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## Countering Indian Disinformation Campaigns

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### JCSP 49

#### Service Paper

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### PCEMI n° 49

#### Service Paper

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 49 – PCEMI 49

2022 - 2023

Service Paper – Étude militaire

## **Countering Indian Disinformation Campaigns**

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## **COUNTERING INDIAN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS**

### **AIM**

1. The paper aims to identify changing global trends for information warfare and highlights areas where Pakistan Army can put an added effort. The scope of the paper will remain limited to information warfare trends internationally, and their implications on Pakistan and at the end the paper will recommend measures to address ever-increasing competition in the information domain.

### **INTRODUCTION**

2. Modern means to disseminate information have provided potent tools to the state's policymakers to shape the environment around them and affect their policy goals. While all nations are attempting to decipher information, disinformation and misinformation maize, specialized government organizations of various countries are actively engaged in overt and covert information warfare across the globe. In the current information-anarchic world, formulating norms or laws to deal with information flow is a daunting challenge. Hence, the medium has become a daily contest - a perpetual battlefield.

3. Pakistan by virtue of its geography has always remained geo-politically relevant for regional and extra-regional players. Whether it is the North-South connectivity of China, access of Russia to the warm waters of Arabian Sea, supply of energy needs to increasingly hungry India or logistics of a land-locked Afghanistan, Pakistan has found itself surrounded by numerous strategic opportunities and challenges. The issues are further compounded by territorial claims, water distribution problems, sectarian and ethnic rifts along with a host of other security challenges. The unstable situation in neighbouring Afghanistan, rising US-China rivalry, Indian hegemonic designs, and Iranian expansionist ambitions have further complicated the situation. These challenges have not only exposed the fragile economy of the country but also widened the social faultline and fragmented opinions and beliefs of the populace.

4. The predicament in which Pakistan finds itself is not unique to the current times but has remained a persistent factor since Pakistan's inception in 1947. What has changed recently is the influence of disinformation on the populace from various players to further their own interests. For a country which prides itself on diversity and has a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and culturally plural population, retaining the integrity of democratic principles is becoming increasingly difficult in such a challenging environment. While protecting freedom of speech, guarding the populace against disinformation is of paramount importance in which the military must play a role. Therefore, it has become imperative for the security establishment of Pakistan to identify and respond to the growing challenge of disinformation and produce defensive and offensive measures.

### **CHANGING GLOBAL INFORMATION TREND**

5. Various countries across the world have developed niche capability to influence information environment. British 77 Bridge has been at the forefront to influence information

environment as desired by British policymakers<sup>1</sup>. NATO finetuned their Strategic communication doctrine in 2021 and enunciated “shaping” the environment to create a favorable information environment in Europe and outside world<sup>2</sup>. The US military has developed a considerable capability of managing the information environment in Strategic Command but has also devolved the technology in the newly created MDO Brigades (Multi-domain Brigade). They have been provided tools to manage the information environment at a tactical and operational level before, during and after a conflict.

6. Although functional democracies across the world have established a so-called system of checks so these entities do not affect the domestic audience, but these organizations retain the capabilities to alter the opinion of the domestic public while bypassing the notional scrutiny. It is evident that these entities are instrumental in creating national consensus or at least a debate on national security issues. Hence, similar operations when used on their own public are referred to not as “influence operations” but as “strategic communications,” “countering-disinformation,” “public affairs awareness” “informing the public” etc to skim around the political nuances.

## CHALLENGES TO PAKISTAN

7. For Pakistan, the primary challenge originates from its Eastern neighbour. With historic rivalry and a rising hindutva-influenced government in India<sup>3</sup>, Pakistan is at the forefront of enduring the most of India’s regional hegemonic desires. Indian soft power has enabled it to influence the international community through various means through a large diaspora in the West, English speakers in the population, potent influence tools like Bollywood and a considerable number of media outlets. With these capabilities, India creates a gigantic machine to spread disinformation against other countries in general and Pakistan in particular. Recently one such info operation has been discovered and debunked by the European Union Dis info Lab in which Indian companies associated with its intelligence agency used more than 10 United Nations Human Rights Council accredited NGOs to claim human rights violations have been committed by the military during the military operations in the tribal belt<sup>4</sup>. For credence, some academic and prominent figures of human rights who had died were resurrected on social and print media. With several identity thefts and more than 750 fake media outlets, covering over 119 countries, a narrative was constructed to alter the image of the Pakistan Army and declare them as accessories to foreign powers, particularly the US, and culpable of committing human rights violations at the behest of others. Although these disinformation campaigns and their sponsor organizations were creditably linked with Indian Intelligence Agencies and exposed on Pakistan’s national media, their operations continued unabated in Europe and North America.

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<sup>1</sup> "Speech: Building Future Forces and using Modern Technologies to Meet with Rising International Strife and Changing Geopolitical Balances." M2 Presswire, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Conoscenti, Michelangelo. 2018. "NATO's Social Media Strategic Communication in the Making." *Altre Modernità*: 23-47.

<sup>3</sup> Hindutva” a political ideology, initially articulated by VD Savarkar, creator of Rashtriya Swayam Sang (RSS) is a specimen of right-wing extremism and fascism in the classical sense<sup>3</sup> and adheres to a concept of homogenous majority and cultural hegemony. BJP government under PM Modi is the political arm of RSS.

<sup>4</sup> Indian Chronicles: deep dive into a 15-year operation targeting the EU and UN to serve Indian interests - EU DisinfoLab, [www.disinfo.eu](http://www.disinfo.eu).

8. From an academic view of the Land Warfare theory, it can be argued that India has attempted to use its military might to coerce Pakistan on several occasions recently but has failed to achieve any worthwhile objectives. The latest episode was the intrusion of an Indian flight package into Pakistani airspace in February 2019 which was met with a swift response by Pakistan Airforce, who shot down two of their jets and captured the pilot. Although this operation was preceded by a massive Indian propaganda campaign to change public views inside India and shape international opinion, the kinetic effects delivered by Pakistan were lost in the massive Indian information campaign. The Incumbent Indian government timed the adventure with the upcoming election and despite losing two fighter jets, one helicopter and a captured pilot which was paraded in front of the media, Indian political leaders won in the perception domain within the domestic audience and created ample confusion internationally. It resulted in the victory of the BJP (Bharati Janata Party) in India giving them a second stint in office. Hence, India may resort to such misadventures in future as well especially when a substantial military equipment is being provided by the US to India. After this episode, it was evident that the information domain will remain all-pervasive and a common trough to fight over until the time India does not achieve a substantial mismatch in military capabilities to compel Pakistan through kinetic means.

9. Additionally, with increased economic and diplomatic influence apart from astounding soft power, India has effectively unleashed a campaign to target Pakistan and influence various pressure groups within Pakistani society. The political ambition of India is to coerce Pakistan into a client state within the ambit of Indian hegemony and drop its core interest on Kashmir. It aims to force Pakistan to accept the Indian occupation of Kashmir as a fait accompli. India has displayed its desire to create a “new normal” where it could act with kinetic and non-kinetic means against any of its neighbours if it deemed fit without any retribution. US’s desire to see India as a bulwark against China in the new “Great Competition,” has provided India with ample leverage to carry out its designs. This trend is likely to continue forecasting BJP’s (Bharati Janata Party) retaining power in India in near future.

10. Furthermore, the involvement of Indian spy agencies in snooping and disinformation campaigns has permeated into various other fields. The Indian government has been found using Pegasus software, a high-end application to snoop on personal mobiles<sup>5</sup>. Apart from snooping on political opponents, the application was used to snoop at various civilian and military leaders of Pakistan and the intelligence gathered was further used to feed the disinformation campaign. Some other countries across the world have been using similar software on one pretext or another but no such capabilities exist within the Pakistan Military or other departments of government.

11. Such disinformation campaigns are having serious implications on the security of Pakistan. It has been noticed that in some instances, soldiers in the military at various ranks are becoming increasingly disenfranchised due to a lack of proper information and consuming all of what is available on social media. Being a large volunteer military, it influences recruitment and retention. Such disinformation also feeds into the confirmation biases of fringe leaders who try to capitalize on such items to further their political interests and undermine the social fabric. Such political tendencies when provided requisite support and finances from foreign nations may

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<sup>5</sup> Pegasus: Why unchecked snooping threatens India's democracy - BBC News

result in an armed movement or an insurgency. Therefore, it is important that the security establishment of the country maintains an effective check on disinformation campaigns threatening the integrity of the country.

## **CONCLUSION**

12. In conclusion, the world is fast evolving to a new type of perpetual battlefield where significant effects are being delivered in the information domain. The fragility of democracy, social fault lines, presence of power groups, and regional dynamics in Pakistan warrant a proactive approach of security apparatus to defend and deter aggression in the information domain. Pakistan's establishment in general and the military have not yet evolved to undertake offensive or defensive tasks to counter disinformation spread to harm the interests of Pakistan. These threats pose a considerable challenge to the country which warrants a proactive approach from the military and civilian leadership.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

13. Pakistan Military has been tasked to defend the territorial boundaries of Pakistan and ensure peace within. Appreciating the latest security challenges, it becomes apparent that accentuating already existing ethnic, religious, and social fault lines in Pakistan through adroit media campaigns seems to be a likely enemy course of action. It is a perpetual battle which is to be fought daily and the response is required to be streamlined, organized, and resourced. Sun Tzu's saying that the acme of skill is winning without a fight still holds valid where a country can influence a policy change just through managing the perceptions of local and international audience. In the modern post-truth world, perception is reality and managing perception is a weapon of war. It is therefore recommended that Pakistan Army and the government develop an information warfare organization which has defensive and offensive capabilities. Detailed organization and TO&E (table of organization and equipment) can be recommended in another paper. However, the following roles are suggested: -

- a. Countering disinformation campaigns originating from foreign countries through social and print media responses.
- b. Projecting Pakistan's point of view and explaining its perspective on matters of regional and domestic security-related issues.
- c. Inform the local audience about the security threats in Pakistan.
- d. Promote national integration through strategic communications and themes to offset ethnic, sectarian, and regional differences.
- e. Retain the capability to target the domestic audience of a hostile country.
- f. Retain capacity to counter disinformation through technical analysis, etc.
- g. Capable of formulating and implementing influence operations in support of an operational plan.

14. The organization should be integrated within the strategic intelligence agencies which are suitably equipped to identify upcoming threats and have a better understanding of the current ones. The capacity of intelligence agencies can be augmented by a strategic communication outfit to respond to information warfare being waged. Furthermore, the national intelligence agency is a component of the Ministry of Interior instead of the Ministry of Defence, hence will



have superior civilian oversight. The outfit can be headed by an undersecretary to the Ministry of Information so he can leverage the Ministry of Information to support the execution of his plans. The organization is to be staffed by intelligence officers working parallel with cyber security experts, strategic analysts, and social media specialists. It needs to have active collaboration with civil media enterprises.

15. Additionally, some measures are also required to protect the population from disinformation which exploits social fissures through sharing of inciteful comments on ethnoreligious lines. In a country which has a history of militancy, it is important to protect the population from deliberate information manoeuvres from foreign countries to further their interests. The absence of social media servers or offices in the country protects them from any meaningful legal action according to the Pakistani law. Therefore, notable social media companies should be requested to open offices in Pakistan, so they remain accountable for the dissemination of information on their platforms. Furthermore, a liaison between social media companies and government officials has to be established with clear terms of reference, allowing the earmarking of disinformation on social media. The requirement does not end to debunk false information but to expose the individual and entities to affect their creditability. Furthermore, if such disinformation is published in any notable/attribution entity against whom legal action can be taken, a component of the suggested organization should be responsible for persecuting a legal case for defamation.

16. Furthermore, soldiers serving in the military are also required to be protected and made immune to the aggressive psychological campaign that is waged to lower morale. As Pak Military is a voluntary service, it will not be able to retain the current recruitment and retention standard if the soldiers start to become disenfranchised by information warfare by an adversary. Therefore, it is recommended that during the annual psychological evaluation, soldiers who have tendencies to be swayed or easily manipulated be identified. This information can be used discreetly for further psychological conditioning of the individual through various cadres and workshops to acquaint them with the tools of hybrid warfare with a pronounced information effort.

17. Lastly, a national debate is warranted to raise the awareness level of the populace about the latest manifestation of the threat. It should involve prominent politicians, media stars, religious personalities, and academia. Talk shows on television primetime, seminars in universities, opinion pieces in the newspapers, blogs by students and a concrete effort on social media will inform the public that the way of fighting a war has changed and they need to develop the critical analytical capability to decipher facts from fiction. It will empower democracy and will support the evolution of society with better integration and peace. If such measures are enforced, Pakistan will be equipped to cope up with the challenge of disinformation.