

Civil Society: A New Theatre of Warfare in India's Internal Security Environment

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*"Those who can make you think the way that's in their interest
enjoy the real power"*

Ajit Doval

Abstract

Civil Society is being referred to as the new frontier of warfare wherein, the adversary tries to subvert the target population through psychological warfare to an extent that they revolt against their own country or start subversive activities. Although psychological warfare existed since ages in security and strategic paradigm, its snowballing with the modern digital technology and proactive participation of civil society is making it more lethal and worrisome. India has been targeted by our enemies in this manner with success and, sometimes, without success. Where such enemy actions have aided insurrections, the result has been very harmful. It is important for India, and indeed all countries, to know how this process is started and given impetus by the intelligence agencies of the enemy state. Only such realisation can enable this insidious danger to be combated which, if neglected, can hollow out the country from within, leading to its downfall or defeat.

Introduction

During the passing out parade of IPS probationers at Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Police Academy (SVPNPA) last year, National Security Advisor Ajit Doval had referred civil society as a new frontier of warfare¹ and this statement triggered a spark in the minds of many intellectuals. Some are taking it differently

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and some are still decoding the real meaning. However, if we pay attention to the terms used and apply some strategic intellect then Doval's statement perfectly aligns with the concept of psychological warfare (PSYWAR) and is quite relevant to India's current internal strategic environment.

Civil Society and Psychological Warfare

Referring civil society as a new frontier of warfare is true because with upcoming generations of warfare and given the changing dynamics of India's internal strategic environment, the civil society will become a significant component of India's internal security architecture. Now a brief explanation on how the civil society becomes a new frontier of warfare and how civilians (civil society) knowingly or unknowingly become a participant of this warfare? Civil society is general population of the state and for any state to face instability, the population is the first and soft target, thereafter population led instability affects the political atmosphere of the state which further leads to political instability and this is what the enemy state wants. To put it simply — what your enemy state can't do from the outside it is doing it from inside that means the intensity of harm which may have resulted from an actual war is far more deadly and effective when deployed from indirect means i.e., using your people and society and turning them against you and your government. Now an obvious question arises that how does a society or population of a state get to be turned hostile towards its own state machinery? For this, we need to delve deeper and understand the concept of psychological war.

Sharing Equations with Psychological Warfare

Civil Society acts as a base of psychological warfare and without instigating/ provoking and creating a mob mentality one cannot trigger internal war or rift within a state and hence the participation of civil society becomes an important and necessary ingredient of psychological warfare. Civil Society participates as a form of weapon with an aim to cause political violence, topple down the ruling government or generate hatred against it. How does that happen and how are different actors involved in constructing this deadly form of warfare?

Understanding the Construct of Psychological Warfare

In psychological warfare, the enemy state often manipulates the

thinking of civil society and tries to mould it in its interest in such a way that it helps the other country to achieve their objectives like destabilising the socio-political environment. Here, manipulation can be defined as tactical usage of propaganda or psychologically colouring the general population with a false narrative eventually leading to an aggressive mob mentality which becomes hostile to the state machinery. When the enemy state succeeds in creating a hostile mob mentality then it only requires a spark which can trigger unrest, riots and violence in the targeted state. Till now we were dealing with a basic understanding of the framework of psychological war. Now it becomes imperative to understand the technicalities of how psychological operations are conducted and how the general population, masked with false narratives, targets the country.

At the first level, the enemy state's intelligence agency assesses the social environment and political processes etc. of the targeted country and infiltrate their operatives inside the targeted country. These operatives identify sensitive issues of the civil society of that country and accordingly create grey zones from which they can mobilise people who may be anti-government or not satisfied with the functioning of the government. The mobilisation process includes the infiltration of foreign operatives or foreign backed terror operatives into different spaces of civil society which later constitutes a mobilised mass. These include NGOs, unions, political or non-political groups, activists etc. Once the mobilisation process gets completed these operatives/subverted actors will negatively colour their psychological belief and behaviour and turn them hostile against the government and society leading to polarisation of the environment, riots, unrest and continue to provoke sensitive subjects of the country through mobilised masses until and unless desirous results are achieved. In some cases, subverted operatives attempt to establish new organisations or unions from the help of the mobilised masses.²

An obvious question that arises here is that means the normal public voicing of grievances against a government becomes a threat? No that is not so. To distinguish a fake from real, we need to see and identify what is a genuine agitation and what is a manufactured agitation which is unnecessarily forced upon to touch the sensitivities of the society. Once these subverted actors succeed in destabilisation, the government of the day or the political

actors will be in the spotlight and blamed for unrest/riots or disturbance which will eventually create an atmosphere of animosity in the society and the government and, as a result, instability prevails not only at the different levels of society but also at different levels in the government. This situation becomes worse when opposition parties in the state capitalise on these kinds of situations to grab political brownie points and to pressurise the ruling government. In short, someone else is held responsible for actions that are in reality executed by someone else. The whole setup of psychological war has one more driving force apart from the civil society that sets the bridge between civil society and propaganda/false narratives. This is Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT).

Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT)

OSINT means intelligence gathered through open-source information such as newspapers, digital space³, WhatsApp, emails, Facebook, Twitter, etc. One provocative or sensitive message or any type of open-source information that has the potential to disturb the peace in the society can destabilise the socio-political environment of the country. This usually takes place whenever and wherever there is polarisation in the society or a situation has been created to deliberately mislead the civil society. These subverted actors of the enemy state use OSINT to circulate fake and provocative messages via their handlers where they are planning to carry out destabilisation.⁴ To have a broader understanding of propaganda there is a clear division in the concept of propaganda which distinguishes different types of propaganda as described by Lerner Daniel, an American scholar:⁵

- **White Propaganda:** Where the news is true and of whistle-blower nature which embarrasses the enemy.
- **Grey Propaganda:** Where the information or news is true but the source is not known
- **Black Propaganda:** Where Information/news is fake and misleading to push the population into the false narrative and colour their psychological beliefs and behaviour against the government; and usually people even don't know that they have been misled. Here the source of information is not known or sometimes kept deceptive or is attributed to a fake source.

Reasons for Waging Psychological Warfare

There are primarily three reasons for waging psychological operations — first, it is intended to bring a regime change/installing favourable government; second, to maximise influence in the region for geopolitical gains; and third, when conditions are not favourable for war. A brief explanation through an example is discussed below:

If state A(targeted state) is not functioning as per the state B (perpetrator), or if the government B feels that the state A might become a subject of potential threat to their country in future and regime change is one effective solution, or state B thinks that influencing or turning the masses of state A towards a certain direction can favour or benefit state B (maximising sphere of influence)⁶, then state B decides to either change the regime by destabilising state A or instilling elements which are pro state B to maximise its sphere of influence. Thus, it achieves its aim not through war or armed conflicts but by psychological operations (PSYOPs). War is not an all-time favourable option and conducting PSYOPs against that country remains an effective option through various means — creating grey zones, carrying out false flag operations through political and non-political subversion, using intelligence agencies from where they can mobilise and provoke sensitive subjects of the country (process explained above). This will automatically build pressure on the government and demoralise the leadership of state A and, in some cases, government (if weak) gets toppled due to enormous pressure of failure in handling riots and political unrest.

Psychological Warfare with Battlefield Perspective

The crux point is that psychological warfare is a war which is fought by invisible soldiers of a state against a targeted state, and weapon involved is the population of the targeted state, and casualty of war involves the government and civil society of the targeted state. In short, without firing a single bullet, our enemy can give inflict wounds which are hard to heal and bring instability to the state apparatus. Subversion of previously aggrieved actors in the civil society is one of the major planks of psychological warfare. They, thereafter, are responsible for spreading poison in society which leads to the state's civil society becoming hostile against its own state. This leads to political and social

destabilisation. When we say subverted actors, it means hostile actors such as enemy's intelligence operatives and sometimes violent state-sponsored actors (terror groups) — who act as sleeper cells — to destabilise the targeted state when the opportunity presents itself. Therefore, after understanding the psychological warfare concept, one cannot deny that civil societies participate in this war, knowingly or unknowingly, and become a participant/actor in the war. Hence, civil society becomes a new domain of warfare. In a battlefield perspective, it is a situation where two states engage in indirect warfare using civil society as a weapon. Once war begins, the enemy state does its best efforts to destabilise the targeted state socially and politically and the targeted state does its best efforts in controlling and demolishing propaganda to extinguish the fire in the civil society and in identifying the subverted actors in the civil societies.

Psychological Warfare in Indian Perspective

For decades, the Indian security establishments, while computing the threats in India's internal security environment, have perhaps not paid much heed to this emerging threat or have never expected psychological warfare taking this much space in the India's internal security environment. Now with realisation of this emerging threat, India is getting cautioned. One can say that maybe the consciousness regarding psychological warfare was much higher in India's external security environment as compared to India's internal environment. India's external Intelligence agency (R&AW) has hands on experience in waging psychological warfare by organising public protests and trading loyalties of people in their inner circles respectively.⁷ However, one cannot shut one's eyes from the fact that India's internal environment has time and again suffered from the Pakistan's ISI backed PFI's hand in Delhi riots.⁸ There are many incidents which are likely to occur if not identified and government or security agencies do not make some hard calls to negate subverted actors or hostile elements in the civil society on time.

Various Theatres of Psychological Warfare

Since the Cold War, psychological warfare was witnessed in various geographies of the world. Two of these are discussed below:

US in Iran: A Classic example of Blame Game.

In April 1953, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was given with a task (operation/project named Ajax) to destabilise the political structure and ruling party in Iran, in other words, to launch a coup against the Iranian Government and establish a puppet government by causing factions in the party or by destabilising and by making opposition party stronger and mobilising people who had non-satisfactory views on the government. This operation was planned to overthrow the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran Mohammad Mosaddegh.⁹ The plan of action of the operation involved CIA agents conducting attacks on mosques and key public figures by posing as members of the communist party. As a result, the Iran Government and party were blamed for the attack, and this led in overthrowing of the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh in favour of strengthening the monarchical rule of the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

China

China is famous for waging psychological and propaganda warfare. Post stepping back from Galwan Valley, the Chinese media started to play victim card and broadcast that India was responsible behind all the tensions and mobilisation at the border. China is playing propaganda tactics to hide its mistakes and to avoid any unrest against the Chinese Government by its people.¹⁰

Conclusion

Psychological warfare in India's security calculus can be said to be an emerging threat which can become lethal to India's internal security structure. Although psychological warfare existed since ages in security and strategic paradigm, its snowballing with the modern digital technology and proactive participation of civil society is making it more lethal and worrisome. A country like India is more vulnerable to exposure to such threats because our society is diverse and has a pluralistic character which makes it more sensitive. A cluster of communal issues emerge on day-to-day basis which can become a hot issue in the blink of an eye or can be escalated by interested parties with the snap of a finger. The same goes for our political environment. India's political environment is also sensitive as it is governed by various domains of the political process (caste, class, etc), and if any speech,

political message, and government-led initiatives touch the wrong nerve or line or get unnecessarily politicised then it can create disturbance in the society and this opportunity can be capitalised upon by some hostile subverted actors to further worsen the situation and destabilising the environment. Hence, there is no denying the fact that the political and societal environment of our country is sensitive and diverse and both sensitivity and diversity make India's civil society vulnerable to psychological warfare making it a possible theatre of new warfare.

Endnotes

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