Pradesh and other territorial issues.
- Building world and regional opinion against China in support of India's position on its border with Tibet.

- Isolating China in the region.
- In the event of hostilities with China, target the mind of the Chinese soldier and undermine the country's political and military leadership.

China has many ethnic, social and economic fault lines which could be exploited. Besides the indiscriminate public, the target audience could be human rights activists and people of the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Xinjiang province where there is a high anti-establishment sentiment.

In the pre conflict stage and during war, the aim should be to indicate India's resolve to protect its core national interests. To be credible, such claims must be backed by appropriate military capability. Activities carried out during peace should contribute to this process without contributing to war hysteria. The Chinese political and military leadership would need to be undermined in the eyes of the Chinese soldier. Exceptional language skills would be required to target the Chinese soldier through radio broadcasts and the use of leaflets. The population of Tibet and Xinjiang would also need to be targeted to rise against Chinese occupation. Foreign media houses would have to be targeted in support of own operations.

Shaping the Domestic Environment

Shaping the domestic environment lies largely within the ambit of the Ministries of Home Affairs, Defence, and Information and Broadcasting and partially within the ambit of the Ministry of Human Resource Development and Ministry of External Affairs. The domestic environment includes the entire indiscriminate population of the country and also selected discriminate audiences within the country. The former is largely to be addressed by the print and audio visual media and the latter for the most part through psychological operations (psyops). There would be a requirement of a public affairs division functioning under the aegis of the Ministry of Home Affairs to oversee all aspects of perception management for the domestic audience. Psyops functions would be dealt by both, the Military and the Home Ministry with inputs as required from other agencies.

The theme for the indiscriminate audience should preferably be national unity and nation building. This is a function of the Central and state governments and not of India's Military. The latter would have target specific themes, which could be meshed in with national themes. The Defence Ministry would hence require an approach which is different in content and target audience from that of the Home Ministry. Both should therefore function independently in developing

and execution their themes, but within the policy parameters as laid down by the Central Government. All activities within the country must be coordinated to achieve synergy in impact. The major part of the Army's psyops campaign should be devoted to those areas where it is engaged in conflict (J&K and Northeast India) as also where it may be employed in the future (as an example, in areas affected by LWE).

Insurgency Affected Areas

The Army has for decades been dealing with the terrorists in the physical domain, but must now also address the issue at the psychological level. Objectives would depend on causative factors, underlying ideology, role of non-state actors and the like. Some stated objectives for the perception management campaign could be as under: -

- Undermine the propaganda and ideologies of the insurgent groups while remaining supportive of the local population.
- Undermine foreign support to insurgents and terrorists.
- Restore the authority of the state and give to the general public a sense of security and confidence in the Army.

The underlying message that has to be delivered is that the Army is the 'People's Army' and is there to protect the people. While its actions against terrorists may at times cause inconvenience to the people, this in no way implies that the Army is not their friend. The image of a friend they can trust - an 'iron fist in a velvet glove' is what needs to be imbibed by the local people. The aim is to wean away the terrorist/ insurgent from the people. Without the people, the insurgent is like a fish without water and will be unable to operate. Some illustrative themes which could form part of the Army's psyops effort are as under: -

- The Army is there for the long haul and will remain till peace is restored.
- The Army is invincible and will win against the insurgents.
- The terrorists and insurgents are carrying out the agenda of a foreign government. They are ruining the future of your children and are an obstacle to your progress and development.
- India's democracy and system of governance is vibrant enough to resolve all the grievances of the people.
- The terrorists and insurgents have made insurgency a business concern to promote their own lavish lifestyle.

How a single soldier or small sub unit handles a tactical situation in an out-of-the-way location still has the potential to make global headlines.

● Expose the hollowness of the militant's claims and drive a wedge between them and their support base.
● Focus on the women, especially the mothers who hold a pivotal role in family affairs to wean away the youth from militancy.

Troops in Contact

While words can be drafted and communicated in very short order, the deeds of individuals, organisations, and even the nation tend to have the strongest and most enduring message that is understood by audiences. Examples of actions being out of sync with words are available in large measures in the way LWE is being handled. While constitutional and other provisions have been made to protect tribal land holdings, actions by state governments in acquiring tribal land for other purposes sends a palpably wrong message.

The Indian Army's excellent human rights record while combating insurgency over six decades gets sullied with a few incidents. Years of goodwill can be frittered away by one action which is perceived to be anti-people. The death of Thangjam Manorama Devi while in the custody of 17 Assam Rifles, the Pathribal incident and the death of two villagers in Machchal are prime examples. The manner in which the military interacts with the civil population thus sends a message to the target population which may not necessarily be the messages we intended to send. The behaviour of every soldier impacts on how the force is perceived. Because of the globalisation of media, how a single soldier or small sub unit handles a tactical situation in an out-of-the-way location still has the potential to make global headlines and have a strategic impact. Indigenous individuals with whom troops interact form favorable or unfavorable impressions and spread those impressions by word of mouth through surprisingly large networks. The behaviour of troops with the local population in conflict zones would thus form a critical input in how they and the organisation they represent are perceived. While economic and other assistance rendered to the local population by the military through civic action and other programmes contributes to building goodwill, it must be remembered that best practices are simply avoidance of worst practices.

Shaping the environment in insurgency affected areas therefore, depends for the most part on troop actions and behaviour. This, in conjunction with psyops campaigns will form the complete gamut of the perception management

paradigm. All troop actions on the ground must be in conformity with what is being said in the message. The image of a civilian friendly soldier will evaporate rather quickly if actions by ground troops do not live up to that reality. Commanding Officers in particular have an important role to play in this regard. Cultural sensitivity and language skills will go a long way in establishing a bond between the soldier and the people he is mandated to protect. Cultural awareness and sensitivity towards the local population in insurgency affected areas would help in improved Army relationship with the people and reduce instances of human rights violations which can have serious strategic consequences, though perpetrated by a few misguided elements at the tactical level. The role of the Indian Army in combatting insurgencies is unparalleled and its practices are a model of restraint and prudence for all foreign armies. However, there are times when some unwanted actions of a few personnel brand the force in a negative light. Offences by troops must be swiftly punished to deter recurrence as also to create the desired impact amongst the people.

Within the military, effective communications and information availability is important for role clarity and preventing the spread of rumours and misinformation. These functions also boost the morale of the soldier, which in turn has an impact on the effectiveness of the operations undertaken. Shaping positive perception can be challenging if there is lack of synergy between the various branches within and outside the Army that are involved in the communication circle. An organisation would have to be created for the purpose.

Impact of Army Psyops

The behaviour of troops with the local population in insurgency hit areas has impacted the latter in different ways and could be said to be a mixed bag. In some areas where the units had good commanding officers, the impact was very positive. In others it remained lukewarm and in some cases became hostile. This simply underlines the fact that commanding officers and senior officers at the brigade, division and corps level have to be specifically chosen for command and staff assignments in counter insurgency. Troops also require to be sensitised to organisational goals. The need for language skills and cultural sensitivity gets repeatedly highlighted but there is still no movement on the ground to improve existing shortcomings.

Civic action has received a better response but its utility is limited. The psyops campaign conducted through the media using both the print and

audio visual format has had little impact in changing mindsets. The effort remains diffused, uncoordinated and largely unthematic. The absence of doctrine and the fact that psyops does not form part of the Army's operational plan is reflected in the poor output in the perception management paradigm. The US has started referring to DIME operations thereby implying the use of Diplomacy, Information Operations, Military Power and Economic Power to be used synergistically to achieve national goals. In India, the element of Information Operations remains left out both at the national level and in all operational orders issued by the Army's senior hierarchy. Mindsets of the military leadership must change if results are to be achieved in shaping perceptions of the target population.

Strategic Imperatives

While engaged in counter insurgency or counter terrorism operations, a key component of Perception Management is the requirement to reach out to the hearts and minds of people who directly or indirectly support the terrorist or who are simply sympathetic to the 'cause'. At the strategic level, this would involve addressing causative factors through political, social and economic tools. Without this effort, a network can actually be defeated militarily, but still maintain support for the 'cause' whilst in a period of hibernation. Drawing on such support, it can eventually regroup and re-emerge stronger, smarter and even more deadly. The resurgence of Maoist activity in India's heartland aptly illustrates the above point. Insurgent and terrorist networks, in a sense could be equated to the story of the demon *Raktabija* in Hindu scriptures. When the demon was slayed, every drop of blood which fell to the ground created another similar demon and thus the demons kept multiplying. Eventually, the Mother Goddess spread her tongue all across the world, to prevent the blood from falling on the ground and only then was the demon slayed. A whole of government approach addressing causative factors is hence required to separate the insurgent from its support base. Only then will insurgency die and wither away.

At the operational level, activities which foment divisions within a terrorist network, undermine the morale of its members (particularly those on the fringe), and drive a wedge between the network and its support base will pay dividends. This is particularly true of third-party[3] supporters whose loyalty is often questionable. While direct action (military, law enforcement, intelligence, political, economic activities) will assist in this effort in the short term, long-term success will only come about when such support is withheld willingly because

the people providing it have been convinced that it is no longer in their best interests to do so.

Campaign Imperatives

Perception Management is not a substitute for capability. In advertising terms, the product has to live up to its brand image otherwise it will lose its credibility. The Army's actions on the ground will thus have to conform to the image which it wishes to create. Capabilities too have to be real otherwise the projection of deterrence will not succeed. Perception Management, in the absence of military capability and 'national will', will fail to deliver the message. There are no 'silver-bullets' that can be employed as war winning strategies in the absence of hard power capabilities. However, in the absence of a perception management strategy, hard fought gains in the operational and tactical sphere can be frittered away and regaining that space would require inordinate effort subsequently.

While executing a strategy, the following aspects must be kept in mind: -

- The need for truth telling is essential. Lying is not only unacceptable, it is counter-productive and will ruin an organisations' credibility from which it will be difficult to recover from. Truth however may take many forms and has many elements. Truth projection refers to those aspects of the truth that we most want to communicate.
- While speed of disseminating information is important, it cannot take the place of accuracy. It is undoubtedly important to get our viewpoint across first as initial impressions generally have a more lasting impact. But the negative impact of inaccurate information being put into the public domain seriously erodes an organisations credibility and image and must be avoided. Winning over trust is a vastly painstaking process which can be dismantled by one impetuous action, especially if it is based on a lie.
- Goal setting must be clear and achievable. Also, acceptance and approval of the final goals by the chain of command is essential and must be embraced and echoed by the entire team. All messages and actions should be developed in support of these goals. Though evolution of goals is possible (and necessary), constantly changing goals and messages will destroy the information campaign and put the overall campaign at risk.
- An analysis of the target audience is essential to maximise the impact of a psyops campaign for there are multiple audiences with which one would have to deal. These could be the local public, groups with particular religious

leanings and beliefs, groups based on language and other cultural facets, women and children in an insurgency affected area, local government officials, politicians, own soldiers, their families and so on. Developing audience analysis and profiles is both an art and a science. Each of these audiences is important. Each is radically different. And each must be understood.

- While developing messages, it may be worthwhile to co-opt specialists such as psychologists, sociologists and scholars for preparing appropriate content. Messages must be target specific and not indiscriminate. More importantly, as messages are created, they must be backed up with action. Without 'mutually supportive words and deeds', the entire communications efforts will be counter-productive. It would be well to remember what is said in advertising jargon, 'Nothing kills a bad product faster than good advertising'! The message must hence fit in with the execution plan of a campaign and with the capabilities of the troops. It has to be disseminated to the right audiences, and must be done with 'reach' and frequency.

Conclusion

The leadership at all levels will need to be trained on using perception management techniques as a force multiplier. Training must include developing leaders in such a way that they learn to thrive on chaos, complexity, and uncertainty. There will be at once too little knowledge or too much information and the Army would have to adjust to this reality. There will also be the challenge of finding and retaining talent that can be used for shaping the information environment. The sort of talent needed is presently flowing towards high-tech internet companies, media houses, advertising and entertainment. How professionals can be hired for specific tasks should be looked into and procedures formulated for appropriate remuneration.

Within the system, there are many Army personnel who have such skills. They need to be identified and thereafter employed in the required manner. Unless persons with the necessary skill and talent sets are made available for psyops functions, the results on the ground will be sub-standard. The Army will also have to understand that the type of talent required is unlikely to conform to the strict code military discipline applicable to its fighting formations. Odd personalities and habits would need to be tolerated as uniforms and standard schedules are unlikely to work. The army would perhaps have to understand and accept that people in the psyops business would perform better with non-regulation lifestyles.

Finally, shaping the information environment is the need of the hour and must be undertaken as a war winning strategy within the country. There is a need to create a strong organisation to look into all aspects of perception management both at the level of the central government and within the military. There is also a need for a supporting doctrine both at the national level and in the armed forces. How we develop our structures will determine our future capability in this regard.

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Notes

1. Leigh Armistead, Information Operations Matters: Best Practices, New Delhi: Vij Books India Pt Ltd, 2010.
2. Anthony R. Pratkanis, "Winning hearts and Minds: A social Influence Analysis in John Arquilla and Douglas A. Borer, Information Strategy and Warfare: A Guide to Theory and Practice, New York: Routledge, 2007.
3. Third party supporters refers to financial houses which act as conduits for money transfer, NGOs, charitable trusts, activists, media personalities and others who are not directly involved in the conflict.