

Conceptualizing new avenues of the Indo-Pak hostilities: an analysis of the invisible PsyWar operations and challenges

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Abstract

The modern era of information warfare has also opened new avenues of warfare. “Psychological War” or “PsyWar” has been a non-violent weapon used to attain military aims and objectives against the enemy since biblical times while ensuring the minimal loss of human life. India and Pakistan, after their inception, have been psychologically obsessed with each other on a number of disputes. The disputes between India and Pakistan are considered one of the most long-lasting disputes of the post-World War era. The article specifically covers the Post nuclearization scenario of the Indo-Pak region and the conceptual debate of the re-emergence of PsyWar in the region. The study digs deep into the nuclear dimension of the Indo-Pak crisis, which played a subversive role in aggravating the hostile relationship and its relevance. The psychological dimension of disputes is as crucial as its physical dimension. In the present era of technological advancement in warfare, new concepts of artificial intelligence (AI) have become even more relevant, particularly for a nation-state where the socio-psychological danger is more pronounced. Thus, it is imperative to analyze the notion of PsyWar operations and the role of information warfare in digital theatre to highlight the upcoming regional challenges.

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1. Introduction

The article endeavours to explore the new avenues of Indo-Pak hostilities and emerging regional instability, which have the potential to cause catastrophic consequences and increase misperceptions among the nuclear armed adversaries. The PsyWar operations and digital theatres are the well-witnessed ways to manipulate and exploit multiple domains of the adversary. The most empirical argument of the study revolves around the debate that the new avenues of PsyWar operations can worsen the security environment of the region. Moreover, the emerging domains in the region have complicated the security paradox in the South Asian region. The first part of the article deliberates on the nuclearization phase of the South Asian region and its psychological context. The next part then debates that attack on the minds, sentiments and hearts of non-combatants and hostages of war, instead of the brainpower of the enemy, is the foundational concept in the back of re-emerging PsyWar (Psychological War) operations, especially information warfare in digital theatre and its prospective use by the adversary in warfare.

“Psychological War” or “PsyWar” has been a non-violent weapon used for the attainment of military aims and objectives against the enemy since biblical times while ensuring the minimal loss of human life. Psychological warfare occurrences come across in almost every state or society and it prevails at all times, as far as mythologies, folklore and recorded history goes, whether prehistoric, ancient, medieval or contemporary. Sometimes the military’s usefulness was doubted, and its practice was restricted to the technology of that age. Psychological warfare and propaganda are thus as ancient as human history itself. The ability to use the authority of persuasion as a force multiplier through psychological operations to attain domestic goals with minimal destruction has been recognized by very few even among the most perceptive army officials and statesmen.

2. Exiting debate and literature on the subject

After India’s unilateral revocation of article 370 and 35-A, which terminated the autonomous status of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJK), the situation has worsened in the region. The Indian PsyWar organizations are extensively using fake news, morphed images, social dissonance content, and doctored videos while blocking information systems and restricting the flow of information. Although the hostilities between both nations date back to their independence in 1947 ever since, both India and Pakistan have been involved in several disputes with each other that pose the risk of war. The major and notable disputes among these include the *Kashmir dispute*, *territorial disputes*, *nuclear arms race* and *water dispute*, among others which sets the ways for psychological warfare, as these disputes are more likely to continue with more power and intensity in the near future and have the potential to remain as escalation flashpoints between them.

Kashmir valley a mountainous region with a great importance due to its topographical location

and geo-political significance, is situated in the *North-Indian Himalayan* enclosure of the globe. The Northern and Western border of the territory are administered by Pakistan, habitually called as *Azad Kashmir* and *Gilgit Baltistan*, while the Southern and Eastern border administered by Indian are known as *Jammu and Kashmir*. Both Indians and Pakistanis have emotional closeness with Kashmir that entangles and boosts the disputes among the both these antagonists. The rigidity over the Kashmir region among Pakistan and India appeared with the foundation of Pakistan as a sovereign country on 14th August 1947 on the world map (Qumber, Ishaque and Shah, 2017, 67-78). Since then, both nations have been involved in two of the three wars between them over the issue of the disputed Jammu and Kashmir territory, and the tension still exists between them even after both nations successfully achieved or established their nuclear weapon programs. India accused Pakistan of assisting an armed struggle in this territory against the Indian control, an accusation which Islamabad clearly refuses. The government of India has deployed almost 700,000 armed troops in the valley of Jammu and Kashmir and also by the side of the de facto boundary with Pakistan, i.e., called *Line of Control or LOC* (Ashraf, 2002).

Indian-occupied Kashmir is considered as one of the militarized territories of the world (Kumar, 2019). The observer groups claim that the dispute in Indian-occupied Kashmir has instigated deaths of 70,000 people over the last 30 years or so, with most of them belonging to the civil society. The territory of Kashmir has consistently persisted as an apple of discord between Pakistan and India but in reality, there are three permissible parties incorporated in this dispute, i.e., India, Pakistan, and the people of Kashmir. Each group incorporated in this dispute has taken its own stance over the Kashmir territory. India claims that the region of Kashmir is one of its structural parts and therefore, this area or side is not open for dispute. On the other side, the area of Kashmir which belongs to Pakistan is basically the cause of the problem of the separation that is yet to be settled between them. On contrary to India and Pakistan claims over the Kashmir territory, the people of Jammu & Kashmir claimed that Kashmir is not straightforwardly an aerial dispute between India and Pakistan, and therefore this dispute cannot be settled down between these two states without the participation of Kashmiris who are the major stakeholder in this dispute (Singh, 2020). One of these political parties, which are the major contenders of this dispute, had expressed any sort of liability at any moment in their affirm stance on Kashmir, and for that reason; the dispute continued to burn out on the world map until it reached a substantial level of the brutality and finally, became a nuclear flashpoint in the recent years between these two nuclear-armed adversaries of the South Asian region.

The Indian agencies and authorities use a tactic to promote narrative of the national secularism within the country, which helps them greatly in the amalgamation of the Muslim minorities of India with the wider society of India (Zishan et al., 2022). However, this approach adopted by the Indian authorities has been less successful as major Indian political parties diminish the concept of secularism and integration by pushing the Hindutva-motivated agendas with the support of the ruling elite for political purpose. Thus, the disputed area of Kashmir has

remained a territory of severe conflict between the two nuclear nations of South Asia either in the shape of directly waged war or a constant psychological warfare, until the day any suitable solution of the dispute is conceived.

The quest of nuclear weapons and the entire journey of nuclear acquisition in the region is based on the perception of insecurity, which as Jervis argued is more psychological than political (Jervis, 1976). The study further mentions new avenues and their related complications which have the potential to worsen the complexities of the Indo-Pak rivalry. Moreover, with the inception of deep fake technology, it has become possible for Artificial Intelligence & Machine Learning based algorithms to create false but realistic-looking audios, videos and images of people which can then be used for deception and information operations aimed at individuals and states. However, these are very highly unethical actions that should not be encouraged (Robitzski, 2018), yet their potential implication on South Asian nuclear opponents cannot be denied. Notably, the implementation of any strategy needs consistency. Especially if it is designed to counter nuclear-armed adversaries, it should be developed keeping in mind the damage both states can inflict on each other.

3. Problematizing the debate with research methodology

The research cannot be quantified therefore qualitative research method will be applied (Polkinghorne, 1983, 273). The research design would be case study and the study will focus regional case study of South Asia (Kumar, 2011, 11) with especial focus on Pakistan and India. Both the states have acquired nuclear weapons and share long history of enmity which proves the significance of the study. The states who hold better access to the liable data and information were more capable to respond timely to the attacks from their adversaries and notably come out victorious in warfare or battle fields. The psychological warfare is a very broad term and the psychological warfare normally manoeuvre such steps that greatly intend to minimize the adversary country's confidence or intellectual well-being before and during the wars.

One of the basic purposes of psychological warfare is thus to use manipulative tactics to intimidate or overwhelm people, and on the other side employing the use of warnings, tactical ways of spreading disinformation, warnings of war and other non-combat mechanisms, or sessions of geopolitical agitation to misguide, dishearten, frighten or some other methods of dominating the thinking and patterns of enemies during wars. Therefore, these new avenues in the Indo-Pak crisis are significant to explore in order to better understand the evolving South Asian politics. The study will employ state level analysis (Ray, 2001, 388) along with critical discourse (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, 12) to explore emerging avenues in the rivalry of both the states. A major part of the study is based on literature review and critical analysis of the subject expert/ scholars/ academicians. Based on these arguments and shared facts, the study will draw inferences to validate the findings.

4. Indo-Pak nuclearization: analysis and discussion

4.1. Indian nuclearization and its psychological impact on the region

The ambition of the acquisition of nuclear weapons was based on the concept of deterrence and thus, it is very much relevant to the psychological impact. As Jervis states the psychological context of deterrence and its role in perception building is very significant (Jervis, 1976). The journey of nuclear weapons for India started with the independence of British India in August 1947. The association of Indian scientists was already in place, therefore, the said association led by physicist *Homi Bhabha*, an influential scientist and *Jawaharlal Nehru*, the Prime Minister of India of that time, invested in the advancement of nuclear energy program of the country. Thus, the progressive nuclear energy program of India is already in place even before its independence from British Raj that helped progress the country's self-reliance and supremacy in the energy department having primary concentration on producing inexpensive electricity (Bhabha & Ramana, 2018). The main objective of the Indian nuclear program was to produce nuclear energy rather than nuclear weapons in its initial stage. Nehru, calling the bomb a *symbol of evil* (Indian Nuclear Program, 2018) determined that *India's Nuclear Weapon Program* only seeks peaceful applications in the world.

In 1962, Indo-China War and subsequently China's acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1964 were thus the basic rationale for the development of Indian Nuclear Weapons Program. India's so-called Peaceful Nuclear Explosion was carried out in 1974, authorizing Indian capability to assemble nuclear weapons. India took more than two decades to produce a nuclear weapon program and delivery system with adequate military deployment after testing its first bomb in 1974. Finally, the BARC leadership was able to construct their biggest nuclear plant of that time. In 1998, after the first Indian & Pakistani nuclear tests, the subsequent nuclear arms race between the two nations Pakistan and India was initiated in the region, becoming a major threat to the strategic stability in the region. This arms race competition demonstrated the potential risk of nuclear escalation between the two nations. According to the 2018 SIPRI yearbook; (SIPRI, 2018) there are 130 to 140 nuclear warheads in the Indian nuclear arsenal. Although India is increasingly concentrating on expanding missiles for the nuclear delivery role, India is also working and developing new missile systems which might have greater accuracy and increased range to enhance India's land and sea-based deterrent in the region. Furthermore, India is also developing *Anti-Satellite Weapons* capabilities and has successfully carried out an Anti-Satellite Weapons (ASAT) Missile test. On the contrary, India also has an operational *Arihant-Class Nuclear Powered Submarine* which completed its first deterrence patrol (Davenport, 2018).

All the above-mentioned details prove Indian aims to pressurize its adversary state and to increase its credibility in the region. India-Pakistan disputes are considered one of the most long-lasting disputes of the post-World War times. Both nations, since their independence, have indulged in four conventional wars and most of the time they habitually show their nuclear

capabilities to surpass and threaten each other. Pakistan & India have carried elements such as unresolved regional disputes, political immaturity, and incongruous situations on national recognition, and also lack of crucial trade and economic relations that give rise to the rivalry to keep going between these two major states of the world.

4.2. Pakistan's nuclearization and its psychological impact on the region

Pakistan's nuclearization was the response of Indian nuclear interests. Although, since the separation of Indo-Pak in 1947, both countries have been involved in several conflicts over several different issues, including the disputed area of Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan's relationship with India and Afghanistan has always remained shaky since its independence and this very factor motivated the state to become a nuclear power as part of its defence and energy strategies. During the Ayub Khan Era, Pakistan started its nuclear program and worked on it as a response to Indian nuclear program designs, which was considered pernicious to the future of Pakistan and strategic stability of the region (Ahmed, 1999, 178-204). In the first instance, in 1956, the nuclear initiative focused on generating energy with the representation of the *Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission* to achieve the country's energy needs. However, the claim of Pakistan related to the nuclear program was only pursuing peaceful applications of atomic energy, but there were signs that its leadership had other intentions claimed by the adversaries. In the 1965 Indo-Pak War, which resulted in the nominal victory of India, this fact was particularly noticeable in wake of such actions. "If India builds the bomb, we will eat grass or leaves, even go hungry, but we will get one of our own," (Pakistani Nuclear Program, 2021) proclaimed by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan.

After the 1971 War between the two countries, Pakistan felt threatened and compelled to respond to the challenge of India. Subsequently, Pakistan began looking closely at the Indian nuclear weapon projects and preparations. Apart from this, in January 1972, *Zulfikar Ali Bhutto*, the Prime Minister of Pakistan of that time, decided to build a nuclear weapon program and to enhance nuclear capabilities of the country. He met with the top scientists of the country and decided to develop a nuclear capability. Without any doubt, it was too difficult for Pakistan to sustain expenses at the beginning of the program, but the nation made it clear and did not compromise on its defence, security, integrity and sovereignty of the state and successfully established the country's own nuclear weapon program (Nuclear Program, 2021). In 1998, between May 11 and 13; India operated a total of five nuclear explosions that threatened Pakistan; and after that Pakistan felt compelled to reciprocate in order to counter the nuclear explosions of India. The then Prime Minister *Nawaz Sharif* announced his intention to test Pakistan's nuclear capabilities, and subsequently Pakistan exploded five bombs on 28th and a sixth on 30th May 1998. With these tests, Pakistan stated that it would maintain a *credible minimum deterrence* against India and abandoned its nuclear ambiguity (Nuclear Program, 2021). Keeping in mind the above-mentioned edict, the nuclear ambition of Pakistan was based on the security model. The concept of deterrence directly deals with the psychological

phenomenon where this security dilemma creates insecurities in the region and thus results in regional security-insecurity paradox.

4.3. Involvement of India in Balochistan

Balochistan is among the five provinces of Pakistan; the other four provinces being called Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit Baltistan. The province of Balochistan is spread over 3, 47,190km area which is almost 43% of the total area of Pakistan and is taken as one of the mammoth provinces occupying the vast area of the country as compared to other provinces. But besides this, it is still the least populous province of the country that barely possesses 5% of the total population of Pakistan. The territory is well blessed by nature and also fully rich in natural resources, but the development of Balochistan province is at a slower pace compared to the other four provinces of the country. Balochistan has a bloody history and has faced five different stages of insurgencies within the territory since 1948 to date (Tiffany, 2019). As it also holds to provide the center base to the whole world for trade and other purposes, not only with the Central world but also with Central Asian countries.

The cause of unrest in Balochistan is based on the assumption of the natives that their resources are not providing benefits to the natives. The example of Sui gas facility is often mentioned that reservoirs of Sui gas were discovered in 1952 in Balochistan, but its access is extended throughout the country with limited reception in Quetta and cantonment area of Balochistan. Likewise, other minerals that are being extracted in the province, but center gets the major share of its profit. This created reservations for the natives of the province. Nevertheless, these economic as well as political grievances are resolvable through several options such as: expanding access to electricity and gas, by providing greater devolution, allowing natives to control its national resources, by fixing commodities sale price and by increasing investment in human resource.

While on the side, India has been involved in creating issues and problems in Balochistan by using the Afghan soil to sabotage the resources of Balochistan province. Indian intelligence has been working directly or indirectly and stands involved in promoting terrorist activities by aiding and using the separatist groups of the province. Pakistan has raised this issue many times in front of the world and provides documented proof of Indian involvement in destabilizing the province. This evidence of the involvement of India in Balochistan was further certified in front of the world when Pakistan detained Kulbhushan Yadav, a serving officer of the Indian Navy working for Indian intelligence agency RAW in March 2016, who is still in Pakistan's custody (Hanif, 2018). The Indian Navy Officer confessed openly by giving a statement on television that he was assigned a task to destabilize the territory of Balochistan and promote terrorist activities with the help of different terrorist organizations that are operating in Pakistan and internationally, and this is the basic reason why he was staying in Pakistan.

India has been working to destabilize Balochistan in two different ways, the very first method

adopted by the Indian government is by sponsoring terrorist groups by using Afghan soil, and the second method; instigating the Baloch dissidents who are living abroad to launch a movement of the independence of Balochistan province from Pakistan. In this context, while India's activities in sponsoring terrorism in Balochistan were confirmed by the apprehension and confessional statement of Kulbhushan Yadav (Hanif, 2018). From an Indian perspective, the separation or even destabilization of Balochistan province by exploiting the separatist movements greatly benefits them and inflicts great damage to Pakistan on multiple fronts. India has been directly and indirectly involved in psychological war against Pakistan by exploiting different problems and creating serious issues to the sovereignty and morality of the state. Pakistan has had to adopt a policy to overcome the issues of the country having historic roots, aimed at not only helping the state unite the nation but also in order to tackle the threats of the adversary.

4.4. Media propaganda and PsyWar operations

In the current era, media has become an important element of everyone's life. The basic purpose of media is to provide information related to the latest happenings and news revolving around the world. Media is used as a tool to provide geographical knowledge of how people are connected and divided in the world. The present-day world of globalization observes both positive and negative impacts of media. However, despite some lacunas, media is still considered as an important element of spreading information, entertainment and knowledge within the society, and it is also considered as the mirror of the society. The use of *Media and Information & Communication Technologies* in warfare context has been taken as the main elements to the fascination of Governments, Intelligence Agencies, Computer Scientists and Security Experts for more than two decades of the past or so. Information Warfare uses media, information & communication technologies in aggressive or protective ways to instantly invade, distort and to dominate the resources of the adversary. Although, Information Warfare is an old phenomenon and with the advancement of technology in communication sciences, the nature of warfare has changed greatly around the globe (Hafeez, 2015).

Now, media and information communication technologies are taken as a double-edged sword that is uniformly important for the powerful nations as well as relatively weak or poor nations of the world. Furthermore, the media has been playing a very vital role in the nation building and opinion building throughout history, especially between Indo-Pakistan since the separation of these both states as independent nations of the world in 1947. Different states of the world routinely use media as a comprehensive tool to establish level grounds for difficult diplomatic decisions, particularly in times of wars and crisis. With the advancement of the media industry, especially the emergence of new media tools empowered by the *Internet*, such as *Social Media and Mobile Phones*, the world has turned into a global village and this new media has faded the geographical boundaries and the physical distances between nations. The *Social Media* through the internet provides the free flow of information, exchange of ideas, news, views and opinions from one nation to another without any sort of fear or threat. The *Social Media* has

gained great value and importance all over the world and is taken as an important element of human lives in this technological and modern world. The overall usage of the internet around the globe has drastically increased the percentage from 1% to 46% in the last three decades (Hafeez, 2015).

Media antagonism is a paramount challenge and is a basic reason for frustration and failure of peace talks and efforts between these two nations. It has been observed many times that both nations use media to build narrative inside the minds of the common people. Media of both nations are spreading propaganda by telecasting fake news. The negative propaganda on media has not been controlled by both states and the authorities, who are in charge of looking after the matters of the media and fake news, are doing nothing about it and this creates greater antagonism between the states and also among the society members. While the moral duty of the media, during times of conflict, is to critically evaluate the correct image, the media of both these states are doing the opposite and are giving further hype to the conflict. It has been alleged by Indians many times that Pakistan has set-up at 15 round the clock FM stations in Jammu and Kashmir territory and also involved in psychological warfare to throw the superiority, and spread choicest invectives at India (Manhotra, 2015). The operations of radio stations by Pakistan have been documented by many observers of the world. The electronic media has also stepped up psychological war in the Northern States of India. It has been alleged that Pakistan had meticulously planned coverage to rouse an anti-India sentiment in some communities of Jaipur, Kanpur, Bikaner, Ambala, Saharanpur, Meerut, Aligarh, Farrukh Abad and other adjoining areas along the border of Nepal with India (Rathore, 2016). In contrast to Indian stance, Pakistan also claimed that India is involved directly or indirectly in internal matters of Pakistan and that they are using the soil of Afghanistan and Balochistan to distract Pakistan from the development. Indian intelligence actors are working in large numbers and are promoting terrorist activities within the country to sabotage the soft image of Pakistan in the world. Indians are also exploiting different tactics of psychological warfare by using the vibrant media of the country.

4.5. Post-Afghanistan scenario: another epicentre of Indo-Pak rivalry

The two decades of US invasion in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks resulted in the recent withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan in 2021. Although this Afghanistan episode is not the scope of the article, yet it has influenced the psychological dimension of Indo-Pak rivalry. In the recent US withdrawal from Afghanistan, NATO Troops left the government of Afghanistan (President Ashraf Ghani) in embattled and fragile position. The government was eventually taken over by Taliban. This Taliban government needed global and regional acceptance and Pakistan supported the Taliban government but on the other hand India had reservations (Choudhury, 2021). One of the reasons for Indian reluctance and criticism was China's offer to Taliban leadership for friendly relations and economic cooperation and Pakistan's growing influence to support this collaboration made India more demoted. (Choudhury, 2021). On the other hand, Pakistan also showed its reservation when India was

invited in the UN-led meeting of regional foreign countries for consensus on Afghanistan (Pakistan expresses 'reservation' on India invitation to Afghanistan conference, 2021). Therefore, the global acceptance and legitimacy of the new Afghanistan government can become another cause of the drift between Pakistan and India relations. This may indulge both the states in the new avenues of regional rivalries and advanced hybrid warfare can bring chaotic impact in the region.

4.6. Role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in perception building

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has immense impact on the perception management such as practice of politicians to collect data from AI in social media to view election trends, non-state actors recruit terrorist through social media platforms and state governments use the data produced by AI to review their policies and monitor public opinion on certain issues. These platforms support governments for public diplomacy for development sectors as well. The economic and development sector has been affected due to emerging trends such as AI and its usage in perception building. This perception building exacerbates the Indo-Pak hostility and if not dealt seriously it will have serious repercussions in the South Asian region (Arif, 2019). The augmented reality regarding AI in military training and the development of advanced weaponry will increase the regional instability (Jhonson, 2020).

This shows the crucial role AI plays in shaping up the issues of terrorism, sectarian violence, anti-state propaganda and political instability particularly in South Asia. Artificial Intelligence based systems can gather information about certain topics. The information is then converted into dis-information and is proliferated across the region which has slowly and steadily changed the perception of the people in the region regarding those specific issues such as; situations of unrest in Punjab province of India, Balochistan province of Pakistan, territory of Jammu and Kashmir and Afghanistan.

5. Conclusion

To conclude India and Pakistan have several times retracted themselves from the verge of full-scale war, yet the risk of deterrence failure still prevails between both the nations, as they are periodically conducting missile tests over each other. This depicts that the above-mentioned developments not only have impact on military domain but it's psychologically impact cannot be ignored. After the development of nuclear weapon programs of South Asian rivals, the scenario of direct war is shifted to PsyWar to achieve the objectives and there are evidences of PsyWar between both the states. Psychological war is enormously connected with traditional and new mass media war. Mass media is used as a weapon to achieve the desired goals through various types of contents disseminated through media in the target audience. Although both the nations involved in conflicts have remained in a tense deadlock and always successfully pulled out of a full-scale war, yet the risk of war is there and this has created uncertainty in the South Asian region, thus peace between India and Pakistan is a difficult and multi-layered

phenomenon. The conflicts between them hinges on identity and the exercise of powers illustrated by both the governments. Both states have hung on in a perpetual battle mode either in direct war on the battle ground which we have witnessed throughout the history or indulge in PsyWar operations against each other.

The media has the ability to achieve a high degree of precision in hitting certain targets such as groups or even individuals. Emerging technologies especially AI has also played crucial role in perception building in South Asia and intensified repercussions in the region. To achieve the afore-mentioned precision, intelligence services are vitally important, as they gather information regarding the targets to be hit. They also have immense psychological impact on adversary and trying to undermine the adversary's potential produces a reaction that imperils the likelihood of inadvertent war. Albeit these new avenues in the Indo-Pak rivalries are noteworthy and need to be addressed in order to bring regional stability.

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