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## Weaponising Perception: Cognitive Warfare an Integral Part of Multi-Domain Operations





## **About the Occasional Paper**

This Occasional Paper explores how cognitive warfare shaped the battlespace during Operation Sindoor—India’s first war in the digital era. The paper underscores the strategic importance of narrative control, information dominance, and perception management in modern conflicts. Drawing on recent experiences, it analyses how disinformation, artificial intelligence-enabled propaganda, and social media engineering were leveraged by adversaries to distort truth, undermine public trust, and influence global opinion. The study highlights institutional gaps in India’s strategic communication framework and calls for a whole-of-government approach to integrate military operations with real-time narrative shaping. It makes a compelling case for creating a strategic communication authority to enhance India’s preparedness in cognitive domains. The paper concludes that military success alone is no longer sufficient; narrative superiority has become a decisive element of modern warfare.



## Introduction

After four days of clinical, calibrated strikes, the Indian Armed Forces achieved the objectives that had been given to them in a calibrated, controlled, and decisive manner. While Operation Sindoor represented an evolution in India's warfighting doctrine, showcasing the capability and readiness of the armed forces, it was also the first war fought in a highly informationalised battlefield—extending well beyond traditional military engagements. In fact, the horrific attack in Pahalgam set in motion one of the most sophisticated Information Warfare (IW) campaigns in recent memory.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the history of warfare, armies have sought advantage through actions intended to affect the perception and behaviour of adversaries. In any military campaign, shaping the strategic narrative is nearly as important as shaping the battlespace. Information is a powerful tool and can be termed as an element of national power and, therefore, synchronising information programmes, plans, messages, and products are imperative 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 war fought in the digital era. The continuous streaming of visuals, debates, and print content was literally available in the palm of one's hand, making it one of the most powerful tools for shaping perceptions.

As Lieutenant General DS Hooda (Retd), former Northern Army Commander, wrote in the Hindustan Times “While this was undoubtedly the worst bout of fighting between India and Pakistan since the Kargil War of 1999, it

was also one in which a fierce parallel battle was playing out in the information space. This was the battle of perceptions conducted across Television (TV) screens, media outlets, and social networks. The information domain has become a frontline in modern combat, where fake news is weaponised to create an alternative reality”.<sup>2</sup> There is little doubt that what unfolded was a taste of cognitive warfare. In today’s battlespace, ‘Victory’ is not about terrain and destruction of enemy war waging potential but also contesting the psychological, virtual, ideological, and technological spaces. Victory or defeat is dominated by actions going viral in an instant by an adversary controlling the information domain. Perception management has thus become the new center of gravity, with narratives shaping perspectives.

## Shedding the Balakot Experience

Learning from their experience after the Balakot strikes, the armed forces were now clear about the necessity of providing clear images of the targets engaged and the destruction caused—leaving no room for ambiguity.

There was also a marked difference in the way the briefings were conducted post the operation. Briefings by Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and armed forces spokespersons, including Colonel Sofiya Qureshi and Wing Commander Vyomika Singh, clearly conveyed the government’s intent post-operations. Compared to Balakot, the Director Generals of Military Operations addressed media and

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took on questions, which they answered with a great deal of granularity and clarity while maintaining the confidentiality of sensitive information.<sup>3</sup>

India's astute messaging established clearly 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, the expansion of information technology, the widespread availability of wireless communications, social media, and today's information environment poses new and complex challenges for military operations. In the military context, it involves tools like propaganda, misinformation, cyber operations, psychological operations, and control over media narratives to influence perceptions.

## **The Triad of Disruption**

Social media, propaganda and fake news, and digital social engineering can be termed the 'Triad of Disruption'. This ongoing threat uses the wide reach of social platforms and skilled information warriors to spread false news and influence public opinion through the art of digital social engineering.

Unlike traditional weapon technologies, development of information-based techniques does not require sizable financial resources or state sponsorship. Though Pakistan has been using

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the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), information systems expertise and access to key networks may be the only prerequisites. Because the cost and technical skills required for executing an online disinformation campaign are remarkably low, the number of actors and the amount of malicious content has increased. With the advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI), manipulation of images to build psychological pressure on the adversary and satisfy domestic audiences during active combat is par for the course.

AI-generated videos reflect a dangerous escalation in IW. These manipulations aren't just offensive; they aim to trivialise human suffering, incite division, and undermine trust in Indian institutions. Their rapid virality, garnering thousands of views within hours, underscores the destructive power of AI-enabled propaganda in shaping public opinion and fuelling societal unrest.

Unlike the physical battlefield, the narrative is harder to assess. Depending on whom one asks, what the individual has just seen or read on their phone, and their engagement with memory, desires, and critical faculties at that moment, different and even contradictory interpretations may emerge about something seemingly obvious.

During the Russia-Ukraine war, a large number of independent bloggers disseminated information gathered from open sources regarding battlefield movements, the progress of operations, target destruction, and the effects of the war on the population. Some of

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these were later proven to have been doctored images but they all they had the effect of targeting the minds of many people and garnering support for the Ukrainian cause.

### **Pakistan's International Outreach**

Soon after the Pahalgam terror attack, various Pakistani ministers launched a narrative offensive, appearing on several foreign TV channels, to argue that the central issue between India and Pakistan was not 'Terrorism' but 'Kashmir'. Three Pakistani Cabinet Ministers—Ishaq Dar, Khawaja Asif, and Attaullah Tarar—along with Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Chief Bilawal Bhutto, appeared in at least 25 interviews during this period on popular stations in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Middle East, and Europe.

As regards supporting terrorism, Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif admitted that they had supported terrorist groups. In a candid conversation with Sky News, Asif acknowledged that Pakistan was involved in 'Dirty Work' on behalf of the West when asked about Islamabad's history of funding and backing terror outfits.<sup>4</sup>

Pakistan's terror infrastructure has destabilised not just its neighbours but far beyond. Its support for the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network led to brutal attacks in Kabul—including the 2008 Indian Embassy bombing and the 2011 assault on the US embassy. Russia also uncovered potential links to Pakistani

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networks in the Moscow Concert Hall attack, suspecting logistical and ideological backing.

Iran, too, has repeatedly blamed Pakistan for harbouring the Sunni terror group Jaish ul-Adl, responsible for numerous cross-border attacks. In Jan 2024, Tehran launched drone strikes deep into Pakistan territory, targeting alleged terror camps. The UK has also felt the impact. The 07 Jul 2005 London bombings were traced back to training and radicalisation in Pakistan, where three of the attackers had spent extended periods of time.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most damning episode was the 2011 US raid that killed Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad, barely a mile from Pakistan's elite military academy. His years-long presence there confirmed the fears regarding the collusion of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) with terror groups. In Bangladesh, the ISI has been linked to funding and arming Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), the group behind the deadly 2016 Dhaka Cafe attack.<sup>6</sup> In 2015, Pakistani diplomats were expelled for funnelling money to JMB operatives. Despite global outrage, Pakistan continues to host a sprawling network of terror training camps across Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Waziristan, and Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir. Groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Hizbul Mujahideen, and Islamic State of

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Iraq and Syria-Khorasan train there, often under the supervision of ex-army personnel.

The US State Department's 2019 terrorism report stated bluntly that Pakistan "Continued to serve as a safe haven for certain regionally focused terrorist groups".<sup>7</sup> The European Foundation for South Asian Studies, in its report 'Pakistan Army and Terrorism: An Unholy Alliance', detailed the deeply embedded nexus between Pakistan's military, the ISI, and radical clerics.<sup>8</sup>

Pakistan has institutionalised IW. Its ISPR operates not just as a media wing, but as a psychological operations command leveraging dramatised storytelling, digital propaganda, AI-powered misinformation, with a well-trained network of information warriors manipulating public perception both domestically and abroad. ISPR's operations aim at converting battlefield setbacks into delusional victories.

Unfortunately, narrative dominance by Pakistan ensured that the terrible terror attack perpetrated by them at Pahalgam was relegated to the background. There was no mention of how India has been wronged by Pakistan-based proxy actors. Instead, India—the victim of the terror attack—was portrayed as the perpetrator of a conventional retaliation. The debate and focus were craftily

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shifted away, and terror is being justified.

As per India Today, “Though India received overwhelming support after the Pahalgam attack, former diplomats believe India’s absence from foreign media platforms and lack of communication activities by embassies and high commissions between 22 Apr and 07 May left space open for the Pakistani narrative to spread unchecked”. Further, “International media outlets, too, are harping on Kashmir, not cross-border terror, as the central issue”, notes strategic commentator Brahma Chellaney.<sup>9</sup>

## **Dangerous Distortions**

There were significant efforts to shape the information environment. Most were absurd, though, some had a hint of sophistication. Within 48 hours of the Pahalgam attack, three Pakistani cabinet ministers, as brought out above, had conducted many interviews across major western outlets including British Broadcasting Corporation, Cable News Network, and Al Jazeera. Their message was carefully crafted and relentlessly consistent: “The root cause is Kashmir, not terrorism”. This reframing was aimed at exploiting existing western media biases, which—being unaware of the region’s complex dynamics—found the Kashmir framework more familiar than that of cross-border terrorism.

Going one step further, while speaking to Al Jazeera, Pakistan’s Defence Minister Khwaja Asif said the Pahalgam attack was ‘Orchestrated’, and his

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government suspects it was a ‘False flag operation’, which remains a ridiculous claim. In fact, even the United Nations Security Council rejected this narrative in their 15 May meeting.<sup>10</sup>

However, Pakistan does not prioritise portraying facts; its focus lies in speed and fabrication, targeting an international audience it understands well. Unfortunately, when it comes to India and Pakistan, the western media and audience is not that concerned with deaths caused by terrorists but rather on the issue of self-determination and denial of territorial rights. Their template regarding victims of terror is inconsistent and Pakistan has mastered the art of creating a false narrative.

The theatre of absurdities included the news regarding the removal of the Northern Army Commander and the Vice Chief of Air Staff. Though, in fact, both these officers were superannuating.<sup>11</sup> During the four days, the claims pelted out were even more bizarre, aimed at both creating a division in Indian society as well as lowering the morale. These included Indian ballistic missiles being aimed at the Sikh population centres and gurdwaras. This was an evident attempt to exploit communal sensitivities while, in actuality, Pakistan had targeted a gurdwara across the line of control.

Within hours of the Indian strikes, the ISPR attempted to

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shape a counter-narrative to India's claims of targeting only terror camps. In press briefings, the ISPR stated that Indian missiles had struck only civilian areas including mosques, homes, and even a school killing dozens of civilians.

Apart from that, there were claims of downing five Indian aircraft, which included a Rafael. In addition, there was also a claim of having captured an Indian pilot.<sup>12</sup> There were even assertions that Pakistan had hacked Indian missile systems mid-flight. Pakistani claims of downing Indian aircraft were amplified by Pakistani social media users sharing pictures of previous Indian Air Force jet crashes in Rajasthan in 2024 and Punjab in 2021. Both crashes had been widely reported earlier. An old video from Sep 2019 showing Pakistani soldiers raising a white flag on the Line of Control was re-shared by Pakistani handles with the false claim that it showed Indian Army troops surrendering.

The fog of war is inherently confusing. But Pakistan's increasingly aggressive mis-information efforts create new and significant risks for miscalculation in future crises.

India's display of military capability during Operation Sindoor forced Pakistan to reach out for a ceasefire. Yet, a fabricated narrative claiming Pakistan downed four Rafale jets and a MiG-29 hijacked global headlines, casting a shadow over India's triumph.

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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. In the second week of May, Pakistan's cyber warfare campaign against India pivoted from direct infrastructure attacks to sophisticated information operations. This stage weaponised digital influence by deploying fake news, disinformation, AI-generated deepfakes, and fabricated narratives to manipulate public perception and destabilise trust.

A particularly alarming incident involved a deepfake video of External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar, exemplifying the adversary's use of emergent AI tools to amplify psychological impact and erode confidence in national leadership.<sup>13</sup>

Complementing these cyber-attacks was a more insidious tool of disruption called algorithms. Algorithms drive content delivery and user engagement on social media platforms. These machine learning systems analyse user behaviour to prioritise content based on likes, shares, comments, and watch time. Though meant to enhance user experience, they often amplify divisive or extremist content by promoting emotionally charged material.

This creates feedback loops that spread polarising narratives and disinformation,

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deepening social divides and bolstering extremist influence. As viral content gains traction, algorithms shape public perception with limited transparency. Their unchecked role in amplifying harmful content poses serious risks to the integrity of information ecosystems and this was evidently visible amid the recent cyber warfare against India. Algorithms on social media became force multipliers in spreading disinformation.<sup>14</sup>

As per Lieutenant General Shokin Chauhan, “The most sophisticated was the third phase: credential laundering. Pakistan managed to get retired British and American generals to endorse its claims during webinars hosted by prestigious think tanks such as the Atlantic Council and Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)”. This wasn’t accidental—these retired officials were carefully cultivated over the years through Pakistan’s extensive lobbying network in Washington and London. When respected western military figures validated Pakistani claims, it provided a veneer of objective analysis that proved incredibly powerful in shaping elite opinion”.<sup>15</sup>

As per RUSI, “Unfortunately, the initial silence from Indian military spokespeople created an information vacuum. Into that vacuum poured commentary that was often technically uninformed and strategically misleading”.<sup>16</sup> Pakistan, while being the

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perpetrator of terror, was building a narrative shield that portrayed it as a victim both within its domestic audience and its global friends in mind. The Pakistan narrative was consistent in showing itself not as a state sponsor of terrorism but as a victim of Indian aggression, transforming the aggressor-victim dynamic.

As Sadanand Dhume wrote in the Wall Street Journal, “For now, the Pakistani army’s skilled public-relations machinery may have turned the once-unpopular army chief into a hero at home. But looked at dispassionately, it’s hard to see how Field Marshal Asim Munir has made Pakistan any safer”.<sup>17</sup>

India’s ongoing narrative of a nation that has been for long the victim of trans-border terrorism unfortunately was not picked up by a global chorus as the focus internationally was in forcing speedy cessation of hostilities between two nuclear powers.

## **The Nuclear Leak**

In the 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 US aircraft visiting the site as well as transportation of huge quantity of Boron from Egypt to control the radiation leak. All were false and, finally, on 15 May, the International Atomic Energy

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Agency confirmed that no radiation leak or release has occurred from any nuclear facility in Pakistan. Earlier, Air Marshal AK Bharti, the Director General of Air Operations, had also denied that India had targeted any nuclear installation in Pakistan.<sup>18</sup>

This was a bid at discrediting the Indian achievements as well as portraying it as an irresponsible nuclear power. India's narrative had been marked by clarity from the beginning; it was targeting the perpetrators and planners of terror.<sup>19</sup> 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 (MEA) 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".<sup>20</sup>

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 that nuclear rhetoric would not be allowed to dictate India's security response.<sup>21</sup>

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## Diplomatic Outreach is Necessary

In an era where wars are waged not only with weapons but with words and algorithms, Saumya Awasthi, while speaking at Observer Research Foundation, presented a compelling case for integrating strategic communication into the core of India's military doctrine. Her analysis underscores that while India's diplomacy often leans on military leverage, Pakistan operates in reverse—its military leveraging an aggressive, state-engineered information ecosystem.<sup>22</sup>

Communication failure reflected deeper institutional problems within India's foreign policy apparatus. Unlike Pakistan, which has spent decades developing integrated IW capabilities, India's communication efforts remained scattered across multiple agencies with poor coordination. The MEA, the Ministry of Defence, and the Prime Minister's Office often operated with different messaging strategies, creating confusion and diluting impact.

While the MEA briefed foreign envoys in New Delhi, most Indian embassies in G-20 countries neither engaged with local media nor organised any events to shape public opinion on the Pahalgam terrorist attack or the subsequent retaliatory strikes on terror camps in Pakistan. Sending a

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parliamentary delegation to countries is akin to closing a stable door once the horse has bolted.

As per India Today, over 75 per cent of the embassies did not conduct any media interviews, podcasts, or publish opinion pieces in local or international newspapers.<sup>23</sup> This included Indian Embassies in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the Netherlands, Egypt, Nigeria, and Morocco. Securing coverage in Chinese media remains particularly challenging, given the strained diplomatic ties between New Delhi and Beijing. Further, many embassies including those in Brazil, France, and Italy did not organise any public events or diaspora outreach programmes between 22 April and 16 May 2025. 12 embassies neither engaged with local media nor held public events.

The primary activity of these embassies appeared to be reposting content from the Prime Minister's Office, the MEA, and other government bodies. In some non-English-speaking countries, posts were shared in Hindi—a misstep in terms of effective communication strategy.

“Appearing on TV and engaging with major newspapers and foreign affairs editors is crucial”, as per Ambassador Rajiv Dogra. He adds that we need to, “Create opportunities to speak to large gatherings. If there's a strong Indian community, engage with

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them. If there's a business community with trade ties to India, speak to them too. Quick reaction is essential".<sup>24</sup>

The MEA needs to evolve from simply disseminating information to strategically crafting and asserting India's narrative on the global stage.<sup>25</sup> India must adopt a more proactive and assertive global communications strategy to shape international perception.

## Dealing with Information Dominance

As per Lieutenant General DS Hooda (Retd), "Information dominance has become a critical pillar of national security. Public perception, both domestic and international, can influence strategic decision-making, military operations, diplomatic fallout, and notions of victory and defeat. Often, the default option adopted in fighting the information war is to block those social media accounts that are spreading fake news or are critical of the government. While this may achieve immediate control, there are several adverse implications. Excessive censorship invites speculation, fuels conspiracy theories, and amplifies rumours, thus, resulting in the very outcome it aims to prevent."<sup>26</sup>

Indian briefings focused heavily on technical achievements, precision targeting, target destruction rates, and the performance of BrahMos missiles. While impressive to defence analysts, these details failed to resonate with broader international audiences who were more

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concerned with the human and political dimensions of the conflict.

The technical focus inadvertently played into Pakistan's hands by reducing the conflict to a platform comparison between Chinese and French fighter aircraft. When Pakistani forces claimed to have shot down Indian Rafale jets using Chinese-built J-10 fighters, the international media coverage became fixated on this technological shootout rather than the underlying terrorism that had triggered the Indian response.

Chinese state media then stepped in amplifying Pakistan's IW stance and led by China Global Television Network (CGTN) and Global Times, aired dozens of segments framing Operation Sindoor as 'Indian Aggression', while promoting Chinese military technology. The narrative shifted from India's counter-terrorism operation to a broader discussion about the reliability of western versus Chinese weapons systems. As the RUSI noted, "The Rafale vs J-10 debate overshadowed India's calibrated escalation management".<sup>27</sup>

In a display of collusivity, CGTN, China's international news network, aired 14 different segments between 07 May and 10 May portraying Operation Sindoor as 'Indian Aggression', featuring 'Experts' who were affiliated with

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Pakistani think tanks. Global Times, another Chinese state media outlet, published an op-ed claiming that ‘India’s reckless strikes threatened the stability of the Belt and Road Initiative’, thereby, directly linking the conflict to China’s broader geopolitical interests.

### Way Ahead

What is needed is a coherent strategy to win the war of narratives. This strategy must fuse real-time fact-checking, cyber defence, narrative control, and public engagement into a whole-of-government approach. Credibility is key to shaping perceptions, and this must always be protected.

In the Indian context, there needs to be an overarching structure that ensures that New Delhi’s strategy and systems are synergised and integrated. Presently, there are numerous pillars to include the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, individual ministries, private print and electronic media which are highly corporatised, and uncontrolled social media environment. These are not cohesive. Our strategic communication capabilities, therefore, need to evolve with a tri-services perspective, a formal joint services doctrine is recommended to be issued.

There needs to be inclusion of academia in national security policy formulation. They should be doing the deep research and establishments and organisations should be listening to them, making security a composite domain.

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As Lieutenant General DS Hooda (Retd) states, “India must invest in information dominance with the same seriousness that it accords to military hardware”.<sup>28</sup> There is no doubt that Pakistan’s narrative onslaught has tangible diplomatic, economic, and security implications that will influence regional dynamics for years to come.

The Operation Sindoor experience offers critical lessons for how to compete effectively in the cognitive warfare environment. The institutional and conceptual gaps identified must be addressed systematically.

India needs to develop the capability to begin shaping narratives immediately after triggering events, not days or weeks later. This requires pre-positioned messaging strategies, trained spokespeople available 24/7, and decision-making processes that can operate at social media speed. Perhaps, most importantly, India must recognise that cognitive warfare is about strategic communication that serves national interests while maintaining democratic values. India need not mirror Pakistan’s disinformation tactics but must develop more effective ways to communicate truthful narratives that resonate with global audiences.

To quote Lieutenant General Shokin Chauhan (Retd), former Director General Assam Rifles, “The first requirement is institutional integration. Unlike Pakistan’s unified approach through ISPR, India’s

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communication efforts remained fragmented across multiple agencies with poor coordination. A proposed Strategic Communication Authority could provide the central coordination necessary for effective IW, but such an institution would require substantial investment in both human resources and technological capabilities”.<sup>29</sup>

India also needs to leverage its global diaspora which represents a potentially powerful asset, if properly organised and coordinated. Unlike top-down propaganda systems, diaspora networks can provide authentic, grassroots advocacy that carries more credibility with international audiences.

Technology also offers solutions to some of the challenges India faces. AI can help identify and counter disinformation campaigns more quickly than human fact-checkers, while sophisticated analytics can help track the spread of narratives and identify key influence nodes. However, technology alone cannot solve strategic communication problems that are fundamentally about human psychology and political persuasion.

The essentials of strategic communications should be based on the whole-of-government approach. It must be part of national aims and objectives. It cannot be handled singly and must be extremely agile and proactive. A synchronised campaign of images and messages is required. The media cannot be

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allowed to run away with its narrative. It must be designed to communicate not just externally but also to own population and troops. The military must think of internal communication, which is timely, accurate, and factual.

To quote Lieutenant General Ata Hasnain (Retd), former Corps Commander Chinara Corps, “The aim is not to create a propaganda machine, but rather a truth-delivery architecture—capable of shaping narratives, countering disinformation, and building sustained influence over time. It should monitor information threats in real-time, advise on messaging strategies, and deploy multi-platform campaigns pre-emptively, not merely in response.”<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

As Clausewitz 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 notion of reality. The information space consists of domestic, adversarial, and international audiences. The requirements of these audiences need to be harmonised; however, India’s tools have been shaped and refined primarily for domestic audiences, whereas similar focus is needed for external audiences as

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well. 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 and 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. In fact, the Economist in a recent article has been critical regarding the Indian news channels which ‘Achieved the astonishing feat of making social media appear sane’.<sup>31</sup>

Operation Sindoor has revealed critical weaknesses in India’s media response and strategic communication. A lack of timely, authoritative updates from officials left a vacuum filled by speculation, jingoism, and misinformation, undermining the operation’s objectives, and enabling adversarial narratives to take hold.

To address this, a twofold strategy is needed: embed experienced military experts within media teams to provide accurate,

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real-time context and counter misinformation without breaching operational security. Second, media outlets must prioritise verified reporting over speed—ensuring fact-checking, responsible language, and restraint in sensationalism.<sup>32</sup>

Information is power and, today, a much larger part of the world's population has access to that power in their hands. India must adopt a more proactive and assertive global communications strategy to shape international perception.

India's fragmented and delayed narrative responses reflect a critical vulnerability. What's needed is not just better media management, but a full-spectrum strategic communication command embedded within national security—one that anticipates, counters, and outpaces adversarial narratives in real time. The battlefield has evolved, and India must match its military strength with information dominance to stay ahead. This isn't a public relations problem; it's modern warfare.<sup>33</sup>

Today, narrative-building has become a critical component of operational planning and the escalatory matrix, yet it is often side-lined due to the need for confidentiality surrounding mission objectives. Pakistan, however, operated without such limitations, placing narrative

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dominance and victimhood portrayal at the forefront of its strategy. Despite being discredited later, its early control of the information space had a powerful influence, shaping international opinion and swaying segments of the Indian public during the initial phase of the conflict.<sup>34</sup>

There should be an apex body or authority dealing with communications, created by an Act of Parliament on the lines of National Disaster Management Authority, University Grants Commission, or Niti Aayog—a multi-disciplinary body with scope to progressively enhance and detach domains.<sup>35</sup>

As per Lieutenant General Shokin Chauhan (Retd), “The speed and coordination of Pakistan’s information offensive would ultimately overshadow India’s tactical military success in Operation Sindoor, offering a masterclass in how smaller nations can leverage information asymmetry to punch above their weight on the global stage”.<sup>36</sup> The fact is that information has become a new dimension of conflict and has moved from the periphery to the prime slot. Military success without narrative success is increasingly meaningless in a globally connected world, where perceptions shape policies and policies shape outcomes.

Strategic communication is a new standoff weapon that can be manipulated and accessed from anywhere via a smartphone. Though non-kinetic, it remains a powerful tool. The strategy to win the narrative may be through candour and credibility. India had truth on its side, but truth cannot afford to be relegated at any stage.

## Endnotes

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### **About the USI**

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