

‘Heart as a Weapon’: A Fresh Approach to the Concept of Hearts and Minds

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Summary

Winning hearts and minds is accepted as one of the principal components of counter insurgency (CI) strategy. The Indian government and the army have for long adopted it as a cornerstone for weaning away the population from the influence of insurgents. The strategy has been practiced with mixed results in the past. However, the recent “heart as a weapon” initiative in Jammu and Kashmir has been received favourably both by critics of security forces and by the state government. This brief compares the initiative with similar strategies in the past and analyses the reasons for its greater acceptance. It also raises the possibility of its inclusion as a WHAM component of CI strategy in the sub-conventional doctrine presently under formulation.¹

¹ As part of the debate, see Ali Ahmed, *Elevate Human Rights as the Core Organising Principle in Counter Insurgency*, November 14, 2011, IDSA Policy Brief.

Introduction

Discontent against the state and its expression has often been seen by governments as a challenge to authority. While a small minority has usually taken up arms in an insurgency, large segments of the population supporting them are also considered suspect through complicity, irrespective of the nature and extent of support. Unlike the practice of the Indian army, armies elsewhere sometimes crush the opposition with ruthless application of force, both for achieving immediate aims as also for a demonstrative impact. However, this graph of state led violence to suppress dissent has fallen steadily, with the shift from autocracy to oligarchy and finally to democracy in most countries. However, even democratic countries have faced a steep learning curve, often at the cost of innocent lives. This is at the cost of popular support, well known to be a critical factor in counter insurgency operations. It is only in the recent past that a renewed emphasis on the "hearts and minds" and a counterinsurgency approach, as against counter terrorism, has led to the fine tuning of operations.

India is amongst a few countries which have gained experience over the years in dealing with CI challenges. The "hearts and minds" approach has been a principal component of this strategy. This was enunciated in detail in the sub-conventional doctrine of the army released in December 2006.² As the mandatory five year period of its implementation comes to a close and with the joint sub-conventional doctrine also having been released, it would be timely to dwell upon a recent WHAM initiative, called "heart as a weapon", as input for the new doctrine.

Concept of Hearts and Minds

It is widely accepted that the people form the centre of gravity of any insurgency and thereby also of a counter insurgency campaign. Mao had said that 'the guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea'. Galula seconds this when he says, 'the population, therefore, becomes the objective for the counterinsurgent as it was for his enemy.'³ If the population is the centre of gravity, then winning it over remains the key for defeating an insurgency.

The concept of "hearts and minds" is generally attributed to Gerald Templer who implemented it during the Malayan Campaign (1948-1960).⁴ The strategy is seen as one of the important reasons for British success and has since been cited as the basis for the British

² *Doctrine for Sub Conventional Operations*, Headquarters Army Training Command, Shimla, December 2006.

³ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2010, p. 52.

⁴ For a detailed review see Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1978.

approach to CI operations in Northern Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan. However, there has been criticism of the strategy. Issues regarding the inherent contradictions involved in achieving its desired aims have also been raised. Paul Dixon argues that despite the hearts and minds phrase associated with the British CI campaign in Malaya, coercive measures were employed leading to human rights abuses.⁵

The US counter insurgency doctrine also emphasizes hearts and minds when it says:

‘Once the unit settles into the AO (area of operations), its next task is to build trusted networks. This is the true meaning of the phrase “hearts and minds,” which comprises two separate components. “Hearts” means persuading people that their best interests are served by COIN success. “Minds” means convincing them that the force can protect them and that resisting it is pointless.’⁶

While this approach highlights the same sentiment, however ‘convincing them that the force can protect them and that resisting it is pointless’⁷ does indicate the aspect of inevitability of siding with the security forces vis-à-vis the insurgents. The US human rights record also contradicts this sentiment. Amnesty International in its 2011 report says, ‘US forces in Iraq committed serious human rights violations, including killings of civilians.’⁸ The French CI expert Roger Trinquier, also recommends gaining the support of the population as a pre-requisite for conducting successful operations. However, this very logic is accompanied by a recommendation to use all possible means to achieve it,⁹ thus suggesting limitations in following through to the entire satisfaction of critics who have often accused security forces of excesses. This contradiction suggests either the impracticality of an ideal WHAM approach or the inevitability of shades of grey in its practical execution.

Indian Experience

The concept of WHAM has influenced the CI approach of many countries including India. In the Indian context, it was applied during CI operations in the Northeast, to include Nagaland and Mizoram, and subsequently in other insurgency affected regions as well. Amongst the more visible subsets of this approach are Operation Samaritan in the Northeastern insurgency affected states and Operation Sadbhavana in J&K.

⁵ Paul Dixon, “‘Hearts and Minds’? British Counter-Insurgency from Malaya to Iraq,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3, June 2009, pp. 353-81.

⁶ FM-3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, Headquarter Department of Army, December 2006, p. 191.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Amnesty International, Report 2011, *The State of Worlds Human Rights*, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/iraq/report-2011#section-65-8>, accessed on November 3, 2011.

⁹ Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, New York, Praeger, 1964, p. 38.

Nehru's desire to win over the Nagas rather than achieve forced assimilation impacted the army's approach to the insurgency in the region. It further flowed from the very pinnacle of the army leadership, with the Chief of Army Staff issuing a special order of the day for the troops deployed in the area, highlighting the importance of 'winning their (the people's) confidence and respect and to help them feel that they belong to India.'¹⁰ Internal literature of the army has since incorporated these sentiments and cemented the principles outlined by the WHAM strategy. However, the first open document, which formally enunciated the army's approach, was its doctrine of 2004. It said:

'Popular support is the cornerstone of all CI operations. All actions, including military operations, should be undertaken to seek the voluntary and willing support of the people in the affected area. Winning the Hearts and Minds (WHAM) of the population through low profile and people-friendly operations is the most essential aspect of successful CI operations.'¹¹

This was further amplified by the Sub Conventional Doctrine of December 2006, which noted the need for a "humane face" given the reality of dealing with the "misguided youth of the country". It also reinforced the need to employ "minimum force" to ensure "least collateral damage".¹²

Much like the Malayan campaign, which became the genesis for the term "hearts and minds", its application was not perfect in the Indian context as well. There have been accusations of human rights violations and loss to life and property,¹³ even as reduction in levels of violence and restoration of normalcy in states like Mizoram was achieved.

The army's experience, levels of awareness and greater sensitivity towards human rights have ensured that the "hearts and minds" strategy is the principal component of its approach to CI operations. However, there seems to be a misconception regarding the application of this strategy. It is often seen as a passive approach wherein military action against rebel forces is forsaken in a quest to win over the population. The nature of WHAM

¹⁰ As quoted in Rajesh Rajagopalan, *Fighting Like a Guerrilla: The Indian Army and Counterinsurgency*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2008, p. 147.

¹¹ *Indian Army Doctrine*, Headquarters Army Training Command, Shimla, December 2004, p. 27.

¹² *Doctrine for Sub Conventional Operations*, Headquarters Army Training Command, Shimla, December 2006, p. 27.

¹³ There has been a number of cases of human rights violations against the army since its induction in CI operations, though a vast majority has been proved as false. However, it is evident from available records that the initial period of deployment did witness collateral damage and casualties in a larger proportion than is the case in the present environment. Lt Col Vivek Chadha, *Low Intensity Conflicts in India - An Analysis*, Sage, New Delhi, 2005, p. 346.

is probably best described by the “iron fist and a velvet glove” initiative of the then Chief of Army Staff, General JJ Singh. Elaborating on the strategy, he said:

‘the armed forces were pursuing an “an iron fist in a velvet glove” policy in the troubled areas of the North East and Jammu and Kashmir. The “iron fist” was reserved for misguided elements and the “velvet glove” for innocent civilians caught in the “crossfire.”’¹⁴

This policy received a further impetus with the enunciation of “heart as a weapon” initiative by the Srinagar Corps, which looks after what is widely considered as the most sensitive area with respect to human rights violations.

Components of ‘Heart as a Weapon’ Strategy

The Srinagar Corps took the initiative of announcing its “heart as a weapon” strategy in 2011. It is not difficult to imagine the scepticism with which it was received initially, given the street protests just months earlier resulting in the death of over 100 protestors.¹⁵ The initiator of the concept indicates the essential difference between WHAM as it was practiced in the past and the hearts and minds approach:

‘...there is an essential difference between the conventional WHAM approach and that of the ‘Heart Theme’. The latter has, as its basis, the retention of power through genuine goodwill, humane attitude, sympathetic conduct and, most of all, an understanding of social, cultural and moral sensitivities. The arrogance of power needs to be subjugated to the goodness of attitude. Such an approach appeals to the psyche and not the material greed of people. The Heart Theme is, therefore, several steps beyond WHAM and way ahead of Sadbhavna.’¹⁶

However, despite its share of critics, the policy was welcomed amongst a large majority amongst the local population.¹⁷ The policy clearly distinguishes between the balance required

¹⁴ Insurgency will be dealt with an iron fist says Army Chief, *The Hindu*, February 18, 2007, <http://www.hindu.com/2007/02/18/stories/2007021813720100.htm>, accessed on November 4, 2011.

¹⁵ *onislam*, 06 May 2011, <http://www.onislam.net/english/news/asia-pacific/452140-india-launches-kashmir-charm-offensive.html>, accessed on November 4, 2011.

¹⁶ Lt. Gen. Syed Ata Hasnain, *The Heart is my Weapon: Kashmir Revisited*, *The War College Journal*, September 2011, Vol. 40, No. 1, p. 2.

¹⁷ A large number of dailies, amongst which some have been critical of the army’s role in the Valley openly came out in praise of the policy. See “A People’s General,” *KashmirLive.Com*, www.kashmirlive.com/story/A-Peoples-General/777108.html, April 17, 2011, accessed on November 4, 2011; “Army Uses Heart as a Weapon,” August 31, 2011, www.greaterkashmir.com/.../army-uses-heart-as-a-weapon-40.asp, accessed on November 4, 2011; and “Army Uses Heart as a Weapon,” *Azad Kashmir*, August 31, 2011, azad-kashmir.com/general/army-uses-heart-as-a-weapon/, accessed on November 4, 2011.

for stabilisation through force and winning over the support of the local population. The latter is seen to be a matter of the heart. The man responsible for the doctrine, Lt. Gen. Syed Ata Hasnain says that the, 'Ak-47 is not my weapon. It's a mere tool to be used occasionally. The heart is my weapon.'¹⁸

With this as the basis of the strategy, the initiatives taken can be grouped under two distinct heads. The first is psychological or emotional and the second, practical and realistic.

As part of the psychological initiative, steps were initiated to heal the emotional wounds festering in the hearts of the people, thus aiming to winn the hearts of the population. Some examples include, observing *Muharram* as a 'non convoy' day to avoid inconvenience to the people,¹⁹ holding numerous *iftar* parties for the local people, respecting and adopting the cultural heritage of the people by imbibing the "jee jenab" concept, which emphasises the Sufi tradition of polite behaviour, holding interactions with the people as part of "awamee sunvoayee" to listen to their grievances and allowing them inside the walled headquarter at Srinagar, as also visit the museum "ibadat-e-shahadat".²⁰

A number of practical initiatives has also been taken to help alleviate the day-to-day problems of the people. There is a strict check to avoid collateral damage during operations, a constant source of consternation amongst the innocent bystanders caught in the terrorist-army crossfire. Stringent rules of engagement have been laid down to reduce incidents of collateral damage. Convoy timings have been changed to avoid peak traffic hours to reduce inconvenience to the people. These initiatives, unlike some others in the past, are not a standalone venture of the army.

Interaction is being coordinated at the level of Unified Command at the apex level which is presided over by the Chief Minister, followed by the Core Group at the corps level headed by the Corps Commander. Visits of the Corps Commander include interaction with local civil administration officials. This has ensured participative and cohesive decision making and implementation of schemes. It has also removed barriers of communication between the common man and those in decision making positions.

Reasons for Success

The "hearts and minds" strategy is the basis of the Indian Army's operational involvement in CI operations. If that be the case, the present "heart as a weapon" initiative could well

¹⁸ *Force Magazine*, May 2011, <http://www.forceindia.net/Interviewmay2.aspx>, accessed on November 4, 2011.

¹⁹ "Gen Hasnain moves Kashmir," *South Asian Idea*, January 14, 2011, <http://southasianidea.com/uncategorized/gen-hasnain-moves-kashmir>, accessed on November 4, 2011.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

be considered an old strategy, rechristened under a different name. While the new concept is undoubtedly based on the same principle, there are however some less-than-subtle differences that highlight the reason for it becoming the basis for army's operational strategy in the Valley.

One, it is probably for the first time that even while recognising the role of the "gun" in CI operations, the "heart" has been given a priority. This clearly underlines the thrust and intense importance attached to the two components of the army's operational role.

Two, Hasnain has set a personal example by reaching out to the masses. His approachability and genuine desire to place the heart ahead of the gun has found an instant connect with the masses. The initiatives taken by the army may not have healed decades old psychological wounds of the people, but they have indicated to them that the men in uniform care about issues that are both practically and emotionally relevant to the common man.²¹

Three, there has been a concerted attempt at educating the troops, ensuring that orders are carried out and enforcing the sentiment behind the initiative at the level of troops.²² While this may be perceived as an obvious outcome given the hierarchical nature of the organisation, however, past experience and reality have often belied this notion.

Four, ensuring effective communication of the initiative through access to the complete chain of command and transparency of action has led to unprecedented credibility and understanding of the army's position.²³ With people as the centre of gravity, the media connects them to the army and government at one end and the insurgents at the other through its medium. The "heart as a weapon" approach has successfully employed this medium as a carrier, to effectively connect with the local population.

Five, the civil administration and paramilitary forces are as much a part of this initiative as the army. In fact the Corps Commander clearly and accurately defines the role of the army as that of an "adjunct" to the government, dispelling any doubts about the nature of the initiative.²⁴

²¹ "Art of Peace," *Outlook*, September 12, 2011. The article describes shouts of "shame, shame" from the students present when discussing human rights. However, the head of the organisation had the confidence to accept criticism, discuss the issue and thus win over the audience. Such attempts at reaching out to people deserve to be emulated. <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?278168>, accessed on November 6, 2011.

²² All troops carry a booklet with instructions regarding the rules of engagement and do's and don't.

²³ *Outlook*, September 12, 2011, <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?278168>, accessed on November 6, 2011.

²⁴ *Force Magazine*, May 2011, <http://www.forceindia.net/Interviewmay2.aspx>, accessed on November 4, 2011.

Recommendations

The 'heart as a weapon' initiative has struck a cord with the local population. However, there is a possibility of the initiative losing its value in the long term if this momentum is not taken to its logical conclusion. Some suggestions in this regard are:

- Often good ideas become a casualty to poor implementation, especially after a change of command given the absence of ownership of the idea. Therefore, the initiative should be included as part of the proposed doctrine for the Corps Zone, given the local flavour of some of the initiatives.
- It also needs to be included as part of the new sub conventional doctrine as a guideline, keeping in view relevant generic aspects of the "hearts and minds" strategy.
- Initiatives such as these might at times be perceived as personality driven.²⁵ However, it needs to be understood that only strong, influential and far sighted personalities achieve far reaching results. Therefore, rather than rejecting it as the personal initiative of an individual, the system needs to celebrate the intellectual depth of one amongst them. General Templer is associated with the "hearts and minds" strategy, General Petraeus with the US counter insurgency doctrine and General JJ Singh with the 'iron fist and velvet glove' idea. Doctrines need personalities as drivers, in this case the Srinagar corps commander, ably supported by his army commander.
- The 'heart as a weapon' initiative clearly places the winning over of the population as a priority, in the endeavour to eliminate insurgency rather than the insurgent. It is this aspect which will reinforce the need to win over the population rather than emphasise on "kills". It will also highlight the criticality of ensuring human rights irrespective of the stage of the counterinsurgency movement.
- The creation of doctrines have long been an in-house effort at best and the contribution of a very few individuals at worst. A doctrine will only instil a sense of ownership from a feeling of participative creation. Given the very nature of sub- conventional operations and the possibility of differences of opinion on various aspects between practitioners and theorists, a debate on its contents is recommended within the service and input taken of experts in the strategic community.
- In addition to the above, the absence of a wider debate and broad based contribution to as fundamental a document as a sub-conventional doctrine takes away a certain

²⁵ See *Outlook*, September 12, 2011, <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?278168>, accessed on November 6, 2011. Indications of unease amongst authorities have been indicated in the story, which, if true, do not bode well for the initiative.

degree of legitimacy from it. It is therefore recommended that the draft sub-conventional doctrine be placed on the army's website for contributions, suggestions and constructive critique to enable the evolution of a more mature thought process. It will also moderate the vision of individuals with the acceptability of a larger audience.

- There seems to be a perception that hearts and minds as a strategy becomes more pronounced only when the level of violence is brought under control. Nothing could be further from the reality. A high intensity of operations, which usually accompanies the initial period of CI operations, is more liable to result in human rights violations. Therefore, it needs to be reinforced that while a military prominent approach during the initial phase of CI operations might seem to bring down violence levels, in reality it pushes the population further towards the insurgent. This incidentally is exactly what the insurgents want. Thus, the heart as a weapon approach must be an inherent part of CI from the initial stages along with the military component. It is only then that success can be achieved.

Conclusion

The 'heart as a weapon' approach reinforces what has been the doctrinal guideline provided for CI operations. While it follows the basic principles of "hearts and minds", yet the prominence of "heart" as the principal bridge between the estranged population and the government could very well bring about a change in perception, that has for long been the very basis of CI campaigns.