

Psychological Defence: Vital for Sweden's Defence Capability

Niklas H. Rossbach*

Sweden is today exposed to information operations that can affect freedom of expression and opinion. In the event of a so-called grey zone conflict (a conflict short of war), the amount of disinformation that is directed at the public and decision-makers will only increase. To defend itself, Sweden will need to organize its countermeasures more clearly and coherently, and increase its will to resist. Effective resistance nevertheless assumes the existence of a, currently non-existent, designated central authority able to undertake a modern strategic psychological defence, including to survey the entire array of threats as well as the roles and capabilities of the affected agencies. Without a cohesive psychological defence, government agencies risk passing the buck among themselves; and it will be very difficult to both resist attempts to spread disinformation and strengthen the will to defend. In the absence of such countermeasures, no other part of defence will be able to function.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENCE IS VITAL TO SWEDEN'S TOTAL DEFENCE EFFORT

"I can fly. I am not afraid", says Stig-Helmer in the classic Swedish film, *Sällskapsresan* (The Charter Trip). Just as Stig-Helmer needs to reassure himself that it is safe to fly, the Swedish public needs to be reassured that it is meaningful to defend the country in the event of a conflict. This applies even in the so-called grey zone between peace and war, when an enemy is trying to influence events short of direct acts of war. A coherent effort will be needed to maintain this conviction, and this is something to which strategic psychological defence can contribute.¹

Without a robust psychological defence, Swedish values stand unprotected against hostile actions that seek to influence Sweden's decisions and actions. This in turn risks undermining both civil and military efforts

* The article is based on research carried out at the University of Oxford, supported by the Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation.

to defend Sweden. Psychological defence is thus a fundamental strategic concern that involves the entire total defence effort.

Psychological defence is just as central for the new total defence as it was during the Cold War. For most of the past few decades, however, work on psychological defence has been significantly reduced. Increased security tensions in Sweden's near abroad, however, have made it necessary to pay attention to the important role of psychological defence in the defence of Sweden.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENCE: A DURABLE CONCEPT

Sweden's psychological defence was originally a response to the psychological warfare the enemy was expected to carry out in the event of war. The term 'psychological defence', primarily used in Sweden, was established in an attempt to move away the older and more specific term – propaganda – which is primarily associated with Nazi Germany and the Second World War. The Swedish term has shown itself to be sustainable and adaptable, but its meaning has become blurred, especially since its applications concern several government agencies. Nevertheless, psychological defence has outlived all conceivable competing concepts.

Psychological defence has three essential components. However, the prominence of each of these has varied over the years. The three parts are:

- to counteract deception and disinformation, including rumour-mongering and propaganda or, in other words, everything that hostile psychological warfare engages in;
- to ensure that the government authorities can get their message out in a crisis, including war;

¹ The concept of 'psychological defence' was established in Sweden as a practical response to preparations for psychological warfare being undertaken in the rest of the world, with the publication of the official government report, SOU 1953:27 *Psykologiskt försvar* [Psychological defence]. Today, the term is often used to cover many overlapping concepts, such as responses to disinformation operations, morale-boosting and resilience-enhancing operations, and information warfare or PSYOPS.

- to contribute to strengthening the population's will to defend Sweden.

Novel technology has always been employed in the service of psychological warfare. Hardly ten years after Nazi Germany's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, made his last radio broadcast, Swedish psychological defence was experimenting with live television press conferences about its exercises, with the aim of protecting democracy.

Psychological warfare can occur through various means. In addition to disinformation, it can also make use of diplomatic and economic means. Modern information and communications technology in the cyber arena provide new opportunities for psychological warfare. False news can be disseminated through social media and cyberattacks on Swedish infrastructure could, together with the use of rumours, undermine the public's confidence in the authorities. Sweden needs a coherent overview of all the potential ways in which an enemy might launch propaganda and information operations. It is also important to understand how the threat has changed since the Cold War.

NEW AND OLD THREATS

The prerequisites of psychological warfare were completely different during the Cold War. Then the threat was more straightforward, with one enemy and one type of conflict, whereas today there are many kinds of threats. Psychological defence activities must now deal with both state and non-state actors and, while counteracting operations that occur in peacetime, must be prepared for wartime conditions. The similarity between the past and the present lies in the fact that it is the same vital values that are at stake, such as free elections. Previously, democracies risked becoming victims of an occupying power. Today, a foreign power may instead attempt to manipulate Swedish political elections through various kinds of information operations.

Then as now, the will to defend was central to a functioning defence. A defence requires both the will to act and the capability to do so. Taken to its extreme, without the will to defend Sweden all the equipment and all the armed forces will be of little value. Ensuring sufficient motivation, however, cannot only be the responsibility of a strategic psychological defence.

Achieving and maintaining the will to defend requires action from several distinct parts of society, not least the various government agencies. In their efforts to strengthen the will to defend, however, there is a risk that a government agency, unintentionally or otherwise, might lapse into some form of domestic propaganda, which could do much more harm than good. Strengthening the will to defend is an issue that requires careful consideration of the roles and responsibilities of government and those of other parts of society.

In the 1950s, the National Preparedness Commission for Psychological Defence (the predecessor of the National Board of Psychological Defence, SPF) wished to avoid being accused of any form of manipulation of the public. During the Second World War, Sweden used its fair share of clumsy and politically doubtful measures for managing public opinion, and the new organisation for psychological defence wanted to avoid being associated with them. Nonetheless, a psychological defence exercise held in the 1970s, which drew much attention and some saw as an exercise in domestic propaganda, reminded decision-makers of the risks. Even in the 1980s, when peacetime tasks such as providing information on total defence became part of psychological defence, decision-makers feared that this might become problematic.

Today, total defence may need a new narrative about what constitutes a credible defence. Such an account would certainly need to be formulated, or at least affirmed, politically, not least in order to show how government agencies are working together in a meaningful way. A strategic psychological defence would be able to coordinate a narrative about the values that Sweden wishes to uphold, especially regarding security-related matters.

Without a coordinated psychological defence, it is likely to be more difficult to ensure a will to defend. The will to defend must be reinforced before a crisis breaks out, and is required to help explain the need to build and participate in a total defence. The will to defend is also important in order to advance the recruitment of civil defence and armed forces personnel, and especially to justify conscription. The will to defend has traditionally been defined by Cold War conditions, and the assumption that the threat is an armed attack



by a foreign power. For information operations in peacetime, it might also be necessary to ensure the will to defend, or to establish a new type of will to defend, against low-intensity threats.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENCE IN THE FUTURE

The psychological defence activities of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) can be viewed as peacetime “here and now” tasks, which psychological defence during the Cold War only engaged in to a limited extent. Psychological defence during the Cold War was certainly strategic, but its role in preparing the population during peacetime for how it should act in the event of war was limited.

Some parts of the MSB’s tasks stem from the old psychological defence. The MSB studies not only developments in the public’s will to defend the country, but also public opinion on propaganda and grey zone conflicts. The agency has increased its knowledge about information operations and how Sweden might defend itself. This type of activity is likely to become ever more important due to so-called hybrid warfare. If propaganda and information operations are sufficient to allow the enemy to achieve its objectives, allowing a conflict to escalate to a war would serve little purpose. But also even an enemy that is preparing for war would want to undermine Sweden’s will to defend itself before an open conflict broke out. Research and knowledge about an adversary’s methods is not enough to strengthen the will to defend. A clear division of responsibility among all the government agencies is also required.

If the tasks of psychological defence become the responsibility of many different government agencies, there is a risk that psychological defence will devolve into disparate efforts and become nobody’s responsibility. Some authorities might treat it as a technical task connected to cyber and IT issues, while others might not make it a priority. As long as the threats are low-intensity, they can perhaps be dealt with separately without a single coordinating authority. In a crisis, however, it will become apparent that more is required than just a network of agencies dealing with psychological defence based on their own separate needs.

The number and types of threats have changed since the Cold War. This increases the need for a coherent

view and is one reason why a central authority is needed – a strategic psychological defence body preferably in the form of a separate agency. Psychological warfare can be conducted in several ways, but to counteract them successfully it is important to be able to understand an opponent’s information operation within a larger strategic context.

The armed forces have a vital role in psychological defence, and have capabilities for engaging in psychological operations (PSYOPS), for example during overseas military operations. This is nonetheless very different from the strategic psychological defence that Sweden had in earlier times. Such a defence should not be coordinated by the armed forces, just as was it not during the Cold War. First, because it would be problematic if questions that concern the heart of Sweden’s democracy, such as the freedoms of expression and opinion, were subjugated to military considerations. In addition, such threats already exist in peacetime; and in the event of war the armed forces must focus on tactical psychological warfare at the frontline, and hence cannot take responsibility for the whole of society.

In sum modern, a well-functioning total defence would probably be best served by a centrally organised psychological defence that is clear and cohesive; that is, a strategic psychological defence. This would mean a combination of the status that psychological defence had during the Cold War and the tasks that today fall within the framework of psychological defence at the MSB.

A STRATEGIC PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENCE IS NECESSARY

To understand the need for a modern psychological defence, it is not necessary to scrutinize military scenarios. It is merely necessary to highlight the risk that information operations could undermine the country’s democracy and capacity for decision-making in the event of a crisis. Today, psychological defence is needed to fight the effects of information operations in peacetime, not just in war. Psychological defence could even be a decisive instrument that averts the threat from an enemy that is unwilling to escalate a conflict to a war.

For psychological defence to be effective it must be strategic. This is true for three reasons:



First, a concise, comprehensive knowledge of an enemy's methods of psychological warfare is required. A reasonably skilful handling of information operations in key parts of society, such as the media and intelligence agencies, is insufficient. In the event of a sudden crisis or a serious conflict, a concise, comprehensive grasp of the aims of information operations and how countermeasures can be swiftly organised could prove crucial.

Second, it is necessary to consider giving special status to psychological defence within the framework of the new total defence effort, not least to show where psychological defence matters are being coordinated. Officials in Sweden, as much as the public, need to know where to go for help in identifying psychological warfare and where they will receive support in countering it, whether the influence is directed at a municipality, an individual or the entire country. Without a strategic and central status for psychological defence, its objectives risk being lost among several different government agencies. Strategic psychological defence should, as before, have a clearly civil status in order to guarantee it autonomous role within the framework of total defence. This would also facilitate collaboration on an equal footing with the intelligence, defence and other government agencies.

Finally, strategic psychological defence would make it easier to collaborate and demonstrate solidarity with other similarly inclined countries. These countries would know which Swedish authority they would be collaborating with on joint measures to defend against psychological warfare. A strategic psychological defence would also make it easier for Sweden to suggest which values should be given priority internationally.

FURTHER READING

Niklas H. Rossback, (preliminary title) *Fighting propaganda: The Swedish Experience of Psychological Warfare and Sweden's Psychological Defence, 1940–1960*, forthcoming, Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation.