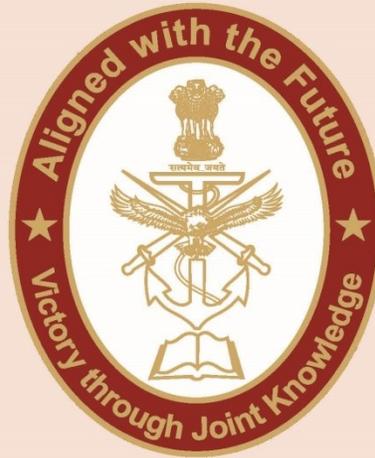


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FOG OF WAR AND PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT IN SOCIAL INFORMATION SPACE: ANALYZING INDIA-PAKISTAN CRISIS POST PULWAMA ATTACK

BY

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1. In any military crisis, the uncertainty over a futuristic scenario continues to influence the decision-making of the parties involved. The complexity of the situation and the intensity of the responses depends upon the type of war fought, i.e., either at the conventional or sub-conventional level. When a perpetual state of conflict is maintained at the sub-conventional level, there remains a high chance of escalatory use of the conventional force. The fog of war can blur the commander's vision and an added war waged via information space makes the situation worse. The ability and the sophistication with which the information content is pushed into the information space depends on the timely and calibrated use of strategic communication tools by the adversary. The objective is to manage the perception of the targeted populace- the electorate, civil society and the public intelligentsia to influence the policy-makers and the political leadership.

2. The current military crisis between India and Pakistan that remains under the de-escalation phase is a perfect case to observe and understand the use of information space for influence operations. The momentum for Indian military response against Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) facilities in Pakistan was met equally with widespread [dis]information campaign through careful use of specially crafted contents and conciliatory statements by Pakistani leadership including Director General Inter Services Public Relations (DG ISPR) and the support from intelligentsia and opportunists on the Indian side.

3. The article analyses the events highlighting the active use of social information space and dis-information campaign employed by the Pakistani military establishment and the failure of India's strategic community to anticipate and remain prepared for counter-narrative operation through coordinated action.

Coordinated Use of Social-Information Space

4. For the creative use of the information space to support the advances made in the physical battlespace and further the gain of the strategic objective, requires resourcefulness and deft handling of both the incoming and limited information available at hand. Because, while the war fought on the ground, it won in mind.

5. The process for coordinated use of information space is a long drawn and well structured, designed to meet the broad objectives set by the adversary state. The tools and channels developed over time harnessed to ripe benefits. It can be expected that, as India gears up for forthcoming general elections, the political parties would jostle to prove their competence and the atmosphere will remain politically charged. In such a scenario any attack on Indian security forces are sure to trigger emotions of the populace regarding the effectiveness of current political leadership. The suicide bombing by JeM militant just did that, creating a dilemma for the government. As a result, the Indian government forced to take a policy action regarding using the airpower for counter-terrorist (CT) mission against JeM facilities deep inside Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. As expected, the Indian military operation drew counter-response from the Pakistan air force.

6. However, in this context Pakistani military establishment was well ahead of their Indian counterparts in exploiting the benefits of social media

to influence public opinion to shape the response from the Indian political landscape. Different sets of information were channeled through official and gray social media accounts operating across the social information space. While the DG-ISPR was busy giving press statements and posting information via its official accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, other obscure social media profiles were posting information on Indian air force aircraft movements, and the contents related to the Indian pilot on the social media. At first, one would think them as isolated profiles, but on digging deep would discover a chain of links reaching a dead end. Then there is selective sourcing of information contents from Indian news channels and articles by intelligentsia to further push the narrative in favor of them. The system was working like a well-oiled machine.

The Chaos in Social- Information Space

7. The information space mirrors the physical battlespace in no small extent. Instead, it is more complex and uncertain than physical battlespace itself. It should be known that in the absence of clarity and response in information space would make the claims by adversary look valid, at least until countered. The counter-response has to be swift, sophisticated and effective. In the ongoing military crisis, the Indian government was caught off guard by an advanced Pakistan perception management machinery that dominated the social-information space, even though the facts on the ground were contrary. The Indian government was using the traditional method of the press release and public statements, while the Pakistani military was using strategic communication tools to push their version of the crisis escalation and prospective suggestions for crisis management. Indian journalists that were struggling to get pieces of information, mostly operating in an information vacuum, got bombarded with fabricated contents shared by Indian social media followers sourced from obscure gray social media accounts. There was utter chaos and confusion in the social information space, with some Indian intelligentsia sharing the bits of questionable information and fabricated contents to support their rant against the ruling political party.

Conclusion

8. It must be remembered that perception is like an empty vessel. You may either consider or ignore it; the reality resides with the content that fills up the vessel. The response of the target to the perception created,

depends upon the quality and speed with which the message disseminated across the information spectrum. In such case, a detailed plan with sufficient human resource should be in place to counter and manage, the cycle of conflict escalation from pre-escalation to post-escalation stage. There are examples regarding innovative uses of social media space by terrorist organizations like ISIS as well as some state actors to influence minds and shape the policy response of their target country. Apart from Russian interference in the U.S. elections and Chinese influence operations in Australia and New Zealand, the current India-Pakistan crisis provides a template for understanding perception management during an active conflict, in the age of internet. The lesson must be learned by both the Indian strategic community, about the nature of warfare ahead and the use of strategic communications tools to dominate the social-information spectrum.

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