



A Role of Media in Sub Conventional Operations

Armed forces must accept the media as an important adjunct to military operations, especially in Sub Conventional Operations, where it is more of winning the hearts and minds of the people, than the tactical operations alone. Media plays a very powerful role in psychological warfare where in maximum use is made of all the media plays a very powerful role in psychological warfare wherein maximum use is made of all the mediums available with the media. The central theme of Psychological operations should be to wean away and isolate the militants from the common masses. For this, the media is an invaluable asset. By co-opting the media, armed forces can draw on their strength and use them to their advantage.

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“Media is the terrorist's best friend. The terrorist act by itself is nothing, publicity is all.” **Walter Lacquer Background.**

In the present socio-economic world order, where nuclear and NBC weapons are widely available, total war would be disastrous for any nation. No nation can risk becoming a pariah in the international community by waging an all out way. Chances of direct conflict are therefore minimised. Thus emerges, what is sometimes called the Sub Conventional War. Sub Conventional War forms part of operations other conflicts than war (OOTW). It includes low intensity Conflict (LIC), which is a generic term encompassing all armed conflicts that are above the level of peaceful co-existence amongst states and below the threshold of war. It figures at the lower end of the spectrum of conflict and is characterised by asymmetry of force levels between regular forces and irregular opposition, where in the force applied and the violence generated depends on the code of conduct and the capabilities of the weaker side, as also the laws of the land which impose restrictions on the actions of security forces. Insurgency, Terrorism and proxy war are the main components of Low Intensity Conflicts Operations (LICO). Border skirmishes also fall within the category. In future, the major international and regional powers will pursue their ambitions through sub conventional operations. Public opinion has become a major factor in pursuance of limited conflict. The media, in turn. Assumes greater importance than in the past.

Media is a news hungry particularly for only sensational news. Such items can only come from activities

of anti-social elements. Hence media becomes quite vulnerable to the terrorists and insurgent groups trying to reach the hearts and minds of the people by populist gimmicks. Media, the world over, is used by terrorists to destroy or degrade the 'will' of the target nation and its armed forces on one hand and to generate favourable opinion at home and abroad on the other.

Indian insurgents and terrorists have shown a remarkable consciousness in managing the media; note the systematic and well-published 'exclusive' stories put out by the media on Kashmir. On the other hand the Indian army has failed to utilise media to its own advantage from the very outset of any counter insurgency counter terrorist operations. Therefore, it finds highly unpalatable and incorrect versions of incidents appearing in the press. 'Operation Blue Star' and Charar-e- Sharief incidents are typical example of failure of media management by the army. It clearly points to weaknesses in the media projections policy. In Sub Conventional Operations, it is the media which when used intelligently, can act as a force multiplier.

Impact of Media Coverage :

Today's terrorist is aware that sympathetic and biased reporting by media helps his cause by enhancing the impact on the local populations. It spread terror and panic among the people. By doing so, it also highlights the might of the movement in an exaggerated manner and corresponding helplessness of the government in dealing with its activities. The impunity with which the terrorists seemingly carry out their acts, builds up their image. A series of such incidents leads to widespread demoralisation of the public. This has

a pronounced impact on the protagonist populations. Impressed by the strength and success of the movement, the public gradually move closer to them. The impact of media on the three affected parties in LIC, insurgent/terrorists, society and security forces, is given in the succeeding paragraphs.

Impact on Insurgents / Terrorist :

(i) Media provides the insurgents/terrorists and exaggerated sense of importance.

(ii) Terrorist actions are designed to play to the galleries via the media, which magnifies the element of horror into every domestic household. This creates a backlash of public opinion and the establishment appears fragile and helpless. All this is ultimately designed to provide a bargaining lever to the terrorists.

(iii) Media displays the 'muscles' of the terrorist/insurgent movement, displaying a Robinhood kind of image, very often when these movements are backed by some external power. It provides the terrorists/insurgents with a large domestic and international audience. It confers recognition and status on the movement, conveying that it is a struggle for a just cause'.

Impact on society :

Media impact on the society cursed by terrorism/insurgency is strong and takes the following forms :

(i) Moulds the public opinion by its selection and presentation of news, analysis and comments.

(ii) Provides feedback to policy makers on the pulse of society.

(iii) Enhances the impact of terrorism on society and helps it grow. This occurs consciously or otherwise by highlighting the might of the movement vis-a-vis helplessness of the government machinery leading to demoralisation of the public, which in turn makes potential sympathisers move closer to the insurgency.

(iv) Isolates the terrorists/insurgent by depicting their acts in the true colours of ruthlessness and brutality. This arouses anger, anguish and revulsion in society leading to alienation of the terrorists from the support base.

Impact of security force :

Being part of the same polity, the security forces are also affected by the media. These effects are :

(i) Assists the security forces in countering militant propaganda, especially allegations by revealing the truth.

(ii) Motivates and builds morale of security forces by recognising their sacrifices thus giving them a sense of fulfilment. Conversely, its biased coverage of counter-insurgency operations has an adverse effect on troop morale.

(iii) Sometimes compromises operational security because of indiscrete leaks of plans, moves and activities of security forces.

(iv) Overzealous reports sometimes hamper negotiations during hostage crisis eg Hijacking of IC 814.

(v) Presence of media during actual operations helps curb human rights violations and also counter false charges of human rights violations operation black thunder and

hazratbal crisis.

What should Armed Forces Do? :

There is an urgent need to synergise the efforts of media and military in Sub Conventional Operations. For the present it is conspicuous by its absence. Many significant acts of bravery and outstanding humanitarian service, rendered by armed forces personnel, often get unnoticed in the press. An objective and dispassionate analysis of the contributing factors leading to such poor coverage reveals that armed forces have no one but themselves to be blame for it.

In normal times, the media has at best remained lukewarm to the armed forces. Due to lack of expertise in dealing with the media, the armed forces reflexively tends to avoid them. Both are wary and apprehensive of each other's role. There is apparent lack of understanding of each other's functioning and their respective role in the society. The easiest way to isolate the local media is to hurt their sentiments. This is done quite often, as the lower rung troops do not understand the implications. Snatching of cameras, breaking of video cameras and physical assaults on journalists covering the news is commonplaces due to the charged atmosphere of operations. Extreme care needs to be taken if the media persons are to be taken in for any questioning as regards their suspected links with the insurgents or any issue related to the insurgency. If an inadvertent error occurs in dealing with them, steps need to be taken at the appropriate levels to assuage the ruffled tempers.

At the same time, media should desist from becoming a publicity tool for the militants. Media needs to remember that they, just like other citizens, are counter terrorists this is not a 'monopoly' or an obligation of the military alone. Keeping in mind the relations between the military and the media are perhaps the most difficult to forge, it is essential that in the LIC, the military builds up a trust with the media and this can be achieved only by transparency.

Transparency :

Transparency is desirable as attempts to hide a bad news can only lead to distortion by the local media. Factual reporting of the incident and promptness regarding causalities to own men and the details of the operations as much as it is relevant to be known to the defence services to open out to the media and understand their functional constraints inhibits the desired level of mutual interaction necessary for objective reporting. Only the vital information needs to be controlled to suit larger organisational interests. At the same time the media needs to be more responsible while sharing sensitive information with the public and it is here that the issue of self censorship comes into play. The editors can play an important role in this and hence maintenance of good relations with editors is necessary. Negative reporting by media at critical juncture should be avoided as it gives fillip to the terrorist activities and at the same time tends to demoralise the security forces.

Censorship and Controls :

It is common knowledge that first reaction of any government in an insurgency is to impose censorship or reflect the problem as law and order type. This ostrich type attitude of government denies the public the correct and factual knowledge. It restricts media from performing its duty in correct perspective. In a liberal democratic state like ours with a large and vibrant press and multimedia, controls over the media are difficult, if not impossible. Censorship can neither be imposed nor enforced.

Suppression of news gives rise to rumours. The effect of rumours on the target population is easy to visualise. Timely and accurate receipt of information through governmental channels and the armed forces invariably gets delayed. Rumours, disinformation, misinformation and distorted facts through locals and the militants get published in the news papers and the armed forces starts its fire fighting against the inaccurate published report by sending rejoinders. However, considering the sensation- value of terrorist propaganda and the media's vulnerability to coercion by terrorists to follow their writ, selective censorship is perhaps unavoidable. However, this being a double edged weapon, its use should be extremely restricted and subject to stringent rules. It would do well for media military relations if the media were to check the veracity to the incidents of more serious nature from the army before their publication/telecast.

Denying access to the media needs greater deliberations often it does more harm than good. Today the press has no difficulty in interviewing any member of the terrorist organisation while the military authorities. Appear tight- lipped, tense and monosyllabic. In any case the 'rules' of media control in LIC environment are different from those in general war. The archaic security rules and regulations in the armed forces inhibit them from interacting freely with the media. This leads to the communication gap between the media and the armed forces, when a terrorist related incident occurs. The armed forces have now updated its media policy in apr 05 and have now permitted interaction by officers up to the rank of company commanders in an insurgency environment. There should be no delay in meeting and interacting with correspondents, simply because officials sanctions has not been received. A few military commanders will create faux pas, but in the overall information battle. The open stance of the security forces will ultimately inspire confidence. There is a need to nominate a nodal officer at formations and stations, so that they are available to offer comments to the queries raised by the media persons. But before that, we need to train ourselves in handling and interacting with the media. There is no doubt that the army's near permanent commitment in Sub conventional operations has led it to become more transparent and accessible than what it was earlier. This is more as a result of negative developments. Rather than the outcome of a well thought out pro-active measure.

Anticipate and Act Pro-actively :

Militants thrive on publicity by hogging headlines. At

the grass-root level militants are able to force the local press to print whatever they advocate, sometimes at the gun-point, where each act of the armed forces, especially where there is an exchange of fire, is blown out of proportion. Deliberate distortion of army's role and activities including violation of human right, during 'Internal Security' and 'Counter terrorists' operations are an established feature. The public does not fully comprehend the constraints within which the armed forces have to operate because nobody tell them. Armed forces have to use the minimum force, operate within law, and be answerable to all consequential inquiries.

Media looks for news and when it is not forthcoming in a given time frame from the authorities, it is forced to look towards other available means which may be in the form of inspired rumours from anti national elements (ANEs). This has to be countered effectively so that inspired rumours of inaccurate reporting cannot repair the damage caused by the initial inaccurate reports. More often than not, the armed forces are reaching to the queries of the media and therefore are generally on the defensive, while interacting with the media. We need to have a proactive response and feed the media with information before they ask for it. Selected formation commanders are authorised to hold periodic press conferences and issue quick press release/ rejoinders/ rebuttals in respect of important operations involving human rights violations. But such denials and placatory explanations are issued only as a reactive response and these results in overall loss of credibility of the armed forces. We need to be proactive in our approach in dealing with the media and providing them with requisite information commensurate with the security.

Psychological operations :

Armed forces must accept the media as an important adjunct to military operations, especially in Sub Conventional Operations, where it is more of winning the hearts and minds of the people, than the tactical operations alone. Media plays a very powerful role in psychological warfare where in maximum use is made of all the media plays a very powerful role in psychological warfare wherein maximum use is made of all the mediums available with the media. The central theme of Psychological operations should be to wean away and isolate the militants from the common masses. For this, the media is an invaluable asset. By co-opting the media, armed forces can draw on their strength and use them to their advantage. Psychological warfare has become an essential tool in the hands of government agencies in combating insurgency. The range of media is well known. This includes radio, TV, newspapers and cyber media. It is essential to understand the extent to which the media can be fully exploited.

Use of Radio : the use of radio as a powerful weapon for conduct of psychological warfare was discovered by Dr. Josef Goebbels. Today radio is the primary means of communication with a large section of local population especially in far-flung rural areas. The people in the valley

listen to BBC and Pakistan Radio more frequently than the All India Radio. If we were to win over the British press and the media covertly or otherwise, we can definitely ensure that BBC projects the Indian government point of view more forcefully than it doing now, similarly well controlled and coordinated programmes over urdu service of All India Radio can also be helpful. Radio Kashmir Jammu and Srinagar stations have to be reoriented to give them greater acceptability.

Use of Television: Television is a very important source for conduct of psychological warfare. It has tremendous advantages over radio. Following can be shown to the public :

- (i) Show news as authentically as possible.
- (ii) Telecast employment news to increase the viewer-ship.
- (iii) Highlight the recent atrocities committed by militant son the general public.
- (iv) Select propaganda through various TV Channels, which are slowly making inroads into the states troubled by insurgencies.
- (v) Highlight development activities in the country and show its military and economic strength.

Newspaper : To be effective, reliance will have to be laid on vernacular press. It would be fair to expect that they will not start fiving pro government statements due to the fear of militants. However over a period of time, by creating a rapport with the media men, their offensive language as it is being presently used can be toned down. They can also be pressurised to publish rebuttals. Whenever the militants give official version. The newspapers particularly, the local ones, have an excellent coverage and reach and therefore, are an excellent medium for psychological warfare.

Cyber Media : The Cyber media is likely to peak in the next one decade. The rate of its growth will be phenomenal, To make effective use of this channel the armed forces should create number of web sites on the internet at various levels in consultation with the media, bearing in mind their need for accurate and timely information regarding operations. The information should be updated regularly. On rare occasions, if the information has to be denied for publication, this should be explained to the media and some senior journalists can be taken into confidence 'off the record'. Realising the importance of cyber media, the army has created certain websites to give information about ongoing operations and welfare measures in J & , on the Internet. Some of them are :

- (i) <http://armedforces.nic.in>
- (ii) <http://www.vijayinkargil.org>
- (iii) <http://armyinkashmir.org>

The internet cell at Army Headquarters is responsible for maintenance and updating of army websites on the internet. It also carries out monitoring of online news with regards to Indian army operations. The effective use of these websites can be the fitting reply to the cyber propaganda of the militants and our adversaries across the border.

Counter propaganda :

An effective strategy to combat propaganda by the

terrorists would be counter propaganda by the security forces. This government counter-propaganda should operate within the accepted norms of publicity or PR. This should not include disinformation, deliberate untruths and the manipulative characteristics associated with propaganda. Indeed it should differ from publicity and PR mainly in its operational aims and its close coordination with all other aspects of counter terrorism. The media may also like to set the limits of portraying personal grief, anguish and gory picture of bloodshed arising out of terrorism related incidents. Notice that the American media had not shown one single gory image post the 11 Sep incident and compare it with chest beating scenes shown by the Indian media after hijacking of IC-814 to kandhar.

Role of Vernacular media :

Vernacular media plays a very important role in LIC operations, which needs to be understood by the armed forces. The armed forces generally give more importance to TV and the English newspaper and tend to neglect the vernacular media. Since the CI problem is more localised, it is the local people who are more affected and the local people read more of local newspaper. Hence, the readership of the vernacular media is much greater than any other newspaper.

In low intensity operations the vernacular press has a greater influencing role on people in rural and even the urban areas than any other form of media. It is the vernacular press that continues to be intimidated by the militants. The insurgents have used this to their advantage and at times the local press has become mouthpiece of the militants. Both northeast as well as Jammu and Kashmir, where we face insurgency, the national dailies have very little influence. In the absence of news, papers tend to publish non-serious and sensational news items, which in insurgency prone areas always favour the insurgents.

Dealing with local media or the vernacular press is as tricky as diplomacy. There are no set guidelines and every individual has to be dealt with differently. It will not be prudent to expect the local journalists to out rightly condemn the insurgents or their cause. Any attempt to get this done may suffer failure. Local media not in favour of the security forces should be handled tactfully as legal approach may not yield the desired result. Confrontation or avoidance is also not the answer. As long as the local media publishes the version of the security forces and in time, it is irrelevant if he also publishes or use the space for advertisement, which serves the purpose of the militants.

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