

Political Warfare: An Emerging Threat to Nation States

Brigadier Narender Kumar, SM, VSM (Retd)[®]

Abstract

Political warfare is emerging as a preferred tool to fight modern wars. It provides deniability and scope to turn social, political and religious fault-lines into belligerent forces to fight from within. The collapse of regimes, and even states, is a possibility. However, it is difficult to predict the end state or outcome of the war. To fight and defend against such a threat, there is a need for heavy investment in intelligence operations. Best defence is to make institutions of governance and civil society so robust that they do not succumb to the directed attacks by multiple agents of political warfare.

Introduction

During the World War I and II, Japan, Germany, France and even the Great Britain were reduced to rubble but rose from ruins and regained their lost glory. The reason for rapid rise was that the history, culture and nationalism could not be destroyed by bombs, rockets and big armies. If nations and societies lose heritage, nationalism, history and culture then it becomes near impossible for the people to reconstruct their nations to earlier glory. It is near impossible today to alter national boundaries by use of military power, however, political warfare has the potential to alter national boundaries, affect regime change and reduce the nations to chaotic fragmented states. It is imperative for the security establishments to understand the lethality of political warfare. Strong armies are unusable force as response option to political warfare; however, Special Forces, cyber, information, electronic and psychological warfare do play an important role in political warfare. The United States (US) and Europe used political warfare as the main tool to break Soviet Union and with the same strategy they

[®]Brigadier Narender Kumar, SM, VSM (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI, New Delhi. He has authored a book on "Challenges in the Indian Ocean Region and Response Options".

dismantled Yugoslavia few years later. The first war where people fought with each other for their own identity and perceived regional or racial nationalism was Yugoslavia. This was a classic case of hybrid and grey zone conflict preceded by political warfare. In Yugoslavia, the seed was sown in the minds of the people of different nationalities that Yugoslavia was an artificial country brought together by force and by subjugation of ethnic minorities by Serbs.

Understanding of Political Warfare

In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives.¹ In a more precise manner, political warfare refers to the employment of military, intelligence, diplomatic, financial, and other means—short of conventional war—to achieve national objectives.² Political warfare consists of the intentional use of one or more of the implements of power—diplomatic/political, information/cyber, military/intelligence, and economic—to affect the political composition or decision making in a state.³ Political warfare involves developing political alliance for resistance against the political establishment in power and “white” propaganda to undermine the credibility of the ruling party. It also consists of covert operations as clandestine support of “friendly” foreign elements to subvert institutions of governance, “black” psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.⁴

Political warfare often is conducted in the shadows.⁵ Political warfare involves some of the elements of grey-zone operations and hybrid warfare, which include activities such as subversion, foreign interference and utilisation of Special Forces. These measures are provocative and escalating but still designed to be non-kinetic and non-lethal.⁶ The visible faces of political warfare are proxies- benign and friendly political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), disaffected ethnic groups, and civil society organisations that appear independent but are actually backed, if not controlled, by states from behind the scenes—or else quasi-government agencies and even corporations.⁷ British East India Company was a perfect example of political warfare that gained access to the Princely Indian States as partners, but slowly colonised entire India. The advantage of political war, as it manifests today, is deniability and chance of giving creditability if it is initiated through domestic credible entities. Political warfare is a potent and

nuanced warfare; it would require collaboration of diplomatic, informational, military and economic (DIME) institutions of the state to target an adversary. It must have a strong and convincing theme around which a false narrative can be weaved. Today the US, Russia and China are pursuing this warfare far more vigorously than any other country. Venezuela and Iran are targets of the US lethal political war. Liberal democracies also use foreign aid as a means of achieving their political objectives.⁸ Economic sanctions are one of the tools of political warfare to shape the behaviour of a nation that is not falling in line.

Muddling with the Notion of Nation State. Russia's current disinformation model is premised on the concept of a "firehose of falsehood"—repetitive, fast paced, continuous, high-volume information attacks from a variety of sources.⁹ The aim is to muddle the notion of truth or objectivity, blur the line between fact and falsehood, and sow confusion among the public¹⁰ against constitutionally elected governments. In fact, digital manipulation of sound, images, or videos to impersonate someone or make it appear that a person or organisation did something¹¹ is fast becoming a potent tool of political warfare to create trust deficit between people and the state. Such exploitation of technology to manufacture reality, for creation of dissonance among the public, can create unsustainable environment for local governments to function. Larger aim of such a strategy is to disrupt the governance, destroy the democratic institutions of the state and disempower civil society to trigger instability. The overall objective is to weaken the "notion of nation state" and disengage people with the state.

Radicalisation: A Potent Tool of Political Warfare. Radicalisation and altering of perception of the people, or an ethnic community, by use of worldwide network of cultural, informational, and influence operations, backed by material support and religious discourse, is also part of the political warfare. The religious tourism, funding of clerics and creation of infrastructure to spread an ideology that can be used to shape perception of the people, with a view to create disaffection with the state, is also part of shaping strategy of the political war.

Lethal Modern Political War

Political war in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen, popularly known as 'Arab Spring', had gone terribly wrong; as a result Libya,

Yemen and Syria have all collapsed into civil wars.¹² Libya, Syria and Yemen may never be same again because the objective of the war was to create conditions for regime change but it led to destruction of states. Tunisia was the only state that stayed the course of its political transition¹³ primarily due to its robust institutions. Egypt is struggling to regain balance and continues to remain politically unstable. In fact, Tunisia's civil society institutions were far stronger and created conditions for the noble minded civil society leaders to develop consensus among the rival political leaders to end political anarchy and re-establish a democratic regime with popular support of the people. The new generation political war has reached the homes and streets and citizens have turned foot soldiers.

Monopoly of the State over Warfare is Diminishing. The spectrum of conflict is changing, state on state wars are becoming expensive and unaffordable due to lethality and destructive nature of modern wars. The question is, are we returning to pre-Westphalian forms of warfare, where it is ambiguous to understand, whom do they fight, why do they fight, how do they fight and 'what they fight for'? This is the warfare that is likely to dominate the next few decades. The modern wars have grey zone, hybrid, political and even conventional elements embedded in it. There are states, super empowered autonomous institutions, NGOs, criminals and non-state actors (stand alone or supported by states) that could join to fight a war to achieve their respective objectives. As a result, the monopoly of the state over warfare is slowly diminishing and non-state actors are in a position to create a scenario where states appear to be at war with their own subjects. During the contemporary period, the war is played out at two levels – a trial of strength on the physical level, and a clash of wills on the psychological level.¹⁴ In the modern paradigm, the primary objective to wage a war is to bleed nations for prolonged period, stunt growth and regime change by creating unsustainable conditions on the ground for the democratic institutions to function. Jihadists have made it possible to fight this war in the name of religion and ideology with a promise to return to the golden era.

Political Warfare Exploits Space between War and Peace. The Cold War was a 45-year-long grey zone struggle, in which the West succeeded in checking the spread of communism and ultimately witnessed the dissolution of the Soviet Union¹⁵ without

direct military confrontation or firing a bullet. It is important to understand that, “space between war and peace is not empty”¹⁶ and if it is allowed to be kept without being controlled or monitored, adversaries will engage, through irregular forces and primary agents of political warfare. In fact, political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz’s doctrine in time of peace.¹⁷ The lethal political warfare has the potential to exploit the space between war and peace to turn streets into battlegrounds, and citizens as warriors, with an aim to erode institutions of governance. It has the potential to create disaffection among the citizens, ability to create political dissonance that could lead to uncontrolled chaos on the streets and thereby, provoking states to fight their own people. The emerging contours of conflict have the potential to make a state collapse from within, not in decades but in a matter of few years and months. Most significant aspect of new wars is that there are tools that are able to convert everything to belligerent so as to create scenarios or likelihood of escalation of conflict. Political warfare enables hybrid and grey zone conflicts and is not a replacement for conventional or sub-conventional wars. Political warfare can achieve desired objectives at lower cost; however, the end state remains unpredictable.

Van Guard for Irregular and Unrestricted Warfare. Political warfare is now becoming a van guard for irregular and unrestricted war and therefore, there is a need to develop a deeper understanding and conceptualisation of evolving political warfare. One must keep it in view that political warfare targets democratic institutions, governance, economic sphere and public conscience. Political warfare is lethal and unpredictable, can spiral out of control of the initiators, and the outcome can be completely unexpected. World has witnessed what happened in West Asia and even China is facing a dilemma on how to handle prolonged political unrest in Hong Kong that could emerge as a platform for initiating political warfare against China. Biggest threat to China today is not from military aggression or economic strangulation by West, but from the sophisticated political warfare that can trigger uncontrolled chaos.

Non-state Actors Flourish Post State/Societal Eruption. In fact, once the political warfare causes fragmentation of societies and states on ethnic, political and ideological lines, non-state actors find space to gain foot hold in a chaotic environment. There are

also tendencies among the religious and political agents of the political warfare to spiral out of control and become autonomous to achieve their own religious or political objectives. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Taliban and Al Qaeda are the by-product of political warfare. These terror organisations have gone astray after having been part of political warfare in the initial stages along with their allies/partners. Therefore, allies and stakeholders could clash if their interests are not aligned post eruption of states and societies.

Pakistan's Political Warfare against India

Pakistan is making serious attempts to unleash political warfare to create political, communal and economic instability in India. There was a deliberate attempt, by the proxies and corroborators, to discredit entire democratic process of India by questioning the credibility of the Election Commission and the electronic voting system. Similarly, if functioning of financial institutes and banking system is discredited, it can lead to collapse of economy and financial viability of a state. Political warfare thrives when fictions are converted into facts by bringing on board gullible political parties, NGOs, media, and even self-acclaimed independent international agencies. Political warfare enables hybrid and conventional wars to achieve objectives at lower cost. Kashmir is witnessing a very sophisticated political warfare, where endeavour is made to discredit the institutions of governance. Election boycott and projection of complete lockdown, or forced shut down under coercion, are some of the facets of ongoing political war in the Valley.

Mechanism to Fightback Political Warfare

Political warfare requires heavy investment in intelligence to detect it at an early stage of manifestation. The governments must strengthen institutions of governance, to make them robust and credible, which are able to deflect repeated attacks through the tools of political warfare. One must be mindful that there are multiple tools of directing political warfare and an adversary will not use same tool time and again, and will surprise by opening different fronts to achieve success. The situation also requires democratic nations to develop the capacity to react proportionately to achieve a deterrent effect. This can be achieved through the development of specifically crafted practical "grey-zone" response option – which doesn't mean engaging in retaliatory subversion, but instead utilising

the value-based argument, amongst other tactics, to win the narrative war.¹⁸

The political warfare is directed to manipulate perception of the people and institutions of governance. Therefore, developing citizens as warriors to expose false narrative by adversaries is one of the best ways to fight back. Cyber spear and cyber shield is another potent offensive and defensive tool to fight political warfare. Cyber spear must be used to decode impersonation, voice modulation, expose falsehood and discredit the aggressor for falsehood. Cyber shield is imperative to prevent hacking of systems and putting up impenetrable fire walls. Non-state actors can conduct political warfare with unprecedented reach because they are faceless and amorphous, thus use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to decode the identity of the non-state actors and their place of origin is imperative. The information arena is an increasingly important battleground, where perceptions of success can be determinative.¹⁹ Ethnic and religious harmony act as shield against political warfare.

There is a need for a strategy to fight political warfare. It requires the institutions of democracy: credible political system that is able to give stable governance, political leaders capable of delivery of governance, a bureaucracy capable of implementing that governance, and civil society groups able to provide support and stability to those institutions.²⁰ In nutshell, political war can be dealt with effectively by whole of government approach. To formulate a doctrine and concept of operations, it is important to develop understanding of this new age warfare.

The military component that should be spearheading the response to political warfare is Special Operation Forces, cyber and information warriors. The role of military is vital for countering and launching political warfare. First on the ground, in a target country, ideally should be Special Forces to coordinate and galvanise public support and once the stage is set, thereafter, cyber and information warriors, and intelligence wings of Special Forces must oversee coordination and direction of operations. This warfare may be whole of the government approach but the operations must be executed with utmost secrecy. During the initial stage of the operations, activities must appear benign and over exposure or over-reaction could compromise response or

retribution. The only way India can make Pakistan pay for the price of cross border terrorism is political warfare. In fact, it may be a monumental mistake to attempt to wrest Pakistan occupied Jammu and Kashmir (POJK) militarily, however, there is a window of opportunity to not only make Pakistan pay the price for its cross border terrorism but also make it unsustainable for it to hold on to POJK.

Conclusion

Political warfare can generate unintended consequences which can, at times, spiral into major challenge for the adversaries. Two important characteristics of political war are; one that it is difficult to predict when this war begins and when it terminates; second that it is ethical denunciation²¹ of formal rules of war. War is a contest of wills, and the digital information age has created a scenario in which political warfare is only going to become more lethal and amorphous. Increasingly it will be about a contest of narratives below the threshold of war.²² Key to succeed is to deny exposed flanks or fractured society and to maintain deniability and surprise while targeting an adversary. Offence is the best option to deter the adversary and thus, conceptualisation and deeper understanding of political warfare is essential.

Endnotes

¹ Danny Pronk, The Return of Political Warfare, *Strategic Monitor* 2018-2019.

² Ibid.

³ George F. Kennan, The Growing Need to Focus on Modern Political Warfare, *Rand Corporation*, RB-10071-A (2019), P 1.

⁴ George F. Kennan, "Organizing Political Warfare", April 30, 1948. Available at the Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive,

⁵ Linda Robinson, Todd C. Helmus, Raphael S. Cohen, Alireza Nader, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, Katya Migacheva, Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses, *Rand Corporation*, P 223.

⁶ Thomas Paterson, The "grey zone": Political Warfare is Back, *The Interpreter*, September 03, 2019

⁷ Robinson, N 5.

⁸ For general overview, see Alsenia and Dollar, 2000; for an example of United States using foreign aid to influence United Nations Security Council members, see Kuziemko and Werker, 2006; for Japan using foreign aid to influence whaling decisions, see Strand and Tuman, 2012.

⁹ Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'firehose of falsehood' propaganda model: Why it might work and options to counter it," (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.

¹⁰ Alina Polyakova, Spencer P. Boyer, *The Future of Political Warfare: Russia, The West, and the Coming Age of Global Digital Competition*, *The Brookings*, March 2018, P 12.

¹¹ Robert Chesney and Danielle Citron, "Deep fakes: A looming crisis for national security, democracy, and privacy?" *The Lawfare Blog*, February 21, 2018, <https://lawfareblog.com/deep-fakes-looming-crisis-national-security-democracy-and-privacy>.

² Amanda Taub, *The unsexy truth about why the Arab Spring failed*, *Vox*, Jan 27, 201

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Bálint Somkuti, Péter Álmos Kiss, *Are we there yet? A critique of 5GW*, Miklós Zrínyi National Defence University, Budapest, Hungary, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2009) 261–274, P 265.

¹⁵ Joseph L. Votel, Charles T. Cleveland, Charles T. Connett, and Will Irwin, *Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone*, Joint Force Quarterly 80 (1st Quarter, January 2016) National Defense University Press, January 01, 2016.

¹⁶ Nadia Schadlow, "Peace and War: The Space Between," *War on the Rocks*, August 2014, available at <http://warontherocks.com/2014/08/peace-and-war-the-space-between/>.

¹⁷ Pronk, N 1.

¹⁸ Paterson, N 6

¹⁹ Robinson, N 5.

²⁰ Taub, N 12.

²¹ David Kennedy, *Modern War and Modern Law*, Accessed from, <http://www.law.harvard.edu/faculty/dkennedy/speeches/War&Law.htm> November 10, 2019.

²² Paterson, N 6.