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Perception Management
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Perception Management in Recent Wars and Proxy Conflicts

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Abstract

The ability of modern technology to control narratives, shape international opinion and influence public perception has become so effective that it would play a decisive role in success or failure in any future conflict. Thus, we can safely say that perception is the new reality; a side wins if it is perceived that it has won, whatever may have transpired on ground. Thus, Perception Management has emerged as a new vital tool in modern warfare which equals traditional military strategies and hard power. This brief seeks to study the role of perception management in recent conflicts and tries to identify the factors that led to their success or failure. Three conflicts i.e. Russia Ukraine War, Israel – Hamas conflict and the Indo – Pak Conflagration of May 2025 triggered by the April 2025 terror attack in Pahalgam. By examining these case studies, the brief seeks to explore effectiveness of various perception management studies strategies, identify reasons for the same and provide concrete recommendations for future conflicts.

Introduction

Perception management is nothing but skilful and deliberate manipulation of information to influence public opinion both international and domestic, normally carried out with a strategic aim. The role of perception management in warfare is perhaps as old as warfare itself. In Mahabharata, Lord Krishna took resolute actions to seek peace before the war to create a perception that Pandavas were not war mongers and despite various injustices, they did not merely seek revenge. Yudhishtar utterance of "**Ashwathama Hathohath**" or "Ashwathama has been killed" changed the very direction of war. In modern warfare, however, perception management extends beyond traditional propaganda and seeks to integrate cutting edge technologies such as AI, cyber and space capabilities with social media and global media campaigns. The objective is to create favourable narratives, undermine the adversary's claims, and secure both domestic and international legitimacy.

This issue brief explores perception management in the context of recent conflicts, focusing on three significant cases which illustrate how information has become as important as conventional military power: -

> ➢ The Russia-Ukraine war (focus on Russia).

> ➢ The Israel-Hamas conflict (Focus on Israel).

> ➢ The India-Pakistan conflagration of May 2025, following the 22nd April 2025 terrorist attack in Pahalgam.

The Russia-Ukraine War (2022–Present)

> ➢ **Information Environment during the Russia Ukraine War**:

> ✓ The Russia–Ukraine war has unfolded not only on the battlefield but also within a contested and weaponized information environment. Both sides, along with global actors, have sought to control narratives, influence domestic and international opinion, and manage perceptions through digital, broadcast, and cyber means.

➢ **Denial of Information Space to Russia**.

✓ Right from the beginning of the conflict Western nations sought to deny information space to Russia. This was done by banning or de-platforming Russian state media outlets such as **RT** and **Sputnik** across the EU, UK, and other allied countries. Digital social media platforms like **YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (now X)** restricted or labelled Russian content as disinformation. Sanctions also targeted Russian influencers cyber actors and other sympathetic platforms making them ineffective.

➢ **Control of Information Resources and Assets by West**.

✓ Western powers consolidated their control over information channels and nodes including **social media platforms, cloud infrastructure, satellite intelligence**, and major news organizations. This environment of total information dominance of the Western nations was used to push Ukraine's narrative to global audiences, debunk Russian claims, and amplify evidence of war crimes. **Strategic communication support including high speed internet support by Star links allowed Ukraine to outpace Russia** in shaping public perception, especially in Europe and North America.

➢ **Regaining of Information Initiative by Russia**.

✓ Despite early setbacks, Russia through innovation and ingenuity **started focussing on non-Western audiences**, in the **Global South**, using platforms like **Telegram**, **alternative media outlets**, and **state-aligned influencers**. Narratives of **Western hypocrisy**, **anti-colonial resistance**, and **economic resilience** found takers in these countries. Russia also **used AI-generated content**, **proxy websites**, and **cyber operations** to muddy the information waters and fragment the truth. By mid-2023, Russia had begun to gain ground in regions less aligned with the West.

✓ **Russian Information Warfare Strategy**

✓ From the very beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russia sought to employ a broad range of tactics to control domestic as well as international narratives. Key components of Russia's information strategy included:

- **Protecting Ethnic Russians**: Russia framed its invasion as a mission to protect ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine, particularly in the Donbas region, highlighting the atrocities inflicted on them by groups supported by Kiev. The purpose was to portray the offensive as a humanitarian measure and justify it on moral grounds. Actions by some fringe groups against civilians in Donbas region were highlighted.

- **NATO Expansion**: Russia portrayed the westward expansion of NATO as an existential threat to Russian sovereignty, justifying military intervention as a

protective measure. For this it sought to highlight historical grievances and security concerns to frame Russia as a besieged power.

- **Denazification and Demilitarization**: The Russian government depicted its military actions as necessary for the denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine. The purpose was to evoke WWII-era patriotism, delegitimize the Ukrainian government, and justify aggression as a moral imperative. For this, fringe nationalist elements in Ukraine were highlighted and their role exaggerated.

- **Brotherhood with Ukrainians**: Ukrainians were projected as a "brotherly people" misled by a hostile regime; that Russia was using restraint and not its full destructive capability was highlighted.

- **Delegitimizing Ukraine**: Ukraine was projected as an artificial state created by highlighting common descent from *Kievan Rus* and role of Lenin in creating the modern Ukrainian state. This was done with an aim of questioning the existence of Ukraine as an independent nation.

- **Ukraine as a Puppet State**: It was highlighted that Ukraine had no independent policy and acted solely to serve U.S./ European interests. Purpose was to undermine and delegitimize President Zelensky and dismiss Ukrainian diplomacy or demands. Towards this purpose, western military aid and advisors to frame the war as proxy war being waged on Russia.

- **Western Hypocrisy and Decline**: West was projected for the domestic audiences as morally corrupt and in decline and decay. The aim was to highlighted the moral superiority of Russian state and to portray Russia as a counter balance to US hegemony. For this, actions of Western powers in Libya and Iraq etc. were highlighted.

- **Glorification of the Russian Military**: Russian soldiers were projected as heroic liberators defending civilization and traditional values. Purpose was to inspire domestic pride, justify casualties, and rally support. Towards this end use of state media, social media influencers, and documentaries to portray valor and sacrifice was carried out proactively.

- **Anti-Sanctions Defiance**: Ineffectiveness of Western sanctions and the fact that they were hurting the West more than Russia. The purpose was to diminish the impact of economic pressure and maintain domestic confidence. For this local production, new trade partners (China, India), and Western inflation or shortages were highlighted.

- **Fake Diplomacy and Blame-Shifting**: It was portrayed that Russia tried to avoid war and offered reasonable peace terms that were ignored. Purpose was to shift the blame for escalation or failed talks.

- **Economic Multi-polarity**: It was portrayed that Western dominance was on the decline and rise of a multipolar world was being accelerated by the war. This was carried out with the aim of reassuring domestic audiences and attracting support from non-Western states. Towards this, BRICS cooperation, ruble trade deals, and economic sovereignty Highlight were highlighted.

- **Strategic Patience and Historical Destiny**: Russia was projected as playing a long game and it was highlighted that it would ultimately prevail because history is on its side. Purpose was to show that short-term failures or losses were immaterial

- so that long term support could be maintained. Evoking imperial, Soviet, and WWII imagery; tying the war to Russia's historical mission were used as powerful symbols to drive home the message.

- **Conspiracy and Alternative Realities**: Global elites (often tied to the U.S., EU, or "liberal" ideologies) manipulating the war for hidden agendas was highlighted. Purpose was to distract from factual criticism and appeal to distrustful or skeptical audiences. Tactics used was to amplify conspiracy theories via Telegram, RT, and sympathetic Western influencers.

- **Civilian Infrastructure Attacks as Military Necessity**: Attacks on Ukrainian power grids, rail, and cities were projected as legitimate military targets. Purpose was to justify collateral damage and demoralize the enemy. Use "dual-use" arguments to explain civilian suffering as a result of Ukraine's militarization was carried out.

- **Internal Unity and the "Fifth Column"**: Critics within Russia were shown to be traitors or foreign agents. The aim was to Silence dissent and enforce loyalty through fear and social pressure. Labeling protestors or journalists as "foreign agents" or supporters of Nazism was carried out with impunity.

Conceptual lessons from Perception Management Strategy adopted by Russia

➢ **Strategic Narrative as a Tool of Statecraft**.

✓ Strategic narratives are constructed stories that align a state's policies with broader identity, history, and future vision (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2013). Russia developed narratives framing itself as a historical guardian of all people tracing their roots to the *Kievan Rus state*, an anti-fascist power, and victim of Western betrayal to **legitimize its special operations and align public opinion**. Use of themes like "denazification," "brotherhood," and "multi-polarity" reinforced a **moral and existential framing.**

➢ **Weaponisation of History and Identity.**

✓ Cultural symbols and historical memory were used as Information warfare tools for Psychological manipulation. Russia invoked **selective memory images** (e.g., WWII analogies, Lenin's role in "creating" Ukraine) to **delegitimize Ukrainian nationalism and justify irredentism**.

➢ **Emotional Appeals over Rational Discourse.**

✓ Affective triggers rather than logical persuasion are often used in effective Strategic communication (Nye's "soft power" and the psychology of influence). Russian used **fear, nostalgia, pride, and victimhood** in its messaging to garner support—e.g., glorifying soldiers, portraying NATO as a threat. This emotional messaging created **resonant frames**

that defeated **factual counter-narratives**, especially in a tightly controlled media environment.

➢ **Denial and Deception in the Information Domain**:

✓ Classical deception strategies (maskirovka) are vital components of modern hybrid warfare. Russia manipulated perceptions using **blame-shifting**, **fake peace overtures**, and **dual-use justifications** for civilian targeting. **Denial, deception, and ambiguity** are thus, vital tools of Information warfare in hybrid and grey zone environments.

➢ **Adaptability in a Contested Information Space:**

✓ On being de-platformed by the West, Russia's pivot towards **non-Western audiences** through alternative platforms demonstrated the importance of **platform agility** and **tailoring audience-specific narratives** in perception management operations to target global audiences.

➢ **Audience Segmentation and Transnational Messaging.**

✓ Russia skillfully used "audience bifurcation" as a tool to get different messages across to different audiences. In Europe, Russia focused on energy dependency and inflation; in the Global South, it emphasized anti-colonialism and Western hypocrisy. This shows how **multi-vector messaging** can exploit historical grievances and ideological divides.

➢ **Conspiratorial Framing and Epistemic Fragmentation.**

✓ Propagation and spread of conspiracy theories facilitates **epistemic insecurity**—which leads in public losing confidence in the national government, symbols and leadership. Narratives of global elites, secret bio-labs, and puppet governments, **which** aimed not to replace facts but to **create confusion**, reducing the impact of adversarial truth-telling.

➢ **Integrated Use of Media Ecosystems.**

✓ Russia's vertical integration across varied platforms used along with AI generated content ensured **message saturation, emotional reinforcement**, and **narrative persistence**. This highlights the value of **synchronized, multi-platform messaging** in modern cognitive warfare.

➢ **Domestic Control and Counter-Dissent as Narrative Enforcement.**

✓ Information dominance requires tight control over **both content and distribution** within one's territory. Through legal repression, censorship, and patriotic framing, Russia

neutralized internal dissent and enforced state-aligned perception which demonstrates how **authoritarian information control mechanisms** can consolidate public alignment during conflict.

> ➢ **Strategic Patience and Narrative Resilience.**

> ✓ **Consistency and endurance** give the required payoffs in long-term strategic communication as compared to reactive speed. Russian narratives spoke of "**long war**" and "**historical destiny**" to **offset short-term failures** and **preserve legitimacy**. This shows the importance of **narrative temporal depth** as it seeks to tie present action to historical legacy and future aspirations.

> ➢ **Economic Framing as Strategic Communication.**

> ✓ In modern conflicts economic hardship can be used both as a both a weapon and narrative tool. Sanctions were reframed by Russia as evidence of Western failure and its own resilience, stressing trade re-alignment (BRICS, China, India). This illustrates how **economic framing** can be used for **strategic reassurance and alliance-building**.

The Israel-Hamas Conflict (2023)

> ➢ **The Propaganda Challenge Faced by Israel**

> ✓ As the Israeli operations against Hamas intensified in the aftermath of the October 7 attacks by Hamas, battle for global information space too erupted which was as fierce as the military one. Sympathizers and proxies, both state and non-state actors went into an overdrive in an effort to capture both the moral high ground and the discourse of untold atrocities and civilian genocide.

> ✓ These actors used evocative imagery of Palestinian civilian suffering, viral videos, emotionally resonant personal stories, and symbolic hashtags (#FreePalestine, #CeasefireNow) to shape public opinion. The capture of academic space in Western universities was total, which manifested in protests and campus occupation and was nicknamed as the "student intifada", while major news networks and opinion columns increasingly reflected a narrative that equated Israeli actions with war crimes or apartheid, often devoid of context about Hamas's provocations or embedded tactics.

> ✓ In such an environment, Israel found itself isolated diplomatically and morally, which called for a rapid, responsive and multidimensional perception management effort if it had to maintain international legitimacy, military freedom of action, and domestic cohesion. Defeating a powerful propaganda network deeply embedded in the global information ecosystem was the unenviable task which Israeli planners set out to achieve.

Perception Management Themes & Strategies by Israel in the Face of Adverse Information Warfare

➢ **Framing Hamas as a Terrorist Entity Embedded in Civilian Infrastructure.**

✓ The strategy is to shift the blame for civilian casualties onto Hamas by portraying them as using "human shields" began to give dividends, for which Israeli military released satellite imagery, intercepted communications, and declassified intelligence reports to support this claim.

➢ **Precision and Proportionality Narratives.**

✓ The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) emphasized the use precision targeting methods, "roof knocking" techniques (warnings before strikes), and dropping of evacuation leaflets to highlight their efforts to minimize civilian casualties. This aimed to position Israel as a law-abiding state operating within the framework of international humanitarian law, unlike its adversaries.

➢ **Victimhood and Moral Equivalence.**

✓ Israel highlighted the shock and trauma faced by Israeli civilians due to October 7 Hamas attacks. By showing Israeli suffering (through personal stories, visuals of destruction, and international press tours), Israel tried to generate empathy and challenge the one-sided portrayal of Palestinians as sole victims.

➢ **Delegitimizing Pro-Palestinian Narratives in Western Institutions.**

✓ Proactive campaigns by Israeli diplomats and allies sought to defeat the pro-Palestinian activism in Western universities and media by labelling them as sympathizers and supporters of terrorists and being misinformed. Connections between Hamas and Western NGOs, student bodies & media houses were exposed to damage their credibility.

➢ **Direct Engagement with Global Audiences.**

✓ Israel used English-language platforms such as i24 News, social media (X, Instagram, TikTok) and targeted influencer engagements to reach international audiences. Use of real-time updates, graphical content, and short-form videos was made to shape global perceptions directly.

➢ **Countering Visual Dominance of Palestinian Casualties.**

✓ Israel **disputed the authenticity or context of footage highlighting Palestinian suffering, called out staged incidents** or **use of fake content by Hamas-affiliated sources** and **by releasing imagery of Hamas weapons found in civilian structures** to shift the narrative.

➢ **Framing the Conflict as Part of a Global War on Terror.**

✓ Israel sought to align its messaging with "Global War on Terror" discourses, positioning Hamas as part of a broader Islamist extremist network, comparable to ISIS or al-Qaeda which found takers especially in western audiences.

➢ **Diplomatic and Legal Warfare (Lawfare).**

    ✓   Israel questioned the legitimacy of international global proceeding like the one at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and labelled these institutions as biased. legal experts were mobilized to present counter-arguments on the legality of its actions, especially regarding proportionality and distinction.

➢ **Emphasis on Internal Dissent and Pluralism.**

    ✓   Israel attempted to highlight the diversity of its society by showcasing Israeli Arabs, Druze, to argue against the "apartheid" label. Judicial activism and internal protests were used to present a picture of a vibrant democracy to counter accusations of authoritarianism.

➢ **Strategic Silence or Ambiguity.**

    ✓   Israel also effectively used controlled silence as a tool in sensitive situations of mistaken targeting, operations in hospital to avoid feeding opposition's narrative.

The India-Pakistan Conflagration of May 2025

The terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir, on April 22, 2025, triggered a major military escalation between India and Pakistan. The attack, which targeted Indian paramilitary forces, was attributed to Pakistan-based militants, further escalating tensions between the two nuclear-armed adversaries. Full details of this conflict have not yet emerged and thus this is just an initial study of the perception management efforts of this conflict.

Perception Management During the May 2025 India–Pakistan Conflict

➢ **Pakistan's Strategy**

    ✓   **Victimhood Narrative**: Pakistan framed Kashmiris as victims of Indian oppression, using graphic images and emotional appeals to garner global sympathy. By highlighting alleged atrocities, it sought to internationalize the Kashmir issue and cast India as an authoritarian regime. This narrative was intended to elicit support from human rights groups and Muslim-majority countries.

    ✓   **Linking Pahalgam Attack to Domestic Militancy**: Pakistan tried to portray that Pahalgam attack was the handiwork of local militants. Towards this effort "The resistance Front" (TRF), a proxy of **Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LET)**, initially took responsibility for the attack. (later it may have realized that the cover of TRF as in indigenous organization had lost credibility, and thus the claim was withdrawn).

    ✓   **Diaspora Mobilization**: Pakistan exploited diaspora in the UK, US, and Canada to amplify its message. These groups targeted Western governments and public opinion, framing the conflict as a humanitarian crisis. This strategy aimed to place diplomatic pressure on India and influence Western narratives.

    ✓   **Islamic Solidarity Framing**: Pakistan has always sought to exploit Kashmir dispute to leverage Islamic solidarity from Muslim-majority nations by portraying India as an aggressor against Muslims, hoping to gain support from organizations like the OIC.

✓   **Use of UN and Human Rights Forums**: Pakistan filed complaints with the UN and other human rights bodies, accusing India of war crimes and human rights violations. This strategy aimed to delegitimize India's actions and garner international condemnation. By pushing for UN resolutions and highlighting abuses, Pakistan sought to isolate India diplomatically.

✓   **Nuclear Sabre Rattling**: Pakistan's politicians, retired officers and media indulged in nuclear sabre rattling to deter a strong Indian response by hinting at nuclear capability and that it was India specific. Nuclear capable missiles were tested to drive home this point.

India's Counter-Perception Strategy

⟳   **Pre-emptive Framing and Narrative Ownership.**

✓   India clearly identified TRF as a proxy of LET within hours of the attack, framing its actions as self-defense against terrorism. This pre-emptive narrative undercut Pakistan's efforts to shape the conflict's narrative. India positioned itself as combating cross-border terrorism rather than engaging in aggression.

⟳   **Diplomatic Synchronization and Legal Warfare.**

✓   India focused on framing its actions as legal and legitimate under the international law, invoking self-defense clauses in the UN Charter. This approach gave India credibility on the global stage. Coordinated messaging with key allies helped support this narrative.

⟳   **Victimhood Reversal.**

✓   India highlighted the cruel manner in which terrorists had executed Hindu men after ascertaining their religion in front of their wives. This shifted the narrative from Pakistani claims of oppression to India's fight against terrorism. By doing so, India challenged Pakistan's monopoly on the victimhood narrative.

⟳   **Real Time Information Dominance and Visual Counter-Saturation.**

✓   Indian media appeared well briefed and prepared to ensure that stories of Indian strikes and Pakistani response were carried in their coverage in real time which did not give Pakistan or its sympathizers time to play on the narratives. India dominated the media narrative, presenting itself as a responsible actor in the conflict.

⟳   **Islamic Outreach and Disruption of Islamic Unity Narrative.**

✓   India engaged with Gulf states, emphasizing shared economic interests and promoting the participation of Indian Muslims in defense and governance. This neutralized Pakistan's attempts to rally Islamic nations behind the Kashmir issue. India's diplomatic efforts ensured key Gulf countries remained neutral or supportive.

⟳   **Framing Through Democratic Legitimacy.**

✓   India highlighted its democratic processes, press briefings, and civil society involvement, contrasting its transparent governance with Pakistan's authoritarianism. This helped frame India's actions as legitimate. Pakistan's media restrictions during the conflict made its narrative less credible in comparison.

➢ **OPERATION SINDOOR – A Powerful and Emotional Message.**

✓ The naming of retributive operations against terrorists and terror camps in Pakistan as OP SINDOOR was powerful, emotional and evocative messaging which resonated with the entire nation given the importance of sindoor (vermillion) in a married woman's life amongst Hindus.

➢ **Emphasis on Responsible Behavior.**

✓ India repeatedly used words like Precision, controlled, restrained, calibrated, responsible, non-escalatory, measured, proportionate etc. in its briefings which carrirfan astute message of responsible behavior. After carrying out the strikes against terror camps, India clearly stated that its forces had deliberately not targeted military and civilian targets in Pakistan and was merely taking actions against terrorists. This cemented India's image as a responsible nation globally.

➢ **Dissemination of Factual Information.**

✓ Indian briefings on the conflict were factual clear, concise, professional and clinical in contrast to the emotionally charged briefings of Pakistani briefing by politicians and DG ISPR which had a feel of lack of preparation and arbitrariness. Pakistanis tried to pre-emptively push their narratives which resulted in their messaging coming across as in-accurate, incomplete and lacking credibility. (Claims of downing 5 to 7 Indian fighters, claims of Indians targeting their own cities, claims that only civilians had been targeted are only some examples of hastily put together briefs with incomplete information whch could not be substantiated later) India on the other hand was factual and gave out briefs with full information and preparation. In fact, briefing by the three DGs of Operations on 11 may 2025 where actions by Indian forces and the resulted achieved by them were shown with graphical details, can be taken as a lesson in how such briefs must be conducted.

Conclusion. Perception management plays an increasingly central role in contemporary warfare, where controlling the narrative is often as important as military operations. In the Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Hamas conflict, and India-Pakistan conflagration, both sides utilized advanced media strategies, cyber tools, and diplomatic channels to shape the global narrative and secure domestic and international legitimacy. For future conflicts, the ability to effectively manage perception through information warfare, coupled with diplomatic and media strategies, will remain a decisive factor in the success of military and political objectives.

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