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Debunking India's Information Operation Matrix against Pakistan in Modern Warfare

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Article Details

ABSTRACT

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Warfare has changed drastically in a world of rapidly changing technology. No longer confined to a defined battlefield, war can play out in cyberspace, especially as narratives, perceptions, and flows of information become tools of influence and control.⁴ The key concept that encompasses this is referred to as IO, which involves organized actions taken to affect an adversary's information, information systems, and decision-making while protecting one's own Information Operation.¹ IO includes a broad range of activities such as psychological operations (PSYOP), cyber warfare, electronic warfare, deception, and operations security, and aims to shape the informational environment to achieve the same strategic effect as a traditional military force without employing lethal means.⁵ It is very pertinent to mention that Information Operations have been used by governments throughout history; early examples include the use of propaganda in the World Wars, misinformation in Cold War psychological operations, and more recently, the use of Google and social media for Information Warfare purposes.^{6, 7} With the development of the digital age, the scope, speed, and reach of IO have vastly expanded. Social media, news platforms, and digital infrastructure are susceptible to weaponization by an adversary for use in manipulating the public, destabilizing governments, and denigrating enemies or competitors globally in real time. This development has fundamentally altered the character of warfare, particularly between long-standing traditional adversaries who are either nuclear powers or embroiled in geopolitical deadlock (such as Pakistan and India).⁸

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INTRODUCTION

Information Operations (IO) pertain to the synchronized use of various methods to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or otherwise usurp an adversary's decision-making capabilities while protecting an information environment.¹ The term IO encompasses many processes like Electronic Warfare, Cyber Operations, Psychological Operations (PSYOP), Military Deception, and Operational Security.² A state will conduct IO through a combination of overt and clandestine means like state media, intelligence organizations, cyber teams, fake social media, propaganda networks, and NGOs pretending to be something they are not.³ The aim is to shape public opinion, influence enemy morale, affect international opinion, and achieve a desired outcome without fighting.

Conflict dynamics among adversaries have transitioned from a physical form of military engagement to hybrid and non-kinetic forms of conflict. The old reality of warfare, predicated on the forward footprint of battle (e.g., invasions, taking land), is increasingly being replaced/supplemented with strategies for influencing the mental, emotional, and perceptual space of the people being targeted. The new reality of warfare is characterized by not only cyber disruption attacks against critical infrastructure, or spreading disinformation for mass deception, as well as negatively framing a country using coordinated messaging, and influence operations, which were geared toward turning global opinion against adversarial nation-states.⁹ ¹⁰ The entrenchment of this new reality is that we don't measure victory in a hard space of land and who we killed, but rather in the means of narration, psychological control, and disrupting enemy social-political realities.¹¹

This change is especially evident in South Asia, where the long-standing rivalry between Pakistan and India has entered a new chapter. Since independence in 1947, both countries have fought multiple wars and engaged in countless military skirmishes, mostly due to the Kashmir issue.^{8, 12} Now that both have developed nuclear weapons, the ability for full-scale conventional war has become severely limited. This new strategic impasse has allowed an IO to flourish as an alternative mode of conflict. The past years of tanks and missiles to achieve its strategic objectives have now been replaced by tweets, documentaries, manipulated media, and cyber warfare, both vie to achieve their strategic objectives and to maintain legitimacy against the other.¹³

India has displayed an increased belligerent stance in this digital battlefield.¹⁴ Using its technology, media, and multitude of transnational diplomatic representatives, India has

launched a global disinformation campaign against Pakistan. The most audacious of the aforementioned is contained in the 2020 report from EU Dis-info Lab, which provided evidence for a sophisticated network of fake NGOs, media, and websites based in India, to encourage anti-Pakistan narratives in Europe and at the United Nations.¹⁵ The campaign was not only orchestrated to discredit Pakistan on issues of violence, terrorism, and human rights, but also to falsely develop a narrative of moral superiority over that of India. The Indian media has created an echo chamber to promote these narratives, sensationalizing the news and alone creating misinformation to propagate the wider program of psychological warfare.¹⁶

Pakistan has taken a more defensive and increasingly proactive approach to Information Operations (IO).¹⁷ While initially, Pakistan was slow in countering the Indian disinformation, in recent years, it has greatly increased its IO ability. The military's media wing, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), has had a significant role in framing narratives in the country, correcting wrong information, and fostering nationalism and patriotism.¹⁸ Pakistan is also just now beginning to leverage what social media can do, reaching youth primarily, sharing national positions, public outreach, and combating Indian propaganda.¹⁹ Meanwhile, a component of Pakistan's diplomatic machinery has been brought into the equation and has had a powerful impact on informing global reckoning of Indian human rights abuses, particularly in Indian-occupied Kashmir, creating more international awareness and urgency around the topic. Kashmir is, to be sure, the central battleground in the information wars. After revoking Article 370 by India in August 2019, which removed the special autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir, the Government of India enacted legal changes to Kashmir's status and began to launch disinformation efforts to cover the humanitarian crisis associated with it.^{20, 21} The Government of Pakistan began a global campaign in order to garner international attention and pressure around the humanitarian crisis, which was and is the consequence of lockdowns, curfews, and communications blackouts in the region.

The use of social media in this conflict has created two edges to the sword.²² On the one hand, it has also created space for citizens to act as journalists and provide others with transparency, and on the other hand, it disseminates information quickly, even information that is misleading. Both sides indeed accuse the other of operating fake accounts, bots, troll farms, etc., to sway public opinion, disrupt critics, and defend state narratives. India has been able to assert its global digital footprint due to its IT infrastructure and large diaspora. However, Pakistan has caught up quite rapidly by training its youth in digital literacy and bringing in

influencers and thought leaders to defend their national interest.²³

EVOLUTION OF INFORMATION OPERATIONS IN MODERN WARFARE

The changing dynamics of war have significant strategic implications. On the one hand, information operations (IO) allow low-intensity contact with an opponent, screened by institutional behaviors, without having to escalate the relationship into conventional or kinetic war. On the other hand, IO creates "permanent tension" where populations remain at risk, under constant disinformation, in a permanent state of anxiety, and where trust in institutions erodes. In democratic nations, this can further increase polarization among electorates, while in authoritarian states, it can justify suppressing dissent in the name of national security.

Information operations (IO) have changed the conventional continuum of war and the understanding of conflict. Wars are no longer limited to the physical battleground, but are fought on media platforms, cyberspace, and social networks.⁷ IO is the intent to use information (or misinformation) to misinform, manipulate, influence, undermine, and deceive a domestic or international audience. "Information" is now acknowledged as a component of military operations, similar to troops, tanks, or missiles.⁷

For countries such as Pakistan, IO has been used as a defence strategy against not only the campaign of misinformation and propaganda against Pakistan by the traditional adversary, India, but it is also helpful against existing domestic propaganda networks that have been in existence for decades. Given the asymmetry of direct conventional warfare between India and Pakistan, the conflict of narratives has become even more urgent and important.⁷

Information Operations are the foundation of modern conflict, fundamentally altering how war is perceived and fought.⁷ These operations leverage psychological manipulation as well as cyber and media tools in their attempts to execute a strategic plan without having to use traditional kinetic weapons. For nation states such as Pakistan, these capabilities are essential tools for national defense, particularly in a region where narrative control is just as important as land control. The power of IO is that it can obfuscate people's perception of reality, change diplomatic views regarding the opposition, and eliminate threats before actual military action.

INDIAN INFORMATION OPERATION AGAINST PAKISTAN

1. INDIAN PROPOGANDA TO ISOLATE PAKISTAN

India has opened its information warfare counts considerably.²⁴ It has mobilized both state and non-state actors against Pakistan's image domestically and internationally. India has

committed sizable resources to influence narrative communications through Twitter/x, Facebook, YouTube, and various international media outlets. One striking illustration of India's information warfare was the discovery of a league-sized Indian disinformation scheme, via the EU Dis-info Lab, that targeted, Pakistan in 2020.²⁴

The EU Dis-info Lab, a Brussels-based independent NGO, has exposed a network of over 750 fake media outlets and 10 NGOs, all connected to India.¹³ They've been operating for over 15 years with a sole purpose: to discredit Pakistan by creating fake stories about terrorism, extremism, and human rights violations (often without credible evidence). They have gone so far as to misuse not only the names of dead human rights activists but even fake UN-accredited NGOs. This is not just psychological warfare, but a systematic effort to politically isolate Pakistan, to reduce international sympathy for the Kashmiri people, and to undermine Pakistan's credibility on the international stage at the UN and Financial Action Task Force (FATF).¹³

India has institutionalized its disinformation campaign against Pakistan with extensive state-sponsored and affiliated media, digital trolls, and fake NGOs to depict Pakistan as a failed state and a sponsor of terrorism.²⁵ According to the EU Dis-info Lab report, this campaign is happening on a massive and systemic scale, and wild insinuations of graft could be made against leading MPs and leaders in the EU institutions, by simply appropriating the names of long dead individuals or organizations long defunct, and producing fake reports to target Pakistan in the EU Parliament and UN. The nature of these actions also constitutes a serious breach of international law, and maligns enemies of civility and democracy globally, while sullying those who honestly advocate for human rights.²⁵

These malicious acts are not arbitrary or incidental, they are consistent with a long-term Indian strategy to discredit Pakistan, to block Pakistan's engagement in multi-country fora like FATF and UN, and to globally deflect attention away from India's own human rights abuses, especially, in Indian occupied Kashmir, and coordinate a path to isolate Pakistan, both politically and economically. While the exposure of these campaigns has solidified Pakistan's claim and gives them the moral reason and impetus to demand good faith, accountability, transparency, and to mandate these rules in any global policies and decisions made by these countries at all levels.

2. KASHMIR: THE FRONT-LINE OF INFORMATION WARFARE

Indian Illegal Occupied Jammu and Kashmir continues to be the focal point of India's relentless

military repression and coordinated disinformation campaign.²⁶ After abrogating Article 370 in August 2019, India implemented a comprehensive lockdown and communication blackout throughout the valley, stopping journalists, human rights activists, and opposition politicians from reporting on the terrible situation on the ground. Concurrently, a global propaganda campaign was launched to describe the abrogation of Article 370 as an "internal matter" and a step toward "development." However, the occupation was marked by mass arrests, a denial of the internet, and human rights violations.²⁶

Pakistan globally maintained a principled position on the issue by exposing India's hypocrisy and gaining support from the OIC, UNHRC, and international media at large, including Al Jazeera, BBC, Foreign Policy, Free Malaysia Today, and all those who have written about the human rights atrocities by Indian forces.²⁷ Pakistan's information response included wording on the media strategy, diplomatic lobbying, and social media campaigns such as #KashmirUnderSiege that were used to successfully contradict India's misinformation narrative.

Kashmir is the central issue in Indo-Pak relations as well as the arena of Indian information warfare.²⁸ After the unilateral revocation of Article 370, India imposed an extreme information blackout in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), and with it, the internet, the arrest of large numbers of political leaders etc., suppression of dissent, etc. This information blackout was not only a violation of basic human rights but was a deliberate attempt to prevent the truths of the region from being told. While India was doing this, they were simultaneously launching a public relations campaign to try to portray the opposition to this illegal and immoral act as a step to the region's development, trying to cover up the state brutality, imposed demographic shifts or changes, and disastrous conditions in Kashmir.²⁸

Meanwhile, Pakistan and its civil society were able to mobilize the voices of the Kashmiri people through social media campaigns, conveying diplomacy and collective protests. Hashtags such as #KashmirUnderSiege, etc., through diplomatic efforts with the OIC and coordinated protests to keep Kashmir around the world. Pakistan's sensible, constitutional, low-key, and lawful efforts gained international attention that seriously challenged India's untenable and false representations on the situation in Kashmir while reasserting its position on the Kashmiri cause from a perspective of international law and UN resolutions.

3. CYBER-OPERATIONS AND FIFTH-GENERATION WARFARE

India's growing investment in cyber capabilities has created yet another front in information

warfare.²⁹ Indian intelligence agencies are said to have been involved in organizing hacking groups that target Pakistani government websites, military servers, and critical infrastructure. These massive cyber-attacks are primarily aimed at psychological intimidation, espionage, or building mistrust in public spaces.

An investment by India in offensive cyber capacity has also created a new front for this battle-space. Attacks in cyberspace have targeted Pakistani portals of government portals, schools, educational institutions, and even hospitals. This aggression can stem, increasingly but not exclusively, from state sponsors.¹⁸ The two threats represented, namely digital aggression and brute force, are to disrupt locally, harvest sensitive data locally, and to terrorize the general populace. So, as India merges hacking with other forms of apparent psychological warfare tactics, hacking is seen as a modality to use for signaling intent and capabilities relative to digital warfare capability, not only as a simple act of sabotage.

4. WEAPONIZATION OF MEDIA AND BOLLYWOOD'S ROLE

India's entertainment industry, namely Bollywood, is strategically employed for soft power. Most films project Pakistan to be a state sponsor of terrorism while showing Indian intelligence agents (for example, "Uri," "Raazi," or "Phantom") as righteous heroes fighting for justice on behalf of India against Pakistani villainy.³⁰ These cultural products are further intended to indoctrinate domestic and international audiences with anti-Pakistan philosophies.³¹

Pakistan adopts a principled approach by banning the screening of these films and by developing its own media content that unites, inspires national identity, and raises consciousness. Pakistani dramas and films are increasingly showcasing the sacrifices of the armed forces, the plight of the Kashmiris, and the resilience of Pakistani society.³⁰

India is using its entertainment industry as a chief tool of propaganda, presenting Pakistan as a rogue state, and its military and intelligence agencies as the supermen who can defeat evil.³⁰ Bollywood films, typically politically motivated to glorify state disaster realities, have achieved much success and are available around the world, winning over audiences and opinion leaders. This soft-power projection, even if subconsciously, continually entrenches state-sanctioned propaganda that idolizes Indian aggression while dehumanizing all things Pakistani and Muslim.³⁰

5. POLITICAL DISINFORMATION AND HYBRID WARFARE

India has also carried out hybrid warfare, employing military, economic, and informational

operations in concert to create internal turmoil inside Pakistan.³² As allotments of accusations against India claim, it has instigated an insurgency in Balochistan, sponsored terrorism using proxies (like Kulbhushan Jadhav - a serving Indian Navy officer caught inside Pakistan while instigating espionage/sabotage), and provided funding to anti-state actors.³²

India's media ecosystem, which is hijacked by state policy objectives, has an important role in disinformation strategies.³³ Sensational coverage of the skirmish, invented "surgical strikes," bombastic threats, and created political events have regularly gained traction to distract the Indian public and also raise tensions in the region when India needs it. The Balakot airstrike in 2019 was presented as a large Indian success, although satellite imagery independent of Indian claims later illustrated that there was little to no destruction at all.³⁴ Pakistan successfully downed an Indian aircraft and received international accolades for successfully downing an Indian aircraft and returning Wing Commander Abhinandan extremely safely and humanely.³⁵ This measure of response also reflected the maturity of the Pakistani Armed Forces.

In addition, India uses a hybrid warfare approach in the context of IO, not only to support insurgent elements in Pakistan but also to foment instability. The case of Kulbushan Jadhav, a retired Indian Navy officer apprehended in Balochistan, provides clear evidence of India's direct orientation towards conducting subversive activities in Pakistan.³⁶ His confession reaffirms India's sponsorship of terrorism and separatist elements while punctuating India's grand strategy, which is multi-layered and aims at politically and socially destabilizing Pakistan while denying such activity domestically in India, appropriated media forms.³⁶

6. INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION OF INDIAN PROPAGANDA TACTICS

Pakistan has been vindicated by several independent studies and international watchdogs. Many organizations like Reporters Without Borders, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch pointed out the increasing intolerance of the Indian government towards press freedom, the weaponization of information, and the crackdown on dissent. These international validations reaffirm the legitimacy behind Pakistan's claims and highlight India's unethical practices in its information warfare.

International watchdogs and organizations have highlighted ways to reveal India's disinformation schemes. Therefore, organizations like the EU Dis-info Lab, as well as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have badly damaged India's global image. All these validations, to some extent, prove Pakistan's long-standing claims about India's unethical

behavior in the arena of information.³⁹

7. HISTORICAL PARALLELS: NAZI PROPAGANDA AND BJP'S INFORMATION STRATEGY

Adolf Hitler's use of propaganda as one of the main tools for psychological and ideological warfare started in World War II.⁴⁰ He had a Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, who worked to control the media, arts, and information in Nazi Germany. Using newspapers, radio, film, and posters, Goebbels spread anti-Semitic ideology while glorifying the Nazi regime.⁴¹ The goal was not to mislead the people, but to construct a fabricated universe that dehumanized minorities, justified warfare, and incited people to blindly love their nation. The propaganda machine was organized, centralized, and ruthlessly effective in indoctrinating the German citizenry to support militarism and genocide.⁴² Through constant lies and emotional appeals, Hitler's government constructed an alternative universe in which truth was obsolete and ideology ruled supreme.

The Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) appears to be duplicating a disturbing model, especially in contemporary time.⁴³ Under Narendra Modi's leadership, the BJP seems to have professionalized a system of media and information to sow hate against Pakistan and to marginalize Indian Muslims.⁴⁴ State-sponsored media promotes anti-Pakistan narratives without let-up, while the BJP's now-infamous "IT Cell" cultivates thousands of social media accounts and troll networks that promote false news, Islamophobic tropes, and hyper-nationalist and bigoted rhetoric.⁴⁵ Like Nazi with Jews, the BJP employs emotionally manipulative propaganda aimed to manufacture consent for policies like the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and the relatively open targeting of minorities.⁴⁶ The purpose is to unify a Hindu majority by creating a common enemy, be it Pakistan or India's own Muslim (or minority) population. This ideological war presents perilous trends to regional peace and security, a profound risk to an entire global population, and enshrined values of democracy in society, international norms, and the rule of law. Accordingly, Pakistan and the world communities must name these dangerous comparisons and oppose their rhetoric at every opportunity.⁴⁷

8. INDIA'S PROPAGANDA IN BALOCHISTAN: WEAPONIZING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR DESTABILIZATION

India has been deftly utilizing social media platforms to disseminate disinformation and incite unrest in Pakistan's Balochistan province.³² Indian intelligence agencies are conducting planned

operations, utilizing digital trolls, fake accounts, and bot networks to amplify the voices of a few exiled dissidents while creating the myth of a mass uprising.⁴⁸ Information that emerges as Twitter trends, YouTube videos, and altered news stories is often disseminated by Indian handles or India-based NGOs claiming to support Baloch human rights and social justice.⁴⁹

This campaign is a part of a larger psychological warfare strategy to discredit Pakistan internationally, to divide Pakistan internally, and to destroy Pakistan's territorial integrity. No matter how much Pakistan has continued to develop Balochistan through CPEC and public investment, India's digital proxies continue to create false and inflated representations of state repression.⁵⁰ These Russian-style tactics resemble disinformation campaigns exposed in other areas and show once again that India transforms information operations into a weapon to weaken Pakistan from the inside out, not for the enhancement of regional peace or human rights, but for its twisted interests.⁵¹

CONCLUSION

The nature of warfare in the 21st century has gone beyond conventional warfare, utilizing bullets and bombs. The combatant's struggle for influence, legitimacy, and ownership of narratives is now an effective source of friction in the strategic environment. Information Operations (IO) represents one of the key components of hybrid warfare, and enables a combatant to represent a being to sway international opinion, sway the opposing domestic population, and weaken an opponent without resorting to traditional military engagements. In the case of the conflict between Pakistan and India, IO in its various forms is extremely relevant given the history of rivalry, the deterrent capability of both being nuclear, and the ideological struggle over Kashmir.

India has engaged in an organized and aggressive IO campaign against Pakistan at the political, diplomatic, cultural, and psychological levels. The IO campaign against Pakistan has included, but is not limited to, fake NGOs and misinformation campaigns revealed by the EU Dis-info Lab both locally and internationally, Bollywood films as propaganda, and the introduction of cyber-attacks on Pakistan. India has systematically engaged in an IO campaign to isolate Pakistan, deflect attention from its own human rights abuses internally, while blaming Pakistan for any instability, and this is unethical and destructive for dialogue or a peaceful solution towards regional stability, and breaches national and international norms of transparency and accountability through IO.

Conversely, Pakistan has adopted a more principled, defensive, and increasingly strategic set of

responses to counter these information attacks, primarily through institutions like ISPR and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which have been leaders in exposing Indian lies, standing up for Pakistan's sovereignty, and raising the voices of the oppressed Kashmiris. Through digital diplomacy, social media campaigns, and various international legal forums, Pakistan has made a concerted effort to counter India's attempts to "reassert" space and found moral and diplomatic backing from various sectors, including human rights organizations and neutral media.

Kashmir continues to be the epicenter of this information war. While India instigates blackouts (and, in many cases, censors independent journalism), Pakistan has welcomed international observers and constantly argued the right to self-determination of the Kashmiri people. Pakistan's ethical high ground has not only salvaged its image but has also solidified its position as a responsible participant in the region's stability.

In the future, information operations will become more important than ever. Victory in future wars may not be defined by the territory won or soldiers defeated, as victory might be defined in terms of who has the Rubicon of public opinion, whose story your people believe, and whose truth is left standing in the aftermath of a conflict. So, going forward, Pakistan will have to keep investing in cyber security, narrative control, the digital literacy of its youth, and reaching out to international media in order to prepare Pakistan to engage in this non-kinetic, yet equally decisive theatre of war. The war of perception is already ongoing, and Pakistan's readiness in this evolving theatre of war will be essential to protect its national interests and unneighborly standing.

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