Strategic Communication: The New Dimension of Conflict

Introduction

After four days of clinical, calculated strikes, the Indian Armed Forces achieved the objectives that had been given to them in a calibrated, controlled, and decisive manner. India's response to the Pahalgam terror attack was deliberate, precise, and strategic. Operation Sindoor represented an evolution in India's war fighting doctrine, showcasing the capability and ability of its armed forces. It is also the first conflict fought in a highly informational battlefield, hence, it extended beyond traditional military engagements.[1]

The role of information, either provided or denied, is an important consideration in military planning and operations. In fact, throughout the history of warfare, armies have sought advantage through actions intended to affect the perception and behaviour of adversaries. Information is a powerful tool and can be termed as an element of national power and, therefore, it is essential to synchrone information programmes, plans, messages, and products as part of a whole-of-government effort.

If Operation Vijay was the first televised war in the Indian context, Operation Sindoor can be termed as the first confrontation between India and Pakistan taking place in the digital era, which includes active participation of print, visual, and social media. The continuous streaming of visuals, debates, and print were available literally in a single click. Social media, therefore, became one of the most powerful tools in shaping perceptions.

Shedding the Balakot Experience

The armed forces learning from their experience after the Balakot strikes were now absolutely clear about the requirement of providing clear images of the targets engaged and destruction caused. Providing these evidences left no doubt for ambiguity.

There was also a marked difference in the manner in which the briefings were conducted by the Foreign Secretary and the spokespersons for the armed forces as well as those by the three Directors Generals of Operations, as compared to those after the Balakot strike. The briefings by Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, Colonel Sofiya Qureshi, and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh articulated the government's intent to the nation and the world. Meanwhile, the DGMOs also answered queries and questions with a great deal of granularity and clarity while maintaining the confidentiality of sensitive information.[2]

India's astute messaging established a clear message that Pakistan is the aggressor in the ongoing conflict and that India's response has been well-planned and controlled, in contrast to Islamabad's reckless offensive targeting civilian areas. It also communicated India's position that while it will not initiate aggression, any attack will get a tough response.

However, there were many unverified accounts proliferating due to the advent of the internet. The expansion of information technology, the widespread availability of

wireless communications, and the far-reaching impact of social media in today's fast-paced information environment poses new and complex challenges for military operations.

In the military context, it involves dangers of tools like propaganda, misinformation, cyber operations, psychological operations, and control over media narratives to influence perceptions.

The Triad of Disruption

Social media, propaganda/fake news, and digital social engineering can be termed as the 'Triad of Disruption'. This persistent threat applies the ubiquitous power of social media and messages to propagate fake news utilising professional information warriors to manipulate the masses via the art of digital social engineering.

Unlike traditional weapon technologies, development of information-based techniques do not require sizable financial resources or state sponsorship. Information systems expertise and access to important networks may be the only pre-requisites. This is because the cost and technical skills required for executing an online disinformation campaign are remarkably low, and the number of actors and the amount of malicious content has increased.

New information-based techniques will substantially increase the power of deception, dramatically complicating efforts to build support for security-related initiatives.[3] They will shape and build the narrative. In fact, strategic communications are aimed at shaping perceptions and binding them in a vice like grip. There is also an inability to analyse truth and falsification of facts.

Dangerous Distortions

There were significant efforts to shape the information environment. Most were absurd, though some had a hint of sophistication. Speaking to Al Jazeera, Pakistan's Defence Minister Khwaja Asif said that the Pahalgam attack in India was 'Orchestrated' and his government 'Suspects very strongly that it was false flag operation', which remains a ridiculous claim. In fact, in the United Nations Security Council meeting on 15 May, members refused to accept Pakistan's 'False Flag' narrative.[4]

The theatre of absurdities included fake claims regarding the removal of India's Northern Army Commander and Vice Chief of Air following Pahalgam attacks. The truth, meanwhile, is that both these officers were superannuated on 30 Apr 2025.[5,6] During Operation Sindoor, the claims pelted out by the other side were even more bizarre. They clearly aimed at creating a division in Indian society as well as lowering the morale of the population. These included claims of Indian ballistic missiles being aimed at Sikh population centers and gurdwaras. This was an evident attempt to exploit communal sensitivities while the truth remains that it was Pakistan which had targeted a gurdwara across the line of control.[7]

Apart from these, there were claims of the downing of five Indian aircrafts, including a Rafael. In addition, there was also news regarding the capture of an Indian pilot across the border.[8] The fog of war is inherently confusing. But Pakistan's increasingly aggressive information efforts create new and significant risks for miscalculation in future crises.

False narratives and exaggerated claims of Indian military losses and fabricated stories of communal violence were viral on social media platforms, aiming to erode public trust.

The Nuclear Leak

In aftermath of the strikes, the social and print media were full of claims regarding the damage caused to Pakistan's underground nuclear weapon storage complex in Kirana Hills near Nur Khan airbase. The report was soon followed up with satellite imagery, claims of the United States' aircraft visiting the site as well as transportation of huge quantity of Boran from Egypt to control the radiation leak. All were false and finally, on 15 May, the International Atomic Energy Agency also confirmed that no radiation leak or release has occurred from any nuclear facility in Pakistan.[9] Earlier, Air Marshal A K Bharti had also denied that India had targeted Kirana Hills or any nuclear installation in Pakistan.[10]

This was a bid at discrediting the Indian achievements as well as portraying it as an irresponsible nuclear power. India's narrative, on the other hand, had been marked by clarity from the beginning. It claimed targeting the perpetrators and planners of terror, with an aim of destroying terror infrastructure across the border.[11] The news surrounding the destruction of a nuclear storage facility was cleverly designed to counter this narrative.

It is stated that India is a responsible nuclear power, and its actions were deliberate, proportionate, and did not target nuclear infrastructure. The Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal has clearly stated that "Our actions were calibrated and entirely within the scope of conventional military operations. Speculative narratives about nuclear escalation are baseless and irresponsible".[12]

The Indian Armed Forces are highly professional and responsible and will never resort to irresponsible actions. Indian actions remained strictly within conventional military boundaries and convey that nuclear rhetoric would not be allowed to dictate India's security response.

Conclusion

As Clauzewitz wrote, "Moral forces on the battlefield have a big impact on its outcome". He also stated that military events could only be planned to a small degree because of the incalculable influence of 'Friction'. Strategic communication is now contributing to this friction in the modern battlefield milieu.

The Web 3.0 is remaking the world's very notion of reality. Increasingly, there is an obfuscation of the reality, any point-of-view can be projected as genuine or as true,

and there are takers for it. The information space consists of domestic, adversarial, as well as international audiences. This needs to be dominated, however, India's tools have been largely shaped and sharpened for domestic audiences only, whereas, it needs to focus on the external audience in a similar manner. There is, therefore, a need to enhance media awareness and develop robust counter-disinformation strategies to safeguard national interests in this digital age.

There will be varying narratives, all churned out by social media cells by vested interests including disgruntled elements. The responsibility now lies with the individuals themselves to cross-check and verify the source and credibility of the information before blindly disseminating it in the digital space. Adding to the social media, the mainstream media with its continuous tirade of 'Breaking News' also needs to be less exuberant.

One thing that the world must understand is that information is power and today, a much larger part of the world's population has access to that power in their hands. This power needs to be harnessed and be aligned with the national objectives. The fact is that information has become a new dimension of conflict and has moved from the periphery to the prime slot. It is a new standoff weapon and can be manipulated and accessed from anywhere.

Endnotes

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