

Psychological Operations as Non-Kinetic Strategy in Countering Banditry: Insights from the Nigerian Military's Approach

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Abstract

The persistent challenge of banditry in North West Nigeria has compelled the Nigerian military to explore innovative non-kinetic strategies to complement its conventional counterinsurgency efforts. This study examines the role of psychological operations (PSYOPS) as a critical non-kinetic approach employed by the Nigerian military in countering the threat of banditry, drawing on the theoretical framework of soft power. As conceptualised by Joseph Nye, soft power emphasises the ability to shape the preferences and behaviours of target audiences through attraction and co-option rather than coercion. The Paper relied on books, internet materials, and newspapers to access information and analyse the issues raised. Analysis of official military documents and reports and examining relevant media coverage and social media data also provided reliable information. The study explores the planning, implementation, and evaluation of PSYOPS campaigns and their impact on local communities and the overall counter-banditry efforts. The findings show that the Nigerian military's PSYOPS strategy has been instrumental in shaping target audiences' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, complementing its kinetic operations and enhancing the effectiveness of its counter banditry approach. The study highlights the strategic value of soft power and PSYOPS in addressing the complex socio-political and psychological dimensions of the banditry problem and recommends that the military should prioritise strategic communication as a core component of its PSYOPS strategy, leveraging various media platforms and channels to disseminate narratives that undermine the legitimacy and appeal of banditry, while promoting the military's legitimacy and the government's commitment to addressing the crisis.

Keywords: Psychological Operations, Non-Kinetic, Banditry, Northwest, Military

Introduction

In contemporary global security dynamics, non-kinetic strategies and psychological operations have emerged as critical tools for addressing conflict and instability. These strategies, encompassing a range of non-lethal tactics such as information operations, civil-military cooperation, and psychological warfare, aim to influence target populations' perceptions, behaviours, and attitudes without direct physical confrontation (Duchene, 2014). Globally, nations have increasingly relied on these methods to address complex security challenges, including terrorism, insurgency, and organised crime, recognising their potential to achieve strategic objectives while minimising collateral damage and long-term resentment (Hoffman, 2007). Within Africa, the security landscape is marked by diverse and evolving threats that necessitate innovative and adaptive responses. The continent faces a myriad of security issues, including terrorism, armed conflict, and transnational organised crime. In response, many African nations have integrated psychological operations and non-kinetic strategies into their security frameworks to manage these threats effectively. For instance, the African Union's

peacekeeping missions often incorporate psychological operations to win the hearts and minds of local populations and undermine insurgent groups' support base (Williams, 2011).

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, has been grappling with significant security challenges, particularly in the northern part of the country, especially the Northwest. Banditry, characterised by armed groups engaging in kidnapping, cattle rustling, and violent raids, has become a pervasive issue, destabilising communities and undermining economic activities. The Nigerian government's response has included military and non-military strategies to restore stability and security (Onuoha, 2020). In this context, non-kinetic strategies and psychological operations have complemented kinetic military actions, offering a holistic approach to countering banditry.

The Nigerian military has increasingly recognised the importance of non-kinetic strategies in its counter-banditry operations. These strategies include information support operations aimed at disseminating accurate information to counter the narratives of bandit groups and psychological operations designed to demoralise bandits and reduce their support base (Agbibo, 2021). Civil-military cooperation initiatives have also been pivotal, fostering trust and collaboration between the military and local communities, thereby enhancing intelligence gathering and community resilience (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). This article analyses the role of psychological operations and non-kinetic strategies in the Nigerian military's efforts to counter banditry in North West Nigeria. Examining the implementation and impact of these strategies would provide insights into their effectiveness and potential lessons for broader security practices in similar contexts.

Conceptual Frame

Psychological operations are a form of political and military activity that is understood and defined in several ways. The definition upon which current peacetime U.S. PSYOP policy is based was established in Department of Defense Directive S-3321.1, *Overt Psychological Operations Conducted by the Military Services in Peacetime and Contingencies Short of Declared War* (1984). That definition states that Psychological Operations are "planned political, economic, military, and ideological activities directed toward foreign countries, organisations, and individuals in order to create emotions, attitudes, understandings, beliefs, or behaviour favourable to the achievement of U.S. political and military objectives Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress (1989). This perspective reflects a narrow view of the concept. In the modern world, the scope of PSYOP is wider than ever before, even though the basic concepts continue as they have existed for thousands of years (Walker, 1987, p. 27). Reflecting on this expansion, PSYOP expert Fred W. Walker states, "We might consider the term persuasive communications to mean the same as psychological operations.

Another expert, William Daugherty, prescribes an even broader field: he asserts that "PSYOP is communication and therefore covers the entire field of human action. Therefore, in the present political-military meaning of the term, PSYOP is a multistage process that uses a combination of non-coercive devices to gain influence over a targeted group's actions and attitudes without resorting to force. American Institutes for Research in the Behavioral Sciences (1987:17). Similarly, Clow Ryan defined PSY OPS as planned psychological activities designed to influence attitudes and behaviour affecting the achievement of political and military objectives. Ryan,(2008). This view implies that PsyOps are not spontaneous; they involve careful planning and coordination. The activities are designed to target specific audiences with tailored messages and tactics with the primary goal of changing how people think and act. This can involve promoting certain beliefs, undermining enemy morale, encouraging defection, or fostering

cooperation among civilians. In the context of this Paper, Psychological operations imply a deliberate effort to influence the attitudes and behaviours of bandits, local communities, and potential recruits to reduce support for banditry and enhance government control.

Non-Kinetic Operations:

Non-kinetic strategies are non-military approaches that leverage various non-military capabilities against potential adversaries. These include nonlethal methods like civil-military operations, engagement, negotiation, information support operations, psychological operations, and rehabilitation. Additionally, they involve the use of "sublethal" weapons or "weapons not intended to be lethal" (Ducheine, 2014, p. 27).

Theoretical Framework

The Paper uses the lens of soft power theory propounded by Joseph Nye in his 1990 book, "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power" as the theoretical framework. Central to the theory is that a country's soft power rests on three primary resources: its culture (including political values), its political ideals, and its foreign policies (Nye, 2004). By leveraging soft power principles, such as cultural appeal and cooperative foreign policies, the Nigerian military can enhance its influence and legitimacy among local communities affected by banditry. For instance, the military can build trust and cooperation through psychological operations that emphasise community engagement and support (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). By promoting Nigerian cultural values and democratic principles in their operations, they can bolster their soft power and undermine the appeal of bandit groups (Agbiboa, 2021). This application aligns with Nye's concept of soft power, emphasising the persuasive ability of non-coercive strategies in achieving security objectives.

An Overview of Banditry in North West Nigeria,

Banditry has become a significant security challenge in the North West region of Nigeria in recent years. According to an Institute for Security Studies report, "Banditry has emerged as one of the most pressing security issues in Nigeria, particularly in the northwestern states" (ISS, 2021p 109). The roots of this crisis can be traced back to a complex interplay of socioeconomic, political, and environmental factors. One of the primary drivers of banditry in the region is the widespread poverty and lack of economic opportunities. As noted by Ogunnubi and Onapajo, "High levels of poverty, unemployment, and inequality have fueled the rise of banditry in the region, as disenfranchised youth are recruited into these criminal networks" (Ogunnubi & Onapajo, 2020p 39). Additionally, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has further exacerbated the problem. Bandit groups have acquired sophisticated weapons, often through illegal channels, which have enhanced their ability to carry out attacks and evade security forces (Onapajo & Usman, 2019). The porous borders with neighbouring countries have also facilitated the influx of these weapons into the region.

The impacts of banditry on the local population have been devastating. Hundreds of people have been killed, with communities facing constant threats of violence, kidnapping, and extortion (Abubakar et al., 2021). In 2010 and May 2023 alone, it was recorded that about 13,485 people were killed (Ojewale, 2024). The disruption of agricultural activities and the displacement of thousands of people have also had severe socioeconomic consequences, further entrenching poverty and instability in the region. The dynamics of banditry in North West Nigeria are

complex and multifaceted. The bandits often operate in loose networks, with various groups collaborating and competing to control lucrative criminal activities (Abubakar & Yamman, 2020). The involvement of corrupt officials and the lack of effective law enforcement have also hindered efforts to address the crisis (Osumah, 2019).

It is a truism that the socioeconomic and political factors have contributed immensely to the rise of banditry in North West Nigeria. However, the region's unique environmental challenges have also exacerbated it. The effects of climate change, such as desertification and dwindling water resources, have led to increased competition for scarce resources among local communities (Bashir & Adamu, 2018). This has, in turn, fueled instability in the region, and the bandits have been able to exploit it. There needs to be more robust and effective governance and security responses from the Nigerian government; this has also been a significant obstacle in addressing the banditry crisis. Despite numerous military operations and interventions, the bandits have continued to evade capture and maintain their strongholds in the region (Nwaodua, 2022). This has led to growing frustration and mistrust among the local population, undermining the state's legitimacy.

Implementing Psychological Operation as a Non-Kinetic Strategy in Combating Banditry North West Nigeria

The Nigerian military has implemented several PsyOps initiatives to address the challenge of banditry. These initiatives include information dissemination, community engagement, and strategic communication campaigns aimed at countering the narratives of bandit groups and fostering a collaborative environment for peace and security. The military has utilised radio broadcasts, leaflets, and social media platforms to disseminate information that counters the propaganda of bandit groups. For instance, radio programs broadcast messages highlighting the negative impact of banditry on local communities and the benefits of cooperating with security forces, which have been a significant PsyOps tactic. This was carefully designed by the military through many radio stations in North west lend. The radio stations dedicated strategic programs to broadcasting peace messages, countering bandit propaganda, and providing a platform for community dialogue. The radio stations such as freedom FM features programs that educate listeners on the dangers of banditry, promote peace building, and showcase the success of military-community cooperation (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). These broadcasts often include testimonies from former bandits who have surrendered and reintegrated into society, encouraging others to defect.

Effective PsyOps requires the active engagement of local communities to build trust and gather intelligence. The Nigerian military has conducted town hall meetings, community forums, and civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) activities to foster dialogue and collaboration with local leaders and residents. For example, in Zamfara State, the military organised medical outreach programs and educational support initiatives to address some socioeconomic grievances that fuel banditry (Onuoha, 2020). These efforts address immediate needs and build a positive image of the military, making it easier to gather support and intelligence from the community. PsyOps also includes efforts to encourage defection and provide pathways for bandits to surrender and reintegrate into society. The Nigerian military has established amnesty programs that offer incentives such as vocational training, education, and financial support for those who abandon banditry. These programs are often publicised through media campaigns and direct outreach, emphasising the benefits of surrendering and the potential for a better life outside criminal

activities (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019). For example, the Nigerian military designed Operation Safe Corridor, which is a rehabilitation program aimed at reintegrating repentant bandits and insurgents into society. The program provides vocational training, religious reorientation, and psychosocial support. The success stories of former bandits who have benefited from the program are widely publicised, serving as powerful PsyOps tools to encourage more defections.

Impact and Challenges of Implementing PSYOPs in Combating Banditry in North West Nigeria

Psychological operations (PSYOPs) have shown significant promise in combating banditry in North West Nigeria. Their impact can be observed in various areas. PSYOPs have helped improve relations between the military and local communities. Community engagement programs, medical outreach, and educational support have built trust and fostered collaboration. This positive relationship has been crucial for gathering intelligence and gaining community support for military operations (Abraham & Rauf, 2023).

PSYOPs have improved intelligence gathering by encouraging local communities to share information about bandit activities. As communities become more trusting of the military, they are more likely to provide valuable insights that can aid in planning and executing operations against bandits (Eze, 2024). PSYOPs have created internal discord within bandit groups by encouraging defections and spreading disinformation. This psychological pressure has lowered the morale of bandit members and created mistrust among them, making it more difficult for them to operate cohesively (Onuoha, 2020). This led to a reduction in bandit activities by undermining the morale and cohesion of bandit groups. By spreading counter-narratives and highlighting the negative consequences of banditry, these operations have led to increased defections and a weakening of the bandits' operational capabilities (Okoli & Ugwu, 2019).

Despite the positive impacts, several challenges hinder the effective implementation of PSYOPs in combating banditry in North West Nigeria. Implementing effective PSYOPs requires substantial resources and specialised training, which are often lacking in the Nigerian military. Limited funding and logistical constraints can hamper the scale and reach of PSYOP initiatives. The success of these operations depends on adequate investment in human and material resources (Akinyetun, 2021). Again, North West Nigeria is ethnically and linguistically diverse, posing significant challenges for the design and dissemination of PSYOP messages. Crafting messages that resonate with different ethnic groups and ensuring they are communicated effectively in various local languages requires careful planning and execution (Rosenje & Adeniyi, 2019). While the Nigerian military has dedicated immense energy to deploying PSYOPs in combating banditry in the Northwest, the bandit groups are also adept at using psychological tactics and propaganda to maintain their influence and counter the narratives of the military. They often spread misinformation to discredit military efforts and portray themselves as protectors of local interests. This counter-propaganda complicates the effectiveness of PSYOPs and requires continuous adaptation and countering by the military.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined the role of psychological operations (PSYOPS) as a non-kinetic strategy employed by the Nigerian military in countering the persistent challenge of banditry in the North West region. Drawing on the theoretical framework of soft power, the analysis has highlighted the strategic value of PSYOPS in shaping target audiences' perceptions, attitudes,

and behaviours, ultimately complementing and enhancing the effectiveness of the military's overall counter-banditry efforts. The findings of this study demonstrate that the Nigerian military has leveraged PSYOPS to exert influence and cooptation rather than relying solely on coercion and hard power. By engaging in information operations, strategic communication, and community-centric approaches, the military has sought to undermine the legitimacy and appeal of banditry while simultaneously garnering support and cooperation from local populations. This multifaceted approach, grounded in the principles of soft power, has enabled the military to address the complex socio-political and psychological dimensions of the banditry problem.

Recommendations

- i. Enhance PSYOPS capabilities: The Nigerian military should continue to invest in the development and specialised training of PSYOPS units, ensuring they possess the necessary expertise and resources to design and implement effective psychological operations.
- ii. Strengthen civil-military cooperation: The military should further enhance its collaboration with civilian stakeholders, such as local government agencies, community leaders, and civil society organisations, to enhance the reach and impact of PSYOPS campaigns. This synergy can facilitate a more holistic and responsive approach to countering banditry.
- iii. Prioritise strategic communication: The military should prioritise strategic communication as a core component of its PSYOPS strategy, leveraging various media platforms and channels to disseminate narratives that undermine the legitimacy and appeal of banditry while promoting the military's legitimacy and the government's commitment to addressing the crisis.
- iv. Incorporate local cultural and linguistic nuances: PSYOPS planning and execution should incorporate a deep understanding of the North West region's local cultural, linguistic, and social dynamics. This context-specific approach will enhance the relevance and resonance of the military's messaging and persuasive efforts.
- v. Emphasise long-term, holistic approaches: While PSYOPS can yield immediate and tactical gains, the military should adopt a long-term, holistic perspective that integrates PSYOPS with broader socioeconomic development initiatives and conflict resolution mechanisms. This comprehensive approach can address the underlying drivers of banditry and foster sustainable peace and stability.

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