



March 2022

COMPREHENDING CHINESE PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE AGAINST INDIA

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Edited by: Mihir Kaulgud

Introduction

National interests are of utmost importance for every state in the world and therefore, countries try to play different tactics, depending on the interest and reasonable way to achieve it. As said by the famous phrase, “everything is fair in war” countries adhere to violence to fulfil their nations interests. Talking about psychological warfare, it is a non-violent way of weakening the belief an opponent or enemy possesses in their strength and even to show a superior hand over the other. Further, with the rise of China in terms of economy as well as military, it has started to justify its expansionist propaganda. Beijing can do so with the help of its strong and large military power possessed by the People's Liberation Army. In situations where they are not able to strike with the help of muscle power, China tends to use a unique way of psychological pressure creating a mechanism which tends to rattle the enemy. In recent times, New Delhi has faced an economic standoff, followed by a military/armed deadlock with Beijing. Fortunately, India responded in a positive and strong manner, refusing to move back from the military standoff, resulting in a strategic failure for Beijing.¹ This triggered the Communist Party of China and to fulfil their national interest, Beijing used the fourth-generation tactics of psywar against India, with an intention to disrupt Indian’s psychological confidence.

Therefore, in this light, this article details the issue of China’s new front of war against India. But to understand the current trends, we need to first understand what psywar is and how it evolved. Further, the article will elaborate on the options a country possesses to counter such psychological warfare tactics. Then the paper focuses on how Beijing is using its infrastructure and resources to start a psychological war against New Delhi after its failed attempts to counter and disturb the Asian neighbour with the help of its economic and military power. At last, the paper will try to evaluate the available options that New Delhi holds to counter such psywar initiated by China and how can they even gain an upper hand in the so-called battlefield.

¹Sawhney, P., 2020. How China Turned the Tables on India and Converted 1993 Agreement into a Land Grab. *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/how-china-turned-the-tables-on-india-and-converted-1993-agreement-into-a-land-grab> [Accessed 11 February 2022].

Psywar: A war on the mind

Psychological Warfare, also called ‘psywar’, is a fourth-generation tactic which intends to use various kinds of propaganda against an enemy. Such propaganda can be further supported by military, political, or economic measures with an intention to demoralize the opponent and to break their will or the potential to resist. Psywar is a modern-day tactic to weaken the enemy and to overcome the will to fight or resist, gain more victory or sympathy from friendly, allied or neutral nations and their citizens. As modern-day warfare cannot be merely operated with guns and nuclear powers, the importance of non-lethal ways to weaken the enemy are of utmost importance (Sawhney, 2020). Therefore, fourth-generation warfare tactics gain immense importance and are absolutely necessary to counter the increasing psychological dominance or a sense of upper hand over the other. To achieve the said objective of psywar, the policymakers and think tanks need to gain knowledge of the beliefs, strengths, likes, weaknesses, dislikes, and vulnerabilities of the target nation, government and/or population. The modus operandi for the Psywar is to cleverly ‘weaponize’ information and disseminate it via face-to-face conversation, audio-media visualization or with the help of a news hub.

Generally, the psywar works with three shades of propaganda as marked by Daniel Lerner.² The first, called white propaganda consists of true information with reliable information already being cited and is circulated very aggressively among the enemy population or camps of enemy soldiers. One such instance of white propaganda was witnessed in the Indo-Pak war of 1971, where Indian air force air spread pamphlets all over the Pakistani army base, stating the real condition of their situation and ensuring a peaceful end if surrender. The second shade is called grey propaganda, where information is mostly truthful, but has been modified in such a way that it aids in proclaiming an upper hand over the opponent or to spread such psychological influence over the opponent nation's population. One such example of it is the American media briefings about Gaddafi and his way of work which was showcased and manipulated to justify the Americans and

² Longley, R., 2019. An Introduction to Psychological Warfare. *ThoughtCo.*, Available at: <https://www.thoughtco.com/psychological-warfare-definition-4151867> [Accessed 11 February 2022].

their steps taken to counter his expansion. The last shade is termed as black propaganda.³ ‘False news’ is spread with a sole intention to show that the opponent is weakened and create a psychological pressure on the government as well as to test the fragility of belief in the opponent's camp. One such example of the black propaganda is of China displaying itself at the Galwan clash point, whereas, in reality, it was very far from the site.⁴ Such depiction even raised several voices in India, proving the efficiency of the propaganda. But this illusion was shattered immediately after the Indian army released a picture of the actual situation at the valley. Therefore, it can be said such propagandas might prove very efficient and might have the most immediate impact, they also carry a great and considerable amount of risk. Especially talking about the grey and black propaganda, sooner or later, the target population identifies the information as being false, thus discrediting the source.⁵

Initial years of Psychological Warfare

Although the psywar is fourth-generation tactics of war, its origins can be traced back to the great American revolution. In that era, the British army, symbolized in bright red uniform, was ought to be undefeatable and therefore, to replicate the same idea, George Washington's continental army wore it. Unfortunately, due to its geographical location and terrain, it was easy to locate and resulted in heavy casualties. As the idea failed, no one considered such psychological tactics as a wise idea for a considerable period of time.⁶ The trend, started by the fear of failure, was ended by the fear of failure. As the allied forces feared the defeat against the Hitler's Nazi Germany, they started to circulate courageous stories of their own soldiers around their camps. Through such ideological warfare, the idea of psywar was given birth. Later, various nations around the globe have used the strategy to show themselves infallible.

³ Sawhney, P., 2020. How China Turned the Tables on India and Converted 1993 Agreement into a Land Grab.

⁴ Longley, R., 2019. An Introduction to Psychological Warfare.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

The significance of psychological dominance over the citizens of the enemy as well as friendly states had immense significance in the Cold War phase and therefore, white propaganda was used predominantly. With such psywar between world's two superpowers, The United States of America, and the Soviet Union, not only had an impact on either nation's population but the minds of people all over the world. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the United States was seen as a sole superpower governing various concerns across the globe. It resulted in the decrease of such psywar tactics.⁷ Yet, with the passage of time, the world witnessed the rise of China under its Communist Party. China, with its economic, military as well as manufacturing power, espoused expansionist propaganda and soon began using such tactics to gain influence and to acquire its ambitions over dozens of nations, especially India.

The Chinese way of war: Beijing's psychological warfare against New Delhi

Chinese psychological warfare against India is not recent but holds a long history and also encompasses an enormous amount of deception and fabrication. China's diplomacy and self-claimed military decency has acted as a great shield to hide fabricated unethical tactics. China is heavily dependent on black propaganda and harsh censorship over media. The Chinese Communist Party tries to withhold any news or event which has the potential to hurt their ambition as well as to produce a lot of pseudo-news with an intention to dump across all the social media platforms of the enemy nation, that is, India. It also tries to hide the real news from its own social media platforms such as Weibo and generates a variety of unauthorized news to keep the feeling of

⁷Jain, S., 2017. Doklam standoff: Why China's vicious psychological warfare against India has fallen flat. *Financial Express*, Available at: <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/doklam-standoff-why-chinas-vicious-psychological-warfare-against-india-has-fallen-flat/804335> [Accessed 11 February 2022].

nationalism awake among the Chinese locals.⁸ Further, as India has restricted China from achieving its ambitions in recent time, Beijing has shown great signs of agitation and frustration to counter Indians over various world platforms, especially on Sino-Indian border.

Chinese psywar tactics are diverse and difficult to define. Although, it greatly resembles to what Sun Tzu, an ancient Chinese military strategist described, “when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near”.⁹ For example, soon after the recent military deadlock between People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and Indian Army over a range of points across the Sino-Indian border, Beijing’s saber-rattling has eventually become more discordant. For a temporary observer, the military dispute between two Asian giants would appear impending.¹⁰ China portrays itself as a sufferer by fabricating lies to obscure its intervention in Bhutan, which was the primary reason for escalation of the situation between India and China. The conflict has highlighted the strategy through which Beijing amalgamates its psychological warfare to subvert India’s proficiency and competence.¹¹ Beijing knew that the Indian populace is intolerant towards loss in the battlefield, especially around the Himalayas. Therefore, three months after the Galwan standoff, Beijing showcased that they had an upper hand over various points of LAC, a situation intolerant to India. Beijing released an official statement distinctly inculcating India for the standoff, which was later dismissed by Indian counterparts.¹²

⁸Ahluwalia, L., 2020. India Must Counter Bidirectional Psychological Warfare. *India Blooms*, Available at: <https://www.indiablooms.com/news-details/O/64284/india-must-counter-the-bidirectional-psychological-warfare.html> [Accessed 11 February 2022].

⁹Mitra, S., 2021. China’s psychological warfare against India. *The Kootmite*, Available at: <https://thekootneeti.in/2021/05/27/chinas-psychological-warfare-against-india> [Accessed 11 February 2022]

¹⁰ Mendez, Z., 2020. Understanding Chinese Communist Party's(CCP) Psychological Warfare- Institutions and Strategy adopted against India. The CESCUBE, Available at: <http://www.cescube.com/vp-understanding-chinese-communist-party-s-ccp-psychological-warfare-institutions-and-strategy-adopted-against-india> [Accessed 11 February 2022]

¹¹ Ahluwalia, L., 2020. India Must Counter Bidirectional Psychological Warfare.

¹² Jain, S., 2017. Doklam standoff: Why China’s vicious psychological warfare against India has fallen flat.

The Chinese media, fake Twitter accounts and news hubs constantly displayed the adroitness and capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), clearly exhibiting the psychological warfare against India fabricated to bewilder and influence India’s decision-making capabilities.

A unique psychological warfare: Chinese Communist Party and its propagandist war

Psywar plays a very critical role in China’s policy of annexing other nations' lands and creating disputes arising out of nowhere. As per the famous saying about China’s attitude towards land border, which is also correctly asserted in the case of Sino-Indian standoff since the war of 1961 and 1965:

“A Chinese stands on the border and takes a broad sweep of the neighbor’s land. Then he takes off his hat and throws it across the border. A while later, he points to the hat on the neighbor’s land and says, ‘that hat has been there since antiquity. It proves that this has historically been my land’”¹³

Chinese expansionist policy is constantly based on asserting the culture or heritage linkage of the land with the Chinese mainland. Via such propagandist expansion, China has annexed Tibet, also harassed Vietnam and Philippines and its self-claimed territory, Republic of China (also known as Taiwan).¹⁴ Adding on to it, China’s political system has concentrated all the powers, such as political as well as military, in the hands of President Xi. This makes the Chinese psywar tactics more concentrated and concrete. Yet on the other hand, India, under the strong leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has exercised appropriate strategic approaches to combat China’s profusion of threats. In the given situation, China had realized that India is no Vietnam or Philippines, and it will not be brow-beaten by China and its warmongering. If we take a glimpse

¹³ Ahluwalia, L., 2020. India Must Counter Bidirectional Psychological Warfare.

¹⁴ Jain, S., 2017. Doklam standoff: Why China’s vicious psychological warfare against India has fallen flat.

of the Doklam standoff from New Delhi's perspective, there is no benefit to the country if they pull away from the standoff. Therefore, India must realize the threat of China's psywar tactics as in the future, the threat will only increase.¹⁵

Beijing has developed a complex structure to improvise the propaganda machinery working against India. Xi, with his ideological goals of a communist China, has formulated foreign policy against India.¹⁶ Through such policies, CCP, beside its own state sponsored channel 'Global Times', also backs various international news channels by funding, with an intention to develop a soft corner towards China and gain sympathy for self-claimed pseudo incidence of provocation by the Indian Armed Forces. Further, the CCP also runs a series of Twitter accounts (verified as well as unverified) to spread rumors among the Indian citizens. Through such tactics, CCP uses the local markets, news channels, and online platforms to surround the center. Fourthly, the Chinese One Belt One Road initiative and the Pearl of Chain, surrounding India via land and ocean, has been a very effective psychological strategy to make India panic.

Indian Perspective: a bidirectional psychological warfare

Considering the aggression and psywar from China as well as military aggression from Pakistan and its terror activities, what options does India possess? If New Delhi considers dealing the situation with force, military incursion is the only option that stands out. But it would not be wise as even if we may succeed it will surely be at great economic as well as military loss (Jain, 2017). Considering all the available circumstances, a two front war is neither advisable nor considerable for India's interests at any cost. Coming back to the concerned standoff, China might not take a lot of time to convert the diplomatic talks into a more intensified battle at various points on LAC.¹⁷ The Chinese PLA will try to showcase their bravery as it tried recently in the new year celebration

¹⁵ Mitra, S., 2021. China's psychological warfare against India.

¹⁶ Mendez, Z., 2020. Understanding Chinese Communist Party's(CCP) Psychological Warfare- Institutions and Strategy adopted against India.

¹⁷ Mitra, S., 2021. China's psychological warfare against India.

of 2022. Chinese state media and its official Twitter accounts posted videos where soldiers were witnessed playing patriotic songs. The state media as well as official Twitter accounts further claimed the location to be Galwan valley clash point where nearly 20 Indian soldiers were killed in the standoff. Through this, Beijing created havoc in India as various political parties, opposition leaders, activists, and a considerable amount of the population started pressuring the Indian military. There were also claims that the Indian army failed to counter PLA effectively, resulting in losing trust in the Indian army. Such type of propaganda needs to be countered immediately and responsively before it results in larger damage. The same was done by the Defense Ministry of India by posting a photo of the Indian army personnel at the actual location of the clash. Later, as the propaganda of Beijing was rightfully and timely countered, further investigation revealed that the location of shooting of the video released by Beijing was staged by Chinese actors and not soldiers, located several kilometres away from the Line of Actual Control.

In this case, the reliability and influential power of China and its state media was hurt considerably, resulting in questioning the facts that China spreads. Further, as the psywar strategy of China against India is distinctly directed against four well defined segments of Indian foreign policy: forces on conventional battlefield, leadership, population on both sides, and global community.¹⁸ Considering the recent development between India and China along the border as well as through the psychological warfare and India's successful counter to China, Beijing (especially after the Galwan standoff) might be forced to have swift reforms in its diplomacy and foreign policy towards India. One such example of India being able to neutralize the Chinese dominance was witnessed in Doklam, where even though China continued to give India ultimatums, New Delhi took an insightful decision of not stepping back from the standoff.

Further, as China is infamously known for its counterattacks and vengeance, Indian must be ready for attempts to trespass the LAC even if both the parties agree to disengage. Additionally, it is the time for New Delhi to realize that they lack infrastructure and communicating technologies to combat Beijing attempts to psychologically weaken the morale of Indian personnel along the LAC.

¹⁸ Ahluwalia, L., 2020. India Must Counter Bidirectional Psychological Warfare.

Yet, it is the truth that India's edge over China lies in its democracy.¹⁹ China's psychological warfare will change radically as China's AI development escalates. Therefore, in the future, India must modernize its technology to be at par, but as of now, it must develop a comprehensible strategy as the foundation of psychological war strategy. The authorities should develop a faster and transparent communication with the citizens.

Conclusion

In recent times, it is vital to understand that psywar and its tactics. Further, China's dominance and its aggressive foreign policy is largely backed by its propagandist psychological warfare tactics. The same psywar has been initiated by the People's Liberation Army backed by government officials of China. Therefore, it is the time to consider the potential threat that New Delhi is facing as experienced in the recent Doklam and Galwan standoff. In such circumstances, Beijing's psychological warfare had played a noticeable, but not significant, role. It is beyond doubt that such psychological tactics have been proved efficient and it has resulted in worries in the Indian camp. Psychological warfare tactics, aligned with a series of cyber-attacks, has forced changes in the foreign policy framed by India. The Chinese 'Debt-trap diplomacy' and its 'string of pearls' have been efficient to have influence over India's neighboring countries. In such times, India has leaned towards US, resulting in diplomatic reforms in India's stance over the couple of years. Further, due to the sound think tank and core command structure in New Delhi, it was able to neutralize the threat. Yet, India lacks infrastructure and adequate resources to combat such psywar. Therefore, the need of the hour for the nation is to maintain faith in their own army and think tanks. For the future, build such infrastructure and better communication link between government and the relevant authority with the citizens on the nation.

¹⁹ Mitra, S., 2021. China's psychological warfare against India.

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