Information Sharing for Irregular Warfare

Ehsan Mehmood Khan

Introduction

A sturdy string of irregular warfare is the planet holding tight today. From Palestine to the Philippines, Columbia to Cambodia, and N. Ireland to India, the non-state irregular militant groups (IMGs) are waging resilient irregular war in face of a *Technowar* in James Gibson's terms.[1] These groups are fighting under three main banners: *Islamic groups* engaged in Palestine, Somalia, Yemen, Chechnya, Dagestan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Thailand and the Philippines; *communist groups* in Peru, Columbia, India, Nepal, Thailand and the Philippines; and local centrifugal groups such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the UK, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in the Basque region of Spain, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, and various national and sub-national groups in Africa (in République Démocratique du Congo e.g.).

Irregular war is fought in the population battlefield and hence involves abundant non-kinetic tools alongside the kinetic ones. Kinetic means are used in brawls between state armies and the IMGs, while non-kinetic means are used not only to strike the opponents but also to engage the people in order to align them with IMGs and alienate them from opponents. The irregular warfare phenomenon is turning so complex with each click-of-the-clock that strategists and theorists of our age are aptly terming it as a "New War". While it has not lost the weight and value of military ascendancy, and thus the utility of force in conventional terms, the currency of confrontation is now information, not ball ammunition, as advocated by General Sir Rupert Smith.[2]

As time elapses, irregular war turns into a war of ideas fought in physical, moral, psychological and information battlespaces. Numerous ideas and notions start occupying the information landscape further complicating an already complex environment. When nation states attempt to spread their side of the truth in order to keep the population on a path to normalcy, the IMGs insert new facts within the existing facts in order to win the contest of legitimacy in keeping with their mass line strategy. The information environment is further compounded if foreign forces

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[1] James William Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam*, (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000). Gibson argues that during the Vietnam War, the United States developed "Technowar," involving a series of war concepts "as a kind of high-technology, capital-intensive production process." I find no difference to this even today save for that all states encountering irregular warfare are embarking on *Technowar* now. The opposing militant groups too are no more alien to the concept.

[2] http://cb3blog.wordpress.com/2009/10/17/review-war-2-0-irregular-warfare-in-the-information-age/ (accessed March 29, 2010).

are also involved militarily in a state or region (ISAF in Afghanistan e.g.). At any rate, the importance of ascendancy in the information space is times more than kinetic superiority as the bullet once fired cannot come back but the words continue to echo in the information space for generations to come.

Traditional Information Warfare Paradigm

Traditionally, nation states and IMGs follow the information warfare paradigm depicted in Figure-1.[3] More often than not, the information environment in irregular wars made up of normative asymmetries both in tangible and intangible planes. It is home to numerous contending narratives, which create a gulf of opinions. This breeds a battle of perceptions. Perceptions are a product of realities, both objective and subjective. The battle of perceptions has its own language or grammar based on two types of issues, "our issues" and "their issues". The language is, in fact, the weapon used in the battle of perceptions, which uses the ammunition of issues. This leads to a cycle of influence, which eventually transforms the existing environment in favor of the side that wins the battle of perceptions, and is able to extend its moral influence over the population.

Figure-1: Traditional Information Warfare Paradigm
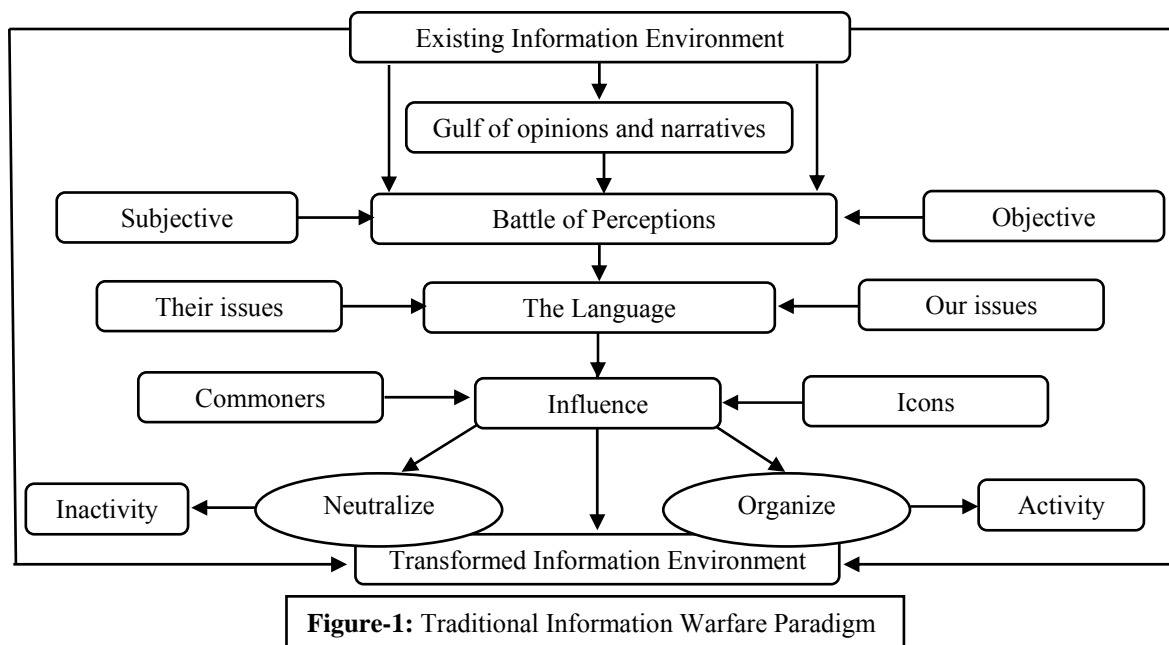
The Information Environment

The irregular war information environment is not as symmetrical as often experienced in a "conventional" operational environment. To better understand the physical, conceptual, moral and methodological asymmetries and complexities, the information environment associated with operations in Afghanistan presents a topical model. Apropos this environment, General McChrystal rightly highlighted the crises of population confidence in his assessment report.[4] He noted that, "Major insurgent groups outperform the Government of Islamic Republic of

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[3] Conceptualized by the writer based on research, analysis and personal judgment.
[4] Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal's assessment report on the war in Afghanistan, 30 August 2009.

Afghanistan (GIRoA) and ISAF at information operations. Information operations drive many insurgent operations as they work to shape the cultural and religious narratives. They have carefully analyzed their audience and target products accordingly. They use their Pashtun identity, physical proximity to the population, and violent intimidation to deliver immediate and enduring messages, with which ISAF and GIRoA have been unable to compete. They leverage this advantage by projecting the inevitability of their victory, a key source of their strength."[5] The model is given as Table 1.1.[6]

Sphere	ISAF	Taliban
Alliance platform	Shared concerns and goals	Shared concerns → goals not shared in case of all groups
Alliance strategy	Unity of purpose as well as effort	Unity of purpose but autonomy of effort
Legitimacy	Global first	Local first
Information space	Home + Local + Global (none is least important)	Local → global information space of secondary importance
The identity	We, the supporters of the Afghan people	We, the Afghan people
Means	Mostly modern	Mostly crude (+ modern)
Physical requirement	Enormous	Limited
Watch : Time	Exit Strategy	Staying Strategy
Communication	Strategic → top-bottom (vertical)	Tactical, which lead to strategic effects → bottom-top (vertical) + group-to-group and tribe-to-tribe (lateral)
Information choice	Accuracy	Speed
Narrative	Freedom & democratization	Occupation & tyranny

Table 1.1: Comparison of ISAF with Taliban in Afghan Information Environment.

Information means used by the IMGs

IMGs understand the importance of media, at times more than the state structures and international alliances. Thus media wings are rider clause for all IMGs active on the globe irrespective of their outlook, military strategies or goals. They use several means available in the information battle space today, as shown in Figure-2. [7]

Figure-2: Information means used by the IMGs

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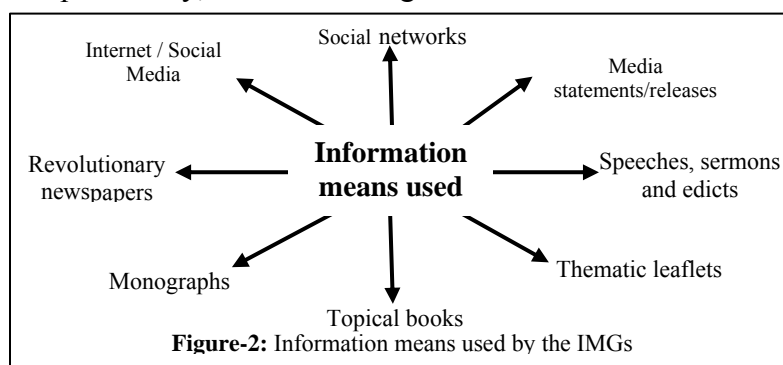
[5] COMISAF's Initial Assessment Report, August 30, 2009. 2-5.
[6] Conjectured by this writer based on research, analysis and personal judgment.
[7] Ibid.

The choice of means varies from IMG to IMG depending on the extent of community outreach desired and type of target audience. For instance, in information environments like those prevailing in Europe (N. Ireland or Spain e.g.); internet, books and media channels have the potential to succeed the most. But in case of the Naxilites in India, or Communist-Maoist groups[8] in the Philippines or Thailand; leaflets, revolutionary publications and corner meetings are the most successful means.

Figure-3: Image of a Revolutionary Publication by the Communist Party of the Philippines.

The Gulf of Opinions and Narratives

Information environment during irregular war remains replete with numerous opinions and contending narratives. This is a real contest between opposing ideologies. The narratives can thus be likened to the rays emitted by the sun of ideology. To be sure, the traditional state narratives are challenged by the IMGs. The states often issue counter narrative, which may or may not find public reception the way they desire. Here are a few examples:

Narratives of Taliban Warfare: Taliban float two main narratives in the information environment: the tyranny by ISAF and the inevitability of their victory. The first one can be found in the poetic words of the former Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef: [9]
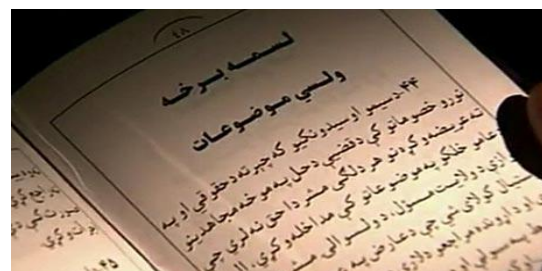

Figure-4: Image of the Taliban Code of Conduct

This 'freedom' put a proud people in chains
And turned free men into slaves
'Independence' made us weak
And slaughtered us
In the name of kindness
This is "democracy" by the whip
And the fear of chains
With a whirlwind at its core

The second of the Taliban narratives can be found in these words of a Taliban leader:

You [ISAF] have the watches, we have the time. We were born here. We will die here. We aren't going anywhere.[10]

In 2009, they issued a *Taliban Code of Conduct* containing six main rules for their fighters guiding on how to deal with the prisoners and population. This is not only a guideline for Taliban warriors but a narrative for Afghan society as well as international community.

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[8] Dr. Thomas A. Marks, *Maoist People's War in Post Vietnam Asia*, (Bangkok: While Lotus Press, 2007) is an authentic source for study of the dynamics of Communist-Maoist insurgencies. Dr. Marks has a life long research on the subject and is rightly considered as an authority on the topic.
[9] Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), vii.
[10] Sami Yousafzai, and Ron Moreau, "The Taliban in their own words." *Newsweek* (September 26, 2009).

***Narrative of the Provisional Irish Republican Army*:**
There have been a number of narratives floated by the individuals and groups in Northern Ireland. One of them, issued by Bobby Sands, read as:

There can never be peace in Ireland until the foreign, oppressive British presence is removed, leaving all the Irish people as a unit to control their own affairs and determine their own destinies as a sovereign people, free in mind and body, separate and distinct physically, culturally and economically.[11]
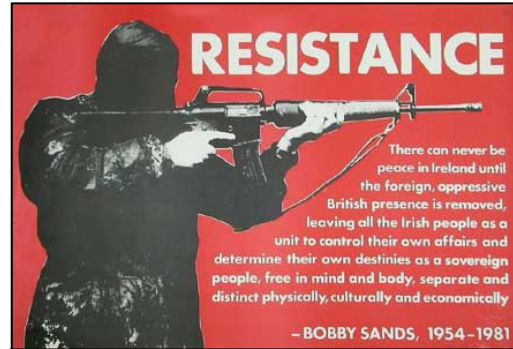

Figure-5: Image of a leaflet by PIRA

This even served as an information warfare leaflet for the organization, as shown in Figure-5.[12]

***Narrative of the Black Panther Party in the US*:** The first of their Ten Point Program of can be considered as the core narrative of the Black Panther Party, which was active during the civil rights movement in US. It read as:

We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black and oppressed communities. We believe that Black and oppressed people will not be free until we are able to determine our destinies in our own communities ourselves, by fully controlling all the institutions which exist in our communities.[13]
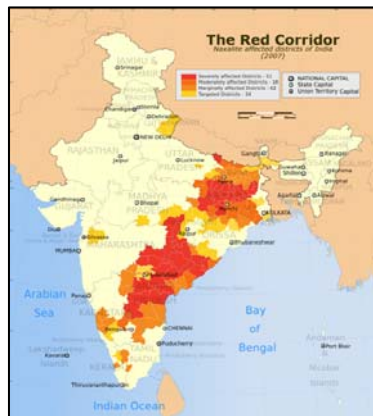

Figure-6: The Naxilite Red Corridor

***Narrative of Naxilite Movement in India*:** Indian Prime Minister has recently termed Naxilite Movement in India as the single biggest internal security threat.[14] One of the numerous narratives being floated by the Indian Naxilites reads as:

The notion that a Naxalite is someone who hates his country [India] is naive and idiotic. He is, more likely, one who likes this country more than the rest of us, and is thus more disturbed than the rest of us when he sees it debauched. He is not a bad citizen turning to crime; he is a good citizen fighting for justice and equality.[15]

The area affected by Naxilism is popularly termed as the Red Corridor);[16] The Naxilites also use the image of the Red Corridor, given as Figure-6,[17] as a narrative to display popular support.

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[11] http://www.morrigan.net/eireshaor/ (accessed April 1, 2010).

[12] http://coeinireland.wikidot.com/major-ira-bombings (accessed March 31, 2010)

[13] Stanford University's Research Project on the Black Panther Party, http://www.stanford.edu/group/blackpanthers/history.shtml (accessed April 1, 2010).

[14] "Rahi Gaikwad: Manmohan: Naxalism the greatest internal threat" The *Hindu*, New Delhi, October 12, 2009.

[15] http://naxalrevolution.blogspot.com/2009_05_01_archive.html (accessed March 29, 2010).

[16] "Kapil Komireddi: Blood runs India's Red Corridor" *The Guardian* UK, April 23, 2009.

[17] http://marxistleninist.wordpress.com/2009/12/15/indias-operation-green-hunt-a-looming-crime/ (accessed March 30, 2010).

*Nation State Narratives***:** Nation states mostly conceptualize their narratives based on the traditional wisdom and universal opinions backed by a constitution. In some cases state structures are also supported by foreign powers, who may be physically involved in a conflict. Such forces have their own narratives. The case in point is the ISAF narrative in Afghanistan that can best be found in its stated mission, which reads as, "ISAF, in support of the GIRoA, conducts operations in Afghanistan to reduce the capability and will of the insurgency, support the growth in capacity and capability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and facilitate improvements in governance and socio-economic development, in order to provide a secure environment for sustainable stability that is observable to the population."[18]

Besides, an irregular war information environment contains several other narratives, such as those floated by the interest groups, mafias, regional or global actors with geopolitical interests, NGOs and human rights groups.

The Battle of Perceptions

The battle of perceptions takes place in the gulf of opinions and narratives. Perceptions are often a producer of realities, which may be objective or subjective. The realities exist in the information as well as the physical space. In the information space,

Figure-7: The Constituents of Public Perceptions

they are represented by the narratives and actions of the key players while in the physical space, they exist in actual conditions of the masses, the opportunities available and the prospect foreseen. Figure-7 presents a template.[19]
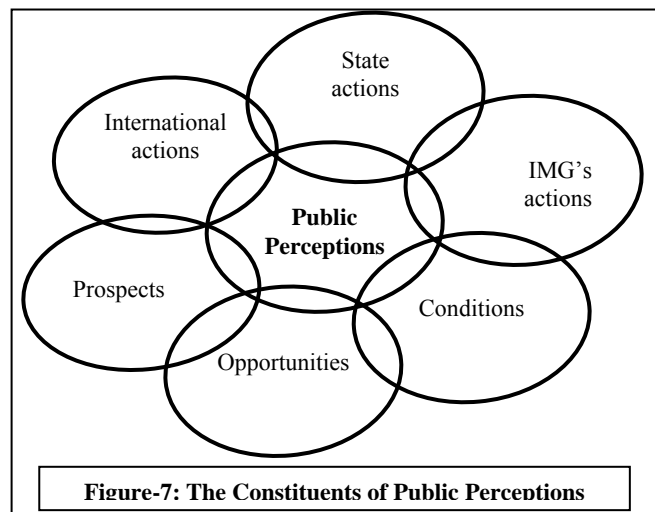
The foremost catch-22 for nation states and international military forces is that they have to deliver in the "present" while the IMGs can live on the glories of the past and promises of the "future". Thus, the states need to deliver on the basis of objective realities, whereas the IMGs can survive on subjective promises.

The Language

The language or grammar of the battle of perceptions is the most important segment of the information paradigm. It contains the "issues" of the both sides. The American acronym WIFM – what's in it for me – is best applied in this case. This type of language serves as a weapon in the battle of perceptions and the issues of both sides collide in this battle of perceptions. For instance; the issues of the state or foreign forces could be "these terrorist, fundamentalists and criminals are spreading an extremist ideology and have put nation state progress to a halt by means of subversion and sabotage based on petty political interests." Conversely, the issues of

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[18] NATO: International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan, http://www.isaf.nato.int/en/our-mission/ (accessed March 27, 2010).
[19] Conjectured by this writer.

the IMGs could be, "these aliens, imperialists and tyrants, who have occupied our land, are killing our women and children, want to loot our resources, pine for enslaving us and want to impose an alien ideology on our traditional culture." While the nation state promises social development, economic progress and justice, the IMGs promise defeat of an alien force and a bright future in keeping with the culture of the community they represent. They also influence the public mind by linking their struggle with history and traditions.

The Cycle of Influence and Transformation of Environment

The battle of perceptions leads to a cycle of influence, wherein each side tries to win over the heads and hearts of both the iconic elements of the society and the commoners. The icons include tribal chieftains, religious clergy, academics, teachers, journalists, lawyers, social workers, local politicians and civil society members. The commoners include laborers, technicians, farmers, low grade officials, salesman, unemployed individuals and oppressed minorities. The purpose remains either to mobilize and organize them into action against the opponent, or to neutralize those hitherto active from the opposing side. The player, who is able to influence the population, succeeds in transforming the information environment to its own favor. Transformation marks the end product of the information paradigm as has been shown in Figure-1. It is of note than in most conflicts, no side is able to completely transform the information environment. This is why the undercurrents of the conflict do not peter out in some cases even for centuries. The demand for Independent Moroland by the Muslims of Mindanao in the Philippines has continued for centuries and is still on surface in an active mode. Likewise, the freedom struggle by the people of Kashmir in India is continuing despite lapse of over six decades.

Typical Fault Lines of the State Strategies

The states and the foreign powers spend huge budget on information warfare using a range of information means. However, their information strategies suffer from numerous pitfalls. Typical fault-lines are listed below:

➢ **Lassitude** - The state mechanism remains stuck up in conceptual quagmires, much short of implementation of information plans. This gives time out to the IMGs to fill the information space with their own narrative and win the battle of perceptions much before the state is able float its own narratives. Complacency i.e. contentment with petite action, and lack of follow up of initial actions are yet other problem areas.

➢ **Lack of coordination** - Lack of interagency, intra-agency and intra-alliance coordination, which at times even leads to collision within the state structure or an alliance impinges upon the success of information campaign.

➢ **Reaction rather than preemption** - States and alliance often work on reactive rather than proactive or preemptive information campaign, which puts them on moral defensive vis-à-vis the IMGs. It may lead to eventual failure.

➢ **Accuracy vis-à-vis speed -** States and alliances seek accuracy and thus lose speed. Certainly, it is often by compulsion rather than choice, but does impact on information operations negatively.

- ➢ **Failure to identify the audience** - Failure to identify the actual target audience in line with the efforts of other instruments of power is another sore area. For instance, in a country like Afghanistan, it is rural tribal elite or religious clergy that is more important than the urban middle class that should receive the message. Conversely, in a Communist-Maoist insurgency in India or Philippine, rural proletariats must be engaged. States often fail to identify as to who really matters, and thus often miss the point!
- ➢ **Global vis-à-vis local image** - The states and alliance also tend to be worried about international image and public perception in the home country rather than the information environment of the conflict-stricken area. Contrarily, the IMGs continue to endeavor in the local information space and thus hinder the state operations.
- ➢ **The Language -** Inadvertently and at times even advertently, the states and alliance lay accent on "our issues" rather than "their issues" thereby compromising the easily attainable success. They often continue to generate messages for the pro-government segments or the populace of the parent country in order to influence them in favor of the war. This may further alienate the actual target audience dwelling on other side of the moral fence.
- ➢ **The means -** States and alliance often use the modern means, failing to recognize that millions of people in conflict zones of the world do not have access to even newspaper and radio. Physical meetings may be the best mode of information and communication in some cases. The point to note is that you need to record your message on their message-board rather than yours, something that the states often fail to do.

Recommended Information Paradigm

Based on the discourse and discussion in this paper, following paradigm is recommended for information operations by the state structures:

- ➢ **The nature of the information campaign -** Embark on a proactive rather than a reactive campaign. Disseminate information before the IMGs can do that or else you would find yourself to be in a quagmire of justification as to how, why and what actually happened.
- ➢ **Information rather than propaganda -** Do not get drawn into reciprocation of propaganda by the IMGs. This would be counterproductive. The nation state information campaign must always be based on the facts on the ground, as David Galula notes, "The counterinsurgent is tied to his responsibilities and to his past, and for him, the facts speak louder than words. He is judged by his words, not by what he says…If he lies, cheats, exaggerates, and does not prove, he may achieve temporary success, but at the price of being discredited for the good."[20] It is imperative to draw a line between the facts and the fictions before making anything public.
- ➢ **The type of narratives -** Issue creative rather than counter narratives; the former are stronger while the latter have a weaker foundation. Yet again, the latter are at times the preferred version but it is the event that decides as to which one would work. Besides, talk of "their issues" rather than parroting "your issues". The former will keep your opponent on defensive whereas the latter will certainly keep you busy in justifications.

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[20] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2006), 9.

- ➢ **The target audience -** Target each segments of the society. Since irregular wars are often fought in the hinterlands rather than metropolitan areas, hence, the iconic elements i.e. the rural tribal and religious elite are the preferred audience. Generally speaking, nation states and alliances must have separate narratives and messages for the six segments of the society: the militant leadership; the pawns i.e. the micro level fighters; the collaborators of militancy; the sympathizers of IMGs; the neutral sections of the society; and the allied segments i.e. the pro-government elements. Specifically however, there is a need to identify the kind of audience to be engaged for effects in accordance with the peculiarities of the irregular war environment faced by the country or alliance.
- ➢ **Micro level engagement -** As Congressman Thomas "Tip" O'Neill put it, "all politics is local"[21], try to engage the masses at the local level by showing them micro economic progress and social development, and allowing them role in local politics. Through such efforts they may become your information disseminators without being on "the payroll".
- ➢ **Information is everyone's responsibility -** Train all soldiers for engagement in the information battle space, both in form of interaction with the media and the population, rather than merely depending on public information personnel. This will multiply your input and thus amplify the output without additional efforts.
- ➢ **Dominate the information space -** Pump in new facts within the existing and age-old "facts", yet without twisting the realities, which would certainly be counterproductive. What's more, do not ever lose accuracy; rather, outperform your opponent in speed too. The objective must be to dominate the information space while retaining credibility and legitimacy.

Conclusion

Nation states and alliances are faced with seasoned and resilient IMGs adept at information warfare strategies. This calls for skill, dexterity and ingenuity on part of state structures to succeed in the information space as well as the physical space. While the need for the kinetic line of effort in order to beat the IMGs militarily and break their will cannot be overstated, the value of the non-kinetic line of effort dominated by information warfare is even more important. The goal remains to win the hearts and minds of the population. If the value of information is understood by one and all, there is no reason for the crisis of confidence, highlighted by General McChrystal, to find space anymore either in Afghanistan or elsewhere in the local or global conflicts. Nonetheless, state narratives must always have universal value, timeless application and be based on irrefutable truths.

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Non Attribution: *The views expressed herein are those of the writer, and are not to be attributed to the policies of any institution of Pakistan or National Defense University, Washington D.C.*

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[21] Tip O'Neill and Gary Hymel, *All Politics is Local and the other rules of the game*, (Holbrook, Massachusetts: Bob Adam, Inc, 1994), xv.

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