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# Psychological Operations In Foreign Armies: Features And Comparative Analysis

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**Abstract.** This article investigates the distinctive features of psychological operations (PSYOP) in the armed forces of the United States of America, France, the People's Republic of China, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Drawing on open-source doctrinal documents, academic research, and comparative military studies, the article analyses organisational structures, strategic objectives, methodological approaches, and technological capabilities that define each country's psychological warfare posture. The study reveals that, although all four nations share the overarching goal of influencing the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour of target audiences, their doctrines, institutional frameworks, and cultural underpinnings differ substantially. The findings are relevant for Uzbekistan's ongoing modernisation of its defence sector and for researchers engaged in the comparative study of military psychology.

**Keywords:** psychological operations, PSYOP, information warfare, military psychology, US Army, French Armed Forces, People's Liberation Army, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, cognitive warfare, influence operations, Uzbekistan defence.

## Introduction

Psychological operations constitute one of the oldest yet most rapidly evolving domains of modern warfare. From ancient commanders who used psychological intimidation to demoralise opponents, to contemporary militaries that deploy precision-targeted digital messaging campaigns, the art of shaping human cognition in the operational environment has never been more important. In the twenty-first century, the boundary between kinetic combat and information struggle has blurred beyond recognition: battles are now won or lost not only on physical terrain but also in the minds of soldiers, civilians, and decision-makers.



The emergence of social media platforms, artificial intelligence-driven content generation, and real-time global communication has dramatically expanded the toolkit available to military planners. Simultaneously, it has increased the vulnerability of societies to adversarial influence. Nations with mature PSYOP doctrines - most notably the United States - have invested heavily in adapting Cold War-era concepts to the networked information environment. Others, such as China and Iran, have developed parallel capabilities rooted in their own strategic cultures and political ideologies.

For Uzbekistan and its armed forces, understanding the psychological operations practices of major powers is not merely an academic exercise. The Republic of Uzbekistan is situated in a region where great-power competition, asymmetric threats, and information operations intersect. As the country implements its National Defence Doctrine and modernises its armed forces in accordance with the Military Reform Programme, a clear-eyed analysis of how leading militaries organise, train, and employ psychological capabilities provides indispensable lessons for institutional development.

The purpose of this article is to examine and compare the psychological operations doctrines of the United States, France, China, and Iran. These four countries were selected because they represent distinct military cultures, geopolitical orientations, and levels of technological sophistication, yet each maintains recognisable and documented PSYOP capabilities. The article is structured as follows: after an overview of conceptual frameworks, each country is examined in turn, followed by a comparative analysis and a set of conclusions with implications for the Uzbek defence community.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: DEFINING PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS

Psychological operations are planned activities that use non-kinetic means to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences in order to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately their behaviour. The United States Joint Publication 3-13.2 defines PSYOP as "planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign target audiences (TAs) to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning,



and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals."

Contemporary scholarship distinguishes between several overlapping but distinct concepts. Information operations (IO) constitute the broader category, encompassing electronic warfare, cyber operations, military deception, operations security, and PSYOP. Cognitive warfare - a term increasingly used in NATO literature - refers specifically to efforts to affect the cognitive layer of adversary decision-making, exploiting biases, emotions, and social divisions. Influence operations is a still broader term that includes both overt and covert activities directed at foreign publics. For the purposes of this article, psychological operations are treated as the institutional, doctrine-driven subset of influence activities that are formally assigned to designated military units.

Three analytical dimensions are used to compare the four countries: (1) institutional organisation - how PSYOP capability is structured within the military hierarchy; (2) doctrinal emphasis - what strategic and operational goals psychological operations are expected to achieve; and (3) methodological approach - what techniques, media, and platforms are employed to reach target audiences.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES ARMED FORCES

### *Institutional structure*

The United States possesses the most formally institutionalised and resource-intensive psychological operations capability in the world. The primary active-duty formation is the 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne), headquartered at Fort Bragg, North Carolina (now Fort Liberty). This unit consists of multiple battalions, each specialised by regional focus: the 1st Battalion (Global), 5th Battalion (Pacific), 6th Battalion (Europe, Africa), 8th Battalion (Western Hemisphere), and 9th Battalion (Middle East, South Asia). The 4th PSYOP Group (A) falls under United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) and is aligned with US Special Operations Command (SOCOM).

Reserve component forces provide substantial additional capacity through the 2nd PSYOP Group (Reserve Component), which mirrors the active



component's regional structure. Total PSYOP-designated personnel across active and reserve components exceed 5,000 soldiers, representing one of the world's largest dedicated information-influence formations.

### ***Doctrinal approach***

US PSYOP doctrine is codified in Army Field Manual 3-53 and Joint Publication 3-13.2. It establishes a systematic, target-audience-analysis (TAA)-driven process: before any product is disseminated, planners conduct detailed sociolinguistic, cultural, and behavioural research to understand the target audience's beliefs, values, information consumption habits, and susceptibility to specific messages. This evidence-based approach distinguishes US PSYOP from simpler forms of propaganda.

Operationally, US PSYOP are organised at three levels. Strategic PSYOP support national-level objectives and are coordinated with the State Department and intelligence community. Operational PSYOP support theatre commanders and are integrated into campaign plans. Tactical PSYOP support ground commanders by producing loudspeaker broadcasts, leaflets, face-to-face engagements, and digital content aimed at local populations or enemy forces. The PSYOP process model - CARVER matrix for target prioritisation, Product Development Cycle for message creation, and CONOP for employment - ensures systematic planning and evaluation.

### ***Technological Capabilities***

The United States has invested substantially in high-technology PSYOP delivery platforms. The Commando Solo EC-130J aircraft operated by the 193rd Special Operations Wing (Pennsylvania Air National Guard) can broadcast AM, FM, HF, TV, and military communications across a wide area. The Digital Broadcast System enables rapid production and global distribution of digital content. Since 2015, US PSYOP units have integrated social media operations, including platform exploitation, persona management, and narrative amplification, into their operational repertoire. The Influence Operations Simulation (IOS) training environment allows PSYOP soldiers to practise campaign planning in virtual information environments before deployment.

PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS IN THE FRENCH ARMED FORCES

### ***Institutional structure***



France maintains dedicated psychological operations capability within the Commandement des Opérations Spéciales (COS - Special Operations Command). The primary formation is the 4e Régiment de Chasseurs (4th Chasseurs Regiment), which was formally redesignated as a psychological operations unit following France's doctrinal reforms in the early 2000s. The regiment is based in Gap and consists of approximately 600 personnel organised into functional companies: one each for media production, information analysis, and deployed tactical support.

France's PSYOP capability is further embedded in the broader Information Operations framework under the Joint Information Operations Centre (CJAI - Centre de la Communication Opérationnelle). This centre coordinates military public affairs, PSYOP, cyber information, and electronic influence, reflecting France's preference for an integrated, whole-of-government approach to information activities.

### ***Doctrinal approach***

French PSYOP doctrine, as reflected in the 2021 Military Programming Law (LPM) and classified Joint Doctrine DIA-3.10, emphasises two primary functions: support to deployed forces in overseas operations (OPEX), and strategic communication in support of France's global influence objectives. The French military has historically been active in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel, and Lebanon, and PSYOP doctrine has been shaped significantly by counterinsurgency and stabilisation operations in these theatres.

A distinctive feature of French doctrine is the concept of l'influence opérationnelle, which treats psychological action, media relations, and cultural outreach as components of a single influence continuum. French planners place particular emphasis on narrative construction - building coherent, culturally resonant stories that legitimise French military presence and delegitimise adversary narratives. France's engagement with Francophone populations in West Africa provides a linguistic and cultural foundation that enhances message effectiveness in that region.

### ***Technological capabilities***

France operates dedicated airborne broadcast platforms, mobile tactical broadcasting systems, and an in-house media production capability that produces



radio programmes, video content, and printed materials for deployed operations. Since 2017, the French Ministry of Armed Forces has explicitly acknowledged the importance of social media influence and established a dedicated unit - the L2I (Lutte Informationnelle d'Intérêt) - to coordinate online influence and counter-disinformation activities, including both defensive monitoring and proactive narrative shaping.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS IN THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY

### *Institutional structure*

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China operates psychological operations within a distinctive strategic framework that integrates military and civilian capabilities across a centralised command structure. Following the 2015-2016 restructuring of the PLA, psychological warfare functions were consolidated under the Strategic Support Force (SSF) - specifically the Network Systems Department - alongside cyber and space operations. This integration reflects China's doctrine of "three warfares" (sān zhǒng zhàn fǎ), which frames psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare as the three key pillars of political warfare.

The PLA's Base 311 (formerly the People's Liberation Army Unit 61398 for information operations) conducts strategic-level psychological and information operations directed primarily at Taiwan, Japan, the United States, and other perceived adversaries. At the operational level, every Group Army (集团军) maintains a political work department that includes psychological operations personnel, trained at the PLA Political Work University in Nanjing.

### *Doctrinal approach*

China's approach to psychological operations is inseparable from the concept of "winning without fighting" (不战而胜) drawn from Sun Tzu's Art of War and adapted for modern strategic competition. The three warfares doctrine, formalised in amendments to the Political Work Regulations of the PLA in 2003, defines psychological warfare (心理战) as efforts to disrupt the enemy's decision-making capacity, undermine adversary morale, and build confidence among friendly forces and populations. Public opinion warfare (舆论战) aims to shape



the information environment both domestically and internationally, while legal warfare (法律战) uses international and domestic law as a tool of strategic influence.

Operationally, PLA psychological operations during potential Taiwan Strait scenarios include cross-strait broadcast operations, internet-based influence campaigns, and direct communication with Taiwan's civilian and military population through social media, radio, and television. Chinese planners devote significant attention to cognitive vulnerabilities in democratic societies, particularly the susceptibility of open information environments to coordinated influence campaigns.

### ***Technological capabilities***

China has developed an extensive domestic media ecosystem - including CCTV's international channels (CGTN), China Radio International, the Global Times, and the Xinhua News Agency - that serves as a platform for strategic messaging. More recently, PLA-linked influence networks have been identified operating on Western social media platforms including Twitter/X, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, using coordinated inauthentic behaviour to amplify pro-Beijing narratives and suppress criticism. China's AI research institutes, including those affiliated with the PLA, are developing large-language-model-based content generation and deepfake technologies for potential deployment in psychological operations.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS IN THE IRANIAN ARMED FORCES**

### ***Institutional structure***

Iran's psychological operations capability is distributed across two parallel military structures: the Islamic Republic of Iran Army (Artesh) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC - Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami). The IRGC's Psychological Operations Organisation (Sazman-e Jang-e Ravani) is the primary dedicated PSYOP formation and operates under direct supervision of the Supreme Leader's office, reflecting the ideological centrality of psychological warfare in Iran's revolutionary strategy. The IRGC Qods Force maintains psychological influence capabilities oriented toward extraterritorial operations in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories.

### ***Doctrinal approach***



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Iran's psychological operations doctrine is deeply shaped by the ideology of velayat-e faqih (guardianship of the Islamic jurist) and by lessons drawn from the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. During that conflict, both sides used psychological operations extensively, and Iran developed doctrinal concepts emphasising religious legitimisation, martyrdom narratives, and the demonisation of adversaries. Contemporary Iranian PSYOP doctrine blends these religious and ideological foundations with asymmetric strategic objectives: using psychological pressure to compensate for conventional military inferiority relative to adversaries such as the United States and Israel.

A central feature of Iranian psychological strategy is the concept of "resistance economy" and "resistance axis" messaging, which frames Iran and its allies - Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthi forces, and Iraqi Shia militias - as a divinely sanctioned coalition resisting oppression. This narrative is disseminated through state media (Press TV, Al-Alam, Al-Mayadeen), religious networks, and social media, and is tailored differently for Arabic-speaking audiences, Persian-speaking diaspora communities, and Western audiences critical of US foreign policy.

### ***Technological capabilities***

Iran operates a sophisticated cyber-enabled influence infrastructure. The IRGC's cyber unit, reported to include the advanced persistent threat group known as APT35 (Charming Kitten), has conducted influence operations targeting US, Israeli, Saudi, and European audiences through phishing campaigns, social media manipulation, and disinformation seeding. Iran has also demonstrated willingness to use psychological pressure in conjunction with kinetic operations: prior to missile strikes, Iranian state media and social accounts routinely broadcast threat messaging designed to paralyse adversary decision-making. The seizure and broadcast of foreign drone and naval vessel imagery serves dual purposes - demonstrating capability and amplifying psychological impact.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Examining the four national approaches in parallel reveals both convergent trends and important divergences. In terms of institutional organisation, the United States stands apart for the depth and breadth of its dedicated PSYOP force



structure, with thousands of trained specialists organised into regionally oriented units under SOCOM. France and China maintain mid-tier dedicated capabilities, with France's strength lying in cultural and linguistic expertise and China's in the integration of state media as a strategic PSYOP instrument. Iran's capability is largely subsumed within the ideological-political apparatus of the IRGC, making it harder to separate PSYOP from regime legitimisation functions.

Doctrinally, the most significant divergence is between the US/French model - which emphasises evidence-based target audience analysis, legal compliance with international law of armed conflict, and transparency about military authorship of products - and the Chinese/Iranian model, which more readily blurs the boundary between military PSYOP and covert civilian influence activities. China's three warfares doctrine explicitly integrates psychological, media, and legal dimensions in a whole-of-state framework that has no direct equivalent in Western doctrine. Iran's ideological framing makes religious and political mobilisation inseparable from tactical psychological operations.

Technologically, all four nations are investing in digital and social media capabilities, though at varying levels of sophistication and institutional integration. The United States leads in doctrine for digital PSYOP but faces legal and regulatory constraints that limit domestic application. China has the most integrated state-media/military information ecosystem. France is notable for its recent formal acknowledgement of offensive information operations. Iran demonstrates that asymmetric, low-cost social media operations can achieve significant psychological effects disproportionate to resource investment.

Common trends across all four cases include: the growing primacy of the cognitive and informational domain relative to kinetic operations; the increasing use of artificial intelligence in content production and target audience analysis; the blurring of peacetime and wartime information activities; and the challenge of attribution in digital influence operations, which complicates both deterrence and response.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR UZBEKISTAN'S DEFENCE SECTOR

For the Republic of Uzbekistan, several practical lessons emerge from this comparative analysis. First, the institutional model matters: establishing a dedicated PSYOP formation - even a modest one - with organic training,



language capability, and doctrine, provides a qualitatively superior capability compared to ad hoc arrangements. The French model of a regiment-sized formation with specialised companies is an instructive example for a country of Uzbekistan's size and defence budget.

Second, the doctrinal foundation must reflect Uzbekistan's specific strategic environment. The country's cultural and linguistic diversity, its position as a hub of Central Asian connectivity, and its relationships with both Russian-led and Western-aligned security structures all shape the threat environment and the audiences that any PSYOP capability must address. Uzbekistan's rich cultural heritage, multilingualism, and the prestige of its historical Islamic scholarship provide unique narrative resources that could underpin a distinctively Uzbek approach to information and psychological operations.

Third, the evidence from all four countries underscores the importance of civilian-military coordination in information activities. No purely military PSYOP apparatus, operating in isolation from diplomatic and cultural institutions, has achieved durable influence effects. Uzbekistan's emerging public diplomacy apparatus and its academic institutions could be natural partners for a national information strategy that includes PSYOP components.

## CONCLUSION

Psychological operations represent a foundational capability in the twenty-first-century military toolkit. This article has demonstrated that the United States, France, China, and Iran each maintain distinctive PSYOP postures shaped by doctrine, institutional structure, technological capability, and strategic culture. The United States leads in formal institutionalisation and evidence-based methodology. France excels in culturally embedded influence for expeditionary operations. China has achieved a remarkable integration of military PSYOP and state media into a unified strategic influence system. Iran demonstrates the asymmetric power of ideologically motivated, low-cost information operations.

These differences notwithstanding, a common trajectory is apparent: psychological operations are becoming more continuous, more technologically mediated, and more deeply integrated into national security strategy. The cognitive domain is emerging as a primary arena of strategic competition, alongside the physical and informational domains.



For Uzbekistan, the lessons are clear: investment in psychological operations capability - in doctrine, in trained personnel, in institutional structures, and in technological platforms - is an essential component of modern defence preparedness. The Republic of Uzbekistan's Military Security and Defence University has a pivotal role to play in developing the research base, educational programmes, and doctrinal frameworks that will equip the nation's armed forces for the challenges of cognitive warfare in the years ahead.

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