

The Roles of PA and MISO in Modern Warfare

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Abstract: The relationship between Public Affairs and Military Information Support (MISO)/ Psychological Operations (PSYOP) has become increasingly relevant in today's modern information warfare. The current military doctrine describes PA and MISO as separate yet coordinated activities. PA focuses on providing truthful information to the public, while MISO aims to influence target audiences through strategically crafted messages. Although both PA and MISO share the common goal of combating disinformation and developing effective narratives within the realm of information warfare, they are usually regarded as separate and distinct fields. This separation can create challenges in coordinating efforts between the two areas. This paper analyzes joint doctrinal frameworks and select real-world cases to explore the relationship between PA and MISO, and how these activities complement each other to improve military communication strategy. The research specifically addresses two questions: RQ1: What is the doctrinal relationship between PA And MISO? and RQ2: How can PA and MISO complement each other to improve military communication strategy while countering propaganda? By analyzing tactics used in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Russia-Ukraine War, and the Israel-Hamas War, and current military doctrine, this study demonstrates that the complementary efforts of MISO and PA can provide a significant advantage to the side that dominates the information war. The study concludes that integrating PA and MISO can enhance the credibility and persuasiveness of military communication efforts, as long as their distinct roles are respected and maintained.

Keywords: Public affairs, Psychological operations, Military information support operations, Information warfare

1. Introduction

Within U.S. military operations, Public Affairs (PA) and Military Support Information Operations (MISO)/ Psychological Operations (PSYOP) are the information capabilities used to shape perception, attitude and behavior (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022). PA focuses on informing the public with truthful, timely and accurate information to maintain credibility and transparency with the audience (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017). In contrast, MISO is concerned with deliberately crafting messages to influence the attitudes, emotions and behaviors of target audiences (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2014). Through the Department of Defense (DoD) policy, these functions are kept separate, as PA messaging cannot be intended to influence or manipulate the public (Department of Defense, 2008). Even though both PA and MISO share a common goal to develop narratives to combat disinformation, their dynamics are typically delineated as separate and distinct components (Fitzgerald, Gills, and Giles, 2022; Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022).

In today's battlespace, various new capabilities assist in information operations aimed at combating disinformation. These advancements, such as artificial intelligence and advanced communication technologies, can introduce unprecedented dynamics, such as the integration of PA and MISO as not just a theoretical concept but a necessary operational element. Despite the potential complementarity between PA and MISO in addressing disinformation, challenges arise in coordinating and integrating the two fields (Larson *et al.*, 2009). One primary challenge is PA's concern that involvement with MISO could negatively impact its credibility with the public (Larson *et al.*, 2009). The hesitation to lose credibility is rooted in policy and strong value to uphold the truth within the PA community.

This paper examines the relationship between PA and MISO, focusing on the advantages and challenges of integrating these two capabilities in information warfare. The current joint doctrine asserts that PA and PSYOP are distinct activities, lacking detailed roadmap for maintaining synchronized communication to each function's respective audience. By analyzing joint doctrinal frameworks and select real world cases, this paper addresses the following research questions. RQ1: What is the doctrinal relationship between PA and MISO? RQ2: How can PA and MISO complement each other to ameliorate military communication strategy while countering propaganda.

2. Military Doctrine Perspective

2.1 Joint PA Doctrine

Since the 1990s, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have gradually refined doctrinal guidance regarding the relationship between PA and MISO previously known as Psychological Operations (PSYOP). The first mention of this

relationship appeared in the 1997 Joint Operations PA doctrine, which stated strict boundaries and absolute separation of PA and PSYOP (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997). However, it emphasized the importance of coordination between the two fields during the planning process to ensure synchronization and credibility of the narrative (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997). Almost a decade later, in 2005, PA was directed to be aware of PSYOP but was not to participate or a tool to be used by IO or PSYOP (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2005).

By 2010, the updated doctrine no longer included the phrase that prohibited the integration of PA and MISO, such as “under no circumstances will PA and MISO conduct each other’s activities” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997). Instead, it acknowledged that PA and PSYOP activities influence one another and require deconfliction (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2010). The 2010 publication also stated that, under law, PSYOP operations would not be conducted on U.S. citizens (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2010). The Joint Chiefs of Staff, in 2016, published the current version of Public Affairs doctrine, which remains consistent with 2010 doctrine, requiring continual and deconflicted coordination between PA and MISO (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2016). While the relationship between PA and MISO is not explicitly defined in the later doctrine as it was in the first version, it continues to highlight the need for separate yet coordinated information activities.

Premise 1: PA’s doctrine delineating a separate, distinct, yet coordinated relationship with MISO, leading to ambiguity on how these activities should interact within the information environment.

2.2 Joint MISO Doctrine

Unlike the doctrine for PA, the joint publication for MISO/PSYOP includes a specific section detailing the relationship between PA and MISO. Before any formal PA joint doctrine was established, PSYOP published two doctrines that emphasized its role in communicating the truth (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1993). The 1993 doctrine highlighted the importance of maintaining the credibility of PA channels, rather than strictly enforcing a separation between the two fields (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1993). Prior to the publication of any PA doctrine, PSYOPs role was described as a tool to support PA’s mission of truth projection to assist in ensuring the target audience receive the information (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1996).

The verbiage advocating for a “separate and distinct” relationship first appeared in the 2003 doctrine, marking a shift toward more clearly defined boundaries between PA and PSYOP (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2003). Similar to PA doctrine, this updated version emphasized the need for coordination to prevent conflicting narratives, while still highlighting each function as distinct (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2003). From 2010 onward, the most updated version of the doctrine consistently maintained a clear separation of PA and MISO, using the “separate and distinct” phrase in all three versions (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2010, 2014). All three doctrines state that while PA and PSYOP are distinct, they must remain coordinated, echoing the language used in PA doctrine (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2010, 2014).

Premise 2: MISO amplifies PAs importance of maintaining credibility as an information source while maintaining a coordinated relationship with them.

3. Anthology of Doctrine: Are we Separate or Coordinated?

Doctrine categorizes PA and MISO as separate and distinct functions, positioning them in different areas within the military staff. For example, PA is part of the commander’s personal staff, providing advice on communications and media activities (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2016). This setup means that public affairs officer report directly to the commanding officer of their unit for objectives and tasks. In contrast, rather than being under the commander’s staff, MISO operates under the information operations capability usually residing with the J39 Information Operations (IO) cell. (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2012). A MISO representative is integrated within the IO Cell to synchronize with other IO capabilities, allowing the Information Officer to achieve the commander’s information objectives (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2012).

Due to their separate chain of command, the coordination between PA and MISO is primarily seen as a staffing process (Briant, 2018; Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2012). This indicates that coordination is conducted at the strategic level rather than focusing on direct, action-oriented tasks (Briant, 2018). Consequently, PA is consulted and kept informed about MISO actions without coordinating on specific tasks (Briant, 2018). In practice, PA and MISO are both operationally and physically distinct within the staff, leading to a challenging cultural divide between them (Porche et al., 2013).

Premise 3: Within a military staff, PA and MISO are operationally and physically separate information-related capabilities.

4. “Turf-War”

Doctrine manifested the relationship between PA and MISO by delineating their roles as separate yet coordinated, aiming to protect PA’s credibility. However, this delineation creates challenges in achieving synchronization, leading to friction and “turf war” within the information fields (Briant, 2018). This “turf war” is highlighted in the Pentagon during Rear Admiral Frank Thorp’s tenure as the Public Affairs Special Assistant to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and U.S. Navy Chief of Information between 2005 to 2009, creating tensions between PA and MISO (Briant, 2018). This period coincided with the publication of the 2005 Joint Chiefs Public Affairs doctrine version, stating that PA should not be used as a tool for PSYOP or engage in their activities (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2005).

Under Admiral Thorp’s leadership, a conflict arose when PSYOP/MISO sought to implement two new policies that would integrate PA and MISO tasks online: Internet Activities (IIA) policy and the Trans-Regional Web Initiative (TRWI) (Briant, 2018). The Trans-Regional Web Initiative is a project that allows the use of websites to communicate DoD perspectives while the IIA allows DoD personnel to engage with foreign audiences online (Briant, 2018; Kulemeka, 2015; Heimann & Silverberg, 2009). Within the Pentagon, these policies were seen as blurring the lines between PA and MISO, allowing PSYOP to conduct tasks online, which was predominantly PA’s tasks (Briant, 2018). Admiral Thorp, who was involved in the approval process, disagreed with this merging of PSYOP and PA responsibilities, which led to the stalling of the approval process for the policies. (Briant, 2018). Consequently, PSYOP personnel decided to bypass PA out of the approval process due to the challenges and difficulties in effective coordination (Briant, 2018).

Premise 4: Blurred lines can give rise to symptom-oriented solutions, which result in unintended consequences, or addictive behavior (Senge, 2006).

Premise 5: PA’s identity and need to maintain credibility results in limited involvement in influence activities.

5. Modern Conflicts

Recent conflicts revealed the dynamics of information warfighting function in a wide spectrum of warfare. The gleaned dynamics may not allude to information warfighting function directly yet, however, an after-the-fact analysis of MISO and PA dynamics in recent three wars can ameliorate the complementary nature of these two in conceptualizing the warfighting function.

5.1 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War

The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War serves as a case study for understanding the modern battlespace and predicting the nature of future conflicts, highlighting the significant role of advanced technologies, such as unmanned aerial vehicle systems (UAS) and satellite surveillance, and information campaigns integrated with kinetic ground operations (Antal, 2022; Cirafo, 2022; Marinus, 2021). On September 27, 2020, Azerbaijan strategically deployed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) into southern Nagorno-Karabakh, leading to the obliteration of a substantial portion of Armenia’s tanks, vehicles and anti-aircraft systems (Antal, 2022; Ho, 2021). Over the course of forty-four days, the conflict unfolded, culminating in a cease-fire agreement that established Azerbaijan as the dominant force over Armenia (Ho, 2021; Marinus, 2021). One of the competitive edges Azerbaijan had over the Armenians was in their execution of information operation with kinetic operations, causing the Armenians to suffer from an information ambush. (Marinus, 2021).

From the start of the conflict, the public affairs offices on both sides worked to shape the perception of the war with official statements and social media (Antal, 2022). Both the Armenian and Azerbaijan offices shared graphic images of the war on social media to support their respective narratives (Antal, 2022). Azerbaijani used social media to share high-definition videos of drone strikes, showcasing the destruction of buildings and soldiers, highlighting their success of the war (Antal, 2022; Rostomyan, 2023). In contrast, the Armenian focused on sharing graphic images to highlight the war crimes and harsh realities of the war being committed to counter the portrayal of Azerbaijani drone live feeds (Rostomyan, 2023). Armenians used these images to support the narrative of being the defenders against an unlawful aggressor, while Azerbaijan’s narrative was to generate confidence in their perceived successes (Rostomyan, 2023).

Azerbaijan’s advantage within the public affairs activity over the Armenians became evident during the missile strikes in Ganja. On October 4, 2020, Armenian forces targeted Ganja, Azerbaijan’s second largest city, with ballistic missiles (Marinus, 2021). Official reports from Azerbaijani sources indicated one death and thirty injured (Marinus, 2021). The Armenian public affairs messages regarding Ganja were contradictory to each other,

lacking one cohesive message (Marinus, 2021). The Armenian Ministry of Defense denied targeting the city, while the Press Secretary claimed that the missiles hit the Ganja airport rather than a civilian populated area, and the president stated that the strikes were aimed at a military installation (Marinus, 2021). In contrast, Azerbaijan's Director of War Information Center actively countered this narrative by releasing a series of coordinated official messages through press release, media kits and social media posts condemning Armenian actions in Ganja as war crimes (Marinus, 2021).

Unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) video feeds were not only used for public affair efforts but also enhanced MISO tactics by allowing for real-time information dissemination to showcase each side's respective successes in the war, while also accusing each other of war crimes (Talishinsky, 2023). A significant tactic employed by Azerbaijan involved using live feeds to instill fear and demoralize Armenian forces to continue fighting in the war (Antal, 2022). In response, Armenian forces also spread false information on social media to undermine Azerbaijani force's morale; however, the Azerbaijani public affairs office quickly countered these MISO efforts as disinformation (Talishinsky, 2023). Social media was the platform for both sides of the conflict to conduct PA and MISO activities with UAV video feeds (Antal, 2022).

5.2 Russia-Ukraine War

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine is described as a war of information, which includes the use of MISO and PA activities, to shape perception among both domestic and international audiences (Szostek, 2018; Helmus & Holynska, 2024). This dichotomy in the audience can imply inadvertent demarcation between PA and MISO dynamics in war.

Rather than focusing on the specific MISO and PA activities employed by both sides during the war, it is important to examine how Ukraine countered Russia's propaganda and disinformation campaigns, which have been widespread throughout the conflict (Szostek, 2018; Helmus & Holynska, 2024). To effectively combat Russia's disinformation, Ukraine developed several synchronized strategies that proved successful during the first year of the war (Ekman & Nilsson, 2024).

One significant development was the establishment of Ukraine's military Strategic Communication (StratCom) organization (Helmus & Holynska, 2024). StratCom coordinates all information related activities, including PA and MISO, to respond to Russia's disinformation (Helmus & Holynska, 2024). By centralizing these information-related capabilities, StratCom has three main goals: 1) to keep the Ukrainian public informed, a public affairs mission, 2) to conduct psychological operations against Russian forces, a MISO action, 3) to communicate truthful narratives to international audiences, a public affairs tenet (Helmus & Holynska, 2024).

To counter Russia's propaganda aimed to undermine the morale and the surrender of Ukrainian force, Ukraine implemented a multifaceted strategy. Ukraine's PA efforts can be attributed to the use of social media, allowing tailored information operations directed at various audiences. In fact, this was accentuated by President Zelensky's social media which elicited three aspects of their information strategy. First Ukraine's truth-based narratives of success on the battlefield, reinforcing confidence of their forces; second, the strong resilience of the force, countering Russia's attempts to demoralize the Ukrainian soldiers; third, gaining international support - all are PA activities (Helmus & Holynska, 2024; Drylie Carey, Galan-Cubilloa & Sanchez-Castilla, 2023). For their MISO efforts, after seeing Russia's efforts to demoralize Ukrainian soldiers, Ukraine developed their own tactics to demoralize Russian soldiers (Waterhouse, 2022). Ukraine initiated an "I Want to Live" hotline, which offered Russian soldiers to call and be provided a pathway to surrender (Waterhouse, 2022).

The take-away from Ukraine's approach lies in the integration of information activities, PA and MISO highlighted, to counter Russia's disinformation campaign (Helmus & Holynska, 2024).

5.3 Israel-Hamas War

The Israel-Hamas war commenced on October 7, 2023, when Hamas launched an attack on the Gaza Strip along with its concomitant, information war. Both MISO and PA activities from both sides of the conflict were actively disseminating live footage documenting these graphic attacks on social media (Basim, 2024; Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024). Initially, Israel's PA activities effectively constructed the narrative as the victim by sharing and sustaining graphic coverage and statements about the attack (Karniel & Lavie- Dinur, 2024). Concurrently, MISO employed strategies that include but not limited to (1) advertisements featuring graphic images and videos to portray Hamas as the aggressor. (2) Characterized the Palestinian Islamic resistance group as a terrorist organization using slogans like "The world has defeated ISIS" and subsequently promulgated "The world will defeat Hamas," to evoke/reinforce the terror frame for the actions of Hamas in the Israel-Hamas conflict. These

tactics garnered increased support from Western media, which further amplified the dehumanization of Palestinians (Tweissi, 2024). By the end of the first month of the war, Israel's narrative had come to dominate the information environment (Tweissi, 2024; Tammi & Vargus, 2024; Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024). Hamas responded to Israel's information warfare efforts by utilizing live-drone footage and imagery to strategically advance their narrative and propaganda (Tweissi, 2024; Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024).

Another example in this conflict, the understanding of the bombing of Al-Ahli Hospital varies with the narrative advantage; as Israel quickly accused the Palestinian Islamic Jihad of orchestrating the attack on the hospital, aiming to portray Hamas as committing war crimes (Tweissi, 2024). However, the shift in target audience's understanding of the events depends on the effectiveness of the narrative and propaganda in evoking a desired frame. Interestingly, during this information maneuver between Israel and Gaza, Western media outlets analyzed the live video footage of the incident and concluded that Israel's claims were inaccurate, thereby creating doubt on the reliability of Israel's PA statements (Tweissi, 2024), which might have hindered the evoking of a desired perspective.

Hamas capitalized on this doubt and uncertainty in the media through their PA and MISO activities, particularly regarding the hostage situation (Tweissi, 2024; Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024). As early as October 16, 2023, Hamas began releasing footage of the hostages to apply psychological pressure on Israel (Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024). This included (1) a young woman hostage looking at the camera with her arm in a sling, stating, "They are taking care of me"; (2) a video of a group of women demanding to go home; and (3) footage of murdered hostages (Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024). In addition to these MISO tactics, Hamas launched a public affairs campaign for the release of hostages, called the "gradual release" media event (Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024). On November 24, 2023, Hamas released high-quality live videos to the media depicted the handover of detainees, featuring female captives who expressed their gratitude and waving goodbye to the Hamas soldiers suggesting that they were treated well while in captivity (Tweissi, 2024). This media series prompted international and Western media to begin thoroughly investigating the earlier events of the war, determining what was propaganda and what was accurate, shifting the narrative away from portraying Israel solely as victims. (Tweissi, 2024).

The Israel-Hamas conflict shares similarities with the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War regarding the strategic use of live-drone feeds and graphic imagery to shape public perception of the war (Tweissi, 2024; Byman & McCaleb, 2023; Weimann & Weimann-Saks, 2024). In both conflicts, drone footage not only serves as a tool to provide real-time updates from the battlefield to support PA activities, but also to be a seed for propaganda and MISO activities in controlling the narrative. A distinction for the information warfare surrounding Gaza compared to modern conflicts is the significant involvement of Western media in amplifying narratives and events of the war (Basim, 2024). However, Western media sources were easily manipulated by the MISO and propaganda activities of both sides of the conflict, increasing the spread of disinformation in the information environment (Tweissi, 2024; Karneil & Lavie-Dinur, 2024). This propaganda dynamic was evident in the efforts to determine who was the victim in the conflict, as both sides employed strategic information campaigns to gain international support and portray themselves as victims.

5.4 Discussion

Table 1: Overview of MISO and PA involvement in three modern conflicts, evaluating the level of involvement from low, medium or high of both sides in each war for MISO and PA. Identifies the dominating side, PA or MISO, in each war

War	MISO Involvement		PA Involvement		Dominating Side
	Azerbaijan	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Armenia	
Second Nagorno-Karabakh War	High	Medium	High	Medium	Azerbaijani's MISO
Russia-Ukraine War	Russia	Ukraine	Russia	Ukraine	Ukraine's PA
	High	High	Low	High	
Israel-Hamas War	Israel	Hamas	Israel	Hamas	Hamas's MISO
	Medium to High	High	Medium	Medium	

During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan's MISO activities significantly influenced the war's course and ultimate outcome. By strategically using live-feed drone footage combined with social media, Azerbaijan was able to psychologically impact by demoralizing the Armenian forces. Azerbaijan's MISO activities were reinforced and complemented by their PA offices, who effectively coordinated messaging that reinforced their credibility through consistency – characterizing High rating in *Table 1*. In contrast Armenia's effort, although

similar in tactics, lacked cohesive messages, resulting in a loss of credibility in their official sources. While Armenia attempted to replicate Azerbaijan's MISO activities, however they were quickly debunked by Azerbaijan's PA offices, justifying Medium in *Table 1*. By integrating advanced technology and complementing a dominant MISO with PA activities, Azerbaijan gained a significant advantage in the information war, which contributed to their success in the kinetic war.

Ukraine's PA strategy emerged as the dominant force in the current information war with Russia, characterized by credibility and transparency of information dissemination. This strategy was reinforced by President Zelensky's official statements on social media, which gained international support and maintained confidence within the Ukrainian troops. Ukraine complemented their PA campaign with MISO efforts aimed at demoralizing Russian troops, characterizing High in both activities in *Table 1*. In contrast, Russia's information campaign relied heavily on significant amounts of disinformation and MISO activities. The production of large amount of disinformation and propaganda by Russia created a challenge in maintaining the credibility in their statements, describing a Low PA in *Table 1*. Despite this, Ukraine's efforts to integrate its information related capabilities, including PA and MISO activities, which have been successful in countering Russia's disinformation in the first year of the war.

The current information war between Israel and Hamas is recognized by both sides employing MISO tactics to influence domestic and international audiences. Hamas created a coordinated information campaign the used live media and drone footage to create psychological pressure on Israel. In response, Israel also engaged in MISO activities to justify their actions and position themselves as a victim of Hamas's attacks. However, Western and international media have identified the disinformation tactics being used by both sides of the conflict, leading to doubt on the credibility of their official statements, leading to a Medium rating in *Table 1*. Hamas capitalized on these uncertainties by releasing emotionally charged hostage videos and negotiating hostage exchanges. This approach allowed Hamas to take a dominant position in the information war and created doubt on the accuracy of information in the international media.

The complementary efforts of both MISO and PA activities in modern conflict gave an advantage to the dominating side of the information war.

6. Conclusion

Using the literature review analysis of this paper, five premises were developed, shown in *Table 2*.

Table 2: Five Premises of the paper

Premise	Description
Premise 1	PA's doctrine delineating a separate, distinct, yet coordinated relationship with MISO, leading to ambiguity in how these activities should interact within the information environment.
Premise 2	MISO amplifies PAs importance of maintaining credibility as an information source while maintaining a coordinated relationship with them.
Premise 3	Within a military staff, PA and MISO are operationally and physically separate information-related capabilities.
Premise 4	Blurred lines can give rise to symptom-oriented solutions, which result in unintended consequences, or addictive behavior (Senge, 2006).
Premise 5	PA's identity and perceived need to maintain credibility results in limited involvement in influence activities.

To address the two research questions of this paper: RQ1: What is the doctrinal relationship between PA and MISO? And RQ2: How can PA and MISO complement each other to ameliorate military communication strategy while countering propaganda, the five premises shown in Table 2 then used to generate the following proposition.

Proposition: Although Public Affairs (PA) and Military Information Support Operations (MISO) are doctrinally, operationally, and physically separate, their close coordination is essential in the complex information environment. The evolving doctrines highlight the importance of maintaining distinct functions while fostering a collaborative relationship. This approach ensures that PA upholds their identity and needs to be truthful and transparent within the information environment while supporting the integrity and effectiveness of MISO's influence campaigns. However, it is crucial to maintain clear boundaries between the two to prevent unintended

consequences and preserve their individual roles' integrity. After reviewing the PA and MISO relationship and tactics used in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Russia-Ukraine War, and Israel-Hamas War, the complementary efforts of the two areas gave an advantage to the dominating side of the information war. Thus, the integration of PA and MISO can enhance the credibility and persuasiveness of military communication efforts, provided their distinct roles are respected and preserved.

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