



Thumbnail Image:




Influence and Psychological Operations within the Context of Wargames ^[1]



A wargame, as the term is used in this article, is a model where people make decisions in a synthetic environment marked by conflict or competition, and where they become aware of the consequences of their decisions, and they can react according to such changes. In a democratic society, decision makers should be aware that they find themselves in an environment that neutral, friendly and hostile (civilian and military) actors seek to shape. All said actors are bent on wielding influence.

In reality, as part of a military conflict or even in periods deemed to be peacetime, military operations can be conducted comprising several kinds of targets, such as the following: individual (military and political decision makers); groups; vast swaths of a country's population. All of these targets, in principle, can be directly or indirectly influenced through various means (e.g. interpersonal communication and media). All this can be present in wargames. Within the sphere of wargames, influence operations constitute the centerpiece of this article. In the current context, influence means  the ability to produce an effect on one's character or behavior or the effect *per se*.

Among others, we see the following operations in the information environment functions: influence foreign target audiences; deceive foreign target audiences; inform domestic and international audiences  . Currently, in our society, nearly everyone is part of the digital information environment. Within the context of the digital age, information warfare is of concern to several experts who warn of malicious actors tampering with public opinion, through the media, and of their destabilizing governments, among other reasons for concern.



Influence in wargames

Compared to conventional wargaming, influence wargaming  goes by way of different factors, such as the following: attitudes; behaviors; non-negotiable beliefs and cultures; motivations in decision-making; governance; national constraints; permissions and policies; the media's inroads-making capability; information and disinformation.

In influence warfare , it's particularly important to know audience perspectives, as obtaining credible data regarding this is not easy. With regard to what is at issue, even if databases  are in place, attitudes and behaviors can change rapidly, making it difficult to assess the impact of actions undertaken in the wargame .


"To create intended effects in influence wargames, players can have several legal or illegal means at their disposal, such as changing public opinion through disinformation, as well as hacking and deep-faking social

media accounts through software piracy."

There is uncertainty in the field of communication , to the extent there is no absolute guarantee that the effects produced by the messages with the intended audience amount to what the emitting party desires. To create intended effects in influence wargames, players can have several legal or illegal means at their disposal, such as changing public opinion  through disinformation, as well as hacking and deep-faking social media accounts through software piracy .

Cognitive / Psychological Operations

Currently, there is conceptual uncertainty regarding cognitive warfare. However, this kind of warfare can be envisaged as a strategic approach to conflicts without resorting to physical violence, in order to change perceptions and to influence thought processes. As part of this, there is a weaponization of content taken in by people. The purpose of cognitive warfare is to shape adversaries' behaviors and, to that end, to set certain cognitive elements as goals (for instance: attitudes, beliefs and understandings). Cognitive warfare operates in the spheres of society and politics, making use of psychological tactics, with the aim of attaining strategic objectives.

In the military domain, cognitive operations include various capabilities , such as the following: psychological operations (Psyops); Public Information (in order to influence domestic and foreign audiences); civil-military operations (for the purpose of having influence over the civilian populace). Cognitive warfare can be waged through the media, in general, including social media.

According to Schrijver, Psyops can be understood as activities which, in times of conflict, use communication methods as well as other means; in relation to certain target audiences, this is to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviors so as to attain certain political and military objectives. Psyops, which may include targets such as enemy forces and civilian populations, among other audiences, can weaken the enemy's will or enhance backing from allies.

In the 21st century, India's capability in the sphere of wargames is strengthened by integrating Psyops. This provides troops with instruments that are vital for them to understand and face opposing propaganda and manipulation operations.

Brazil Case Study

Navy Captain Tito Xavier, a retired member of the Brazilian Armed Forces, stated in an email interview that, with regard to wargames in his country, Psyops are increasingly important, despite currently being limited at tactical and operational levels. He added that conditions are right for conducting wargames at higher decision-making levels.

Captain Xavier provided the example of Psyop-simulating wargames, which attempt to influence a target audience's opinion so that said audience is for or against a given party made up of players, while seeking to weaken the opposing party's will to fight.

He bemoans the fact that political decision makers in Brazil, in practically every sphere—including Security, Defense and Foreign Relations—are unaware that the methodology of wargames is important and effective for analyzing complex problems,

strategies and policies of areas which they head. Still, he is convinced that this situation will be changed in the medium term.

Captain Xavier believes that operational success increases when influence can be wielded over the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of certain target audiences. He added that, in the world we currently live in, opponents seek to affect political cohesion while diminishing the target country's economic and social resilience.

He asserts that Brazil's academic community could lend its contribution toward creating and designing wargames while improving their results; however, this topic is still in its very early stages at Brazilian universities. According to Captain Xavier, this difficulty has been mitigated by the contribution from the School of Naval Warfare's Scenario Simulation Laboratory; still, as Captain Xavier sees it, much remains to be done.

This article was first published by Marinho Media Analysis on March 10, 2025.
