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A Battle of Narratives: Challenge of Psychological Warfare to India

Twenty-first century warfare—where hearts, minds and opinion are, perhaps, more important than kinetic force projection—is guided by a new and vital dimension, namely, the belief that whose story wins may be more important than whose army wins. This is especially true if one avoids kinetic engagement altogether.¹

– Stefan Halper

Introduction

Advancements in Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) has revolutionised the way information penetrates globally. ICT is today a vital part of human existence and has also produced certain adverse impacts on society by facilitating the circulation of misinformation, propaganda, rumour-mongering, post-truth, fake news, hacking, etc. Not only has it expanded the battlespaces but has also modernised the ways in which information is being used as a 'weapon of war'. Information Warfare (IW) seeks an information advantage or superiority over an adversary to influence the opinions, beliefs and decisions of a target population. Information supremacy has historically been a significant prerequisite for military victory as it assists the combat power of a nation. Earliest examples of this includes the creation of Trojan Horse and the subsequent deception; Sun Tzu's assertion on the need to have informational supremacy over the enemy for victory; and the Arthashastra by Kautilya incorporating elements of disinformation and manipulation of public opinion in its philosophy.² Even the great Indian Epic, Mahabharata is a classic example manifesting the usage of 'disinformation' to achieve victory in the Battle of Kurukshetra. Several tactics of IW were utilised during both the World Wars. Earlier, IW tactics such as intrigue, deception and propaganda were pursued through tools such as radio, cryptography and intelligence, surveillance & reconnaissance (ISR) technologies. Since the beginning of the Cold War, it was seen that media, particularly the print and electronic media and digital communication systems began to play a central role in managing public opinions and perceptions during the conduct of military operations. The Gulf War of 1991 is a classic example of IW



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Key Points

- Informational superiority over the adversary has been essential since historical times as it assists the combat power during military engagements.
- With the advancements in Information and Communications Technology, elements of Information Warfare have expanded to include deception, operational security, electronic warfare, cyber warfare, psychological warfare, etc.
- Pakistan has been employing psychological warfare time and again as a tactic of its proxy war against India since the 1990s.
- Disseminating misinformation, false news and circulating morphed images and videos through social media platforms, newspapers, magazines, television, etc., targeting India, has accelerated in recent years.
- At the forefront of Pakistan's psychological warfare against India, there has been a well-organised propaganda machinery operated by the military's media wing—Inter-Services Public Relations.
- To successfully win the psychological warfare against its adversaries, it is the appropriate time for India to develop a robust comprehensive strategy with a whole of government/society approach.

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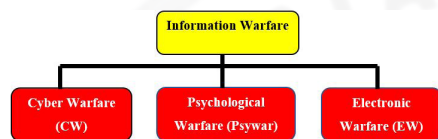
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being employed across all domains. Deception strategies, electronic warfare, psychological operations, etc., were conducted through effective usage of radio and television, loudspeakers, and leaflets.

Information Warfare can be divided into various defensive and offensive elements including operational security, electronic warfare, psychological operations, deception, physical attacks on information infrastructures and information attack on information processes.³ Amongst these, three of the most prominent elements today are Cyber Warfare (CW), Electronic Warfare (EW) and Psychological Warfare (Psywar) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Elements of Information Warfare



Source: Annotated by author

Deception and Psywar are primarily focused on the cognitive domain and CW and EW are focused on the information and physical domains.⁴ The element of Psywar has today become a grave concern for India, considering its adoption by Pakistan as a tactic under its proxy war against India. Psywar can be understood as the use of effective propaganda, threats and other non-combat psychological techniques to manipulate the morale and the general behaviour of enemy forces. It may include using false media propaganda to negatively affect the psychological well-being of an enemy population and carrying out covert military operations that are intended to mislead the enemy and cause mental fatigue. It is often employed by governments to gain some level of mental advantage over the enemy and also, in several cases, to influence the public opinion within their territories.⁵ While India had successfully outmanoeuvred Pakistan in the Psywar during the 1971 India-Pakistan War and later in the Kargil War of 1999, but today it seems that India has been slightly on the back foot when it comes to the Battle of Narratives.

Propaganda Used as a Weapon by Pakistan

Realising its incompetency in winning a conventional war against India, Pakistan, since the 1990s, has been waging a Psywar against the nation. From spreading its anti-India propaganda and shaping public perception against India, through objectionable pamphlets and newspaper entries, to using social media platforms for circulating fake news and videos, Pakistan has upped the ante in the Psywar of the twenty-first century. Pakistan has been using the information as a 'weapon of war' and has accelerated its psychological operations against India through disseminating misinformation, false news, morphed images, videos, etc., through a large number of platforms as delivery systems like internet, social media, newspapers, magazines, television, etc. It seems that the Pakistan Army has very well inculcated the Chinese concept of "Three Warfares"⁶—coordinated use of strategic psychological operations; overt and covert media manipulation; and legal warfare designed to manipulate perceptions of target audiences abroad—into its Hybrid Warfare against India. The recent edition of the Pakistan Army's publication entitled *Green Book 2020* also revealed its plans to intensify the IW against India by creating/supporting anti-Indian establishment propaganda, opening a domestic and international fund to support Kashmiris against India, projecting terrorist activities in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) as a local movement by supporting groups like The Resistance Front and buying air-time in both domestic and foreign media for Psywar.⁷

At the forefront of this has been its military's media wing called the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) and their army of trolls and

bots, incessantly engaged in building false narratives and spreading misinformation. It is interesting to note that Pakistan has a well-organised machinery for its unparalleled propaganda, social media weaponisation and planting of fake news. It is carried out by millions of bots on social media platforms, motivated youth, hackers, social media influencers, state-sponsored think tanks, ex-servicemen, renowned journalists, the expatriate community amongst others. ISPR has been recruiting youth to spread propaganda against India on social media and recruits over 1,000 interns each year who are given a detailed list of social media handles of influential Indians to be targeted and are asked to set a different narrative about Indian leaders, soldiers and bureaucrats.⁸

Indeed, the Indian Armed Forces do recognise that the prominence of IW, vis-à-vis, the future battles is inevitable and understands the necessity to outline a unique approach towards IW tactics waged by its adversaries. Time and again IW has been mentioned in the doctrines of the Armed Forces and there also exists a Joint Doctrine on IW prepared under the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) in 2004 and revised in 2010.⁹ The 2018 Land Warfare Doctrine by the Indian Army also asserted that:

Due to the increased threat of hybrid warfare, the Indian Army will prosecute operations with designated forces, equipped and mandated to effect attacks/retaliation in the IW domain. Indian Army will develop capabilities to prosecute IW operations over the entire spectrum of conflict as well as in 'No War No Peace (NWNP)' scenario, with the aim to achieve full-spectrum information dominance over the adversary.¹⁰

According to the Doctrine:

Psywar would be used to promote own objective and the Indian Army shall graduate to a state where mass media becomes an organic part of the future operations. Social Media, which emerged as a powerful tool for public information and perception management, will also be used meaningfully and responsibly to yield desired dividends.¹¹

Despite such visionary thinking, how far has India succeeded in winning the Psywar against Pakistan, demands significant attention.

Pakistan's success in Psywar was most prominent after the Balakot airstrike, conducted by the Indian Air Force (IAF) on February 26, 2019. India carried out a pre-emptive strike on terrorist launch pads on Pakistani soil, proving Pakistan to be a safe haven for terrorists. Despite this, Pakistan received undue attention internationally due to its fake news and propaganda-producing machinery. The time lag between the airstrike and its official confirmation by India was significantly exploited by Pakistan. Using ISPR's official Twitter account, bots and fake accounts, Pakistan conveniently built a false story of only trees having been hit by the strike and that Pakistan Air Force's quick response pushed the IAF back.¹² Amidst delayed official confirmation and speculations on news channels and social media over the number of terrorists killed, the misinformation campaign led by Pakistan's ISPR succeeded in shifting focus from the real issues of Pakistan, providing safe haven to terrorists and role of Pakistan in the Pulwama attack of February 14, 2019, that was being highlighted by India. The following day after transgressing into Indian Airspace and the resulting dogfight, Pakistan quickly resorted to a psychological operation to garner international support for its propaganda, painting India as an aggressor state and itself as a victim in these developments.

After the abrogation of Article 370 in J&K in August 2019, Pakistan again relentlessly got engaged in a blatant misinformation campaign. This time India did gain a diplomatic victory by winning support from the majority of the governments across the world. Despite this, Pakistan kept spreading its propaganda and fake news about the so-called violations of human rights in J&K to the extent that organisations like the United

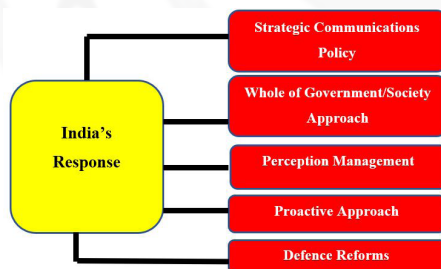
States Congressional Commission carried out a hearing on the issue and the European Union (EU) Parliament introduced a resolution on Kashmir. Not only that, India's decision allowing delegations of EU Parliamentarians and foreign ambassadors to tour J&K in the immediate months after the abrogation of Article 370 allowed Pakistan to project it as India's bid to seek validation and approval of foreign delegates for its historic decision on J&K.

Even at a time when the world is grappling with a pandemic, Pakistan has not given up its Psywar against India. During April 2020, Pakistan organised a social media propaganda against India in a bid to attack the secular fabric of the nation.¹³ They used various fake identities on social media, all of which was traced back to bots, trolls and people in Pakistan. Pakistan generated huge amount of content on social media, thereby attempting to incite violence amongst different communities. It even attempted to create a wedge between India and the Gulf countries by creating fake profiles on social media in the name of Arab nationals and shared anti-India propaganda. It is essential today that India also joins this Psywar vociferously and aims at achieving not only a diplomatic victory but winning the battle of narratives and perceptions.

Reforms to Win the Battle of Narratives

The Kargil Review Committee 1999 stressed that in the Information Age, India must relentlessly wage an IW against Pakistan to the extent that the country is compelled to forego its terrorist campaigns. While it lauded some efforts by India in the IW during the Kargil War but it also identified certain drawbacks in the government's approach such as lack of training of media personnel in war reporting, limited counter disinformation campaign by the Armed Forces, the role of Defence Public Relations (DPR) in handling media relations during a war or proxy war, etc.¹⁴ The Group of Ministers (GoM) on National Security (2001) also carried out an analysis of the threats and capabilities of IW. Following this, the Government of India (GoI) committed itself to tackling IW by setting up institutions such as Computer Emergency Response Team-India (CERT-In), National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), etc. However, despite these organisations, India has had only limited success in the field of Psywar waged by Pakistan from time-to-time. In the light of this, it is suggested that a robust comprehensive strategy to win the Psywar against Pakistan must include the following points (Figure 2):

Figure 2: Suggested Reforms in India's Response to Psywar



Source: Annotated by author

- **Strategic Communications Policy**—Strategic Communications can be understood as a coherent approach by all tools of the State in disseminating information on issues of national importance and strengthening the nation's narrative both within and abroad. Many countries do have such a policy which identifies the core political objective and crafts a strong policy and align all diplomacy and communication programmes to target specific audiences using the most appropriate and effective media available.¹⁵ An example of the

clarity with which information must be presented to the public at large is the official media briefing after the Uri Surgical Strike in 2016. Considering the need for a strong policy narrative in India to negate the misinformation campaign by Pakistan, the GoI must also look at formulating an official Strategic Communication Policy, but this needs to bring uniformity and overcome the communication gaps between the civilian administration and the military. Hence, it must aim to bring confluence in the communication strategies of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the Ministry of Defence (MoD)/Armed Forces while engaging with media and the larger public.

- **Need for Integration**—All three services have their own Public Relations (PR) departments. Each has its own set of media liaison officers, dealing closely with the planning of information and Psywar. The DPR is responsible for public relations and media affairs for the MoD. The three senior Public Relation Officers (PROs) representing the three Services, 24 staff-level PROs across the country from all three forces and Indian Information Service works under the DPR. However, it seems that each of these work in silos due to which there is a lack of coordination and that there is no unified machinery against IW in the Indian defence structure. Currently, at the tri-services level, there exists the Defence Cyber Agency (DCA) and Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) functioning under the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), for issues pertaining to IW. To further strengthen these organisations, it is today time for India to establish a Unified Information Command under the aegis of the CDS to bring more integration in the forces. Moreover, the Indian Armed Forces had prepared the first Joint IW Doctrine in 2005 and revised it in 2010 but over the last one decade, there have been several changes in the ways of disseminating information and the means in which information has been weaponised. Considering this, the Armed Forces must upgrade/update the Doctrines accordingly.
- **Whole of Government/Society Approach**—For the nation to pursue its national interests, there is an urgent need to integrate the military, academic, civilian components of the nation for strengthening the narrative. This integration and synergy will be essential for winning the battle of narratives against the adversaries. All sections of society must be taken into confidence and assistance from specialists must be sought. Role of the diaspora to this end is also vital as they are key to building India's image in different countries. The government must work towards empowering the 'social media warriors' who include general public belonging to different walks of life voluntarily engaging in countering online propaganda against the nation.
- **Focus on Perception Management**—At a time when information travels instantly, every government is concerned about the internal and global ramifications of its actions. Since 1947, Pakistan has internationalised the Kashmir issue and constantly influences the target audience to believe in its false narrative. This has, at many times, been detrimental to India's image in many countries, especially amidst their civil society. A National Policy on Perception Management needs to be formulated and upgraded regularly. Not only must it incorporate information about India's activities to be disseminated to the media and public at large, but also a set of customised counter-narratives on issues of strategic importance for the target audience at three main levels, namely, national, regional and global. Significant attention must be laid on the role of social media in influencing the audience, especially when

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Pakistan executes much of its narrative warfare on different social media platforms. Hence, India needs to strengthen the capacities to monitor social media platforms and also engage effectively in countering anti-India propaganda.

- **Narrative Build-up by India**—From time-to-time, India has been successfully reacting, clarifying, defending or responding to the false propaganda unleashed by Pakistan. This has been the case for all reports by the international community on India's human rights record, Pakistan's vigorous attacks in official publications, social media campaigns accusing India of committing genocide against the minorities and even when such propaganda strains India's bilateral relations with other countries. At the same time, as part of India's IW, it has also successfully highlighted in the international community the state-sponsored terrorism from Pakistan and in designating many of Pakistani terrorist as a global terrorist by the United Nations. Still, there exists a need for India to further strengthen its proactive measures against Pakistan in terms of Psywar. To this end, the numerous religious, social and economic faultlines in Pakistan must be pro-actively exploited such that the human rights abuses by Pakistan especially its Army against its own people is brought to light. Even though such tactics take long to receive adequate traction but in the long run will weaken Pakistan's narrative on various issues internationally.

Conclusion

Today, there exist only mere possibilities of an all-out conventional war breaking out between India and Pakistan. 'Cognitive domain' will remain the battlespace for both the countries for the years to come. Hence, India's strategies and doctrines need to be reshaped and the nation must imbibe strong tactics of Psywar that can provide it with an added advantage over its adversaries. Most importantly, a whole of society approach must be undertaken since countering Pakistan's Psywar is not solely the responsibility of the government or security forces but calls for the collective support of the society as well.

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