

Cognitive Warfare: An Indelible Dilemma Confronting Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Cognitive Warfare explores its inheritance from manipulation and deception targeting adversaries as one of the foremost integral components of a broader military tactics since the time immemorial. However, under the prevalent geopolitical environment, the nature of battlefield has unprecedentedly broadened from military as an exclusive player to almost every all segment of society. Under these international security environments, coercive and manipulative tactics have become obsolete thus creating a void for ‘influencing’, a phenomenon in which minds of masses of the target country are molded with the aim of drawing desired responses or reactions and obeying orders by ‘Influencers’ whose operational methodology is based on the requisite know-how, incentives, resources and, above all, the multifaceted strategy to wage cognitive warfare which is a domain of Hybrid Warfare. The employment of these manipulative tactics causes the desired reality distortion’ thus giving the influencer unprecedented access to the neural data of the target public, offering insights into how they perceive, assume, determine and then finally respond to stimuli. This process allows policy makers to hack and alter the masses’ perceived reality with the objective of influencing their behaviors. In this context, Pakistan since its creation, has emerged as one of the prime targets of cognitive warfare, first during the Cold War (1945-1991), then through the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1988), and now amidst the China-US struggle in South Asia. This study encompasses the impact of cognitive warfare waged by adversaries and competitors against the nation of Pakistan followed by the strategy to counter it.

Introduction

The history of every nation state altering itself geographically as well as demographically amidst the fast-changing geo-political environment is distinctive and onerous in nature; a conundrum in which Pakistan is no exception whose tumultuous socio-political and governance systems since its emergence in the dawning years of First Cold War are considerably devoid of authenticated sources (Talbot, 1998). It is a stark reality that Pakistan is among a few countries whose accurate and factual history is masked by conspiracy theories, baseless accusations, undetermined mysteries and pre-conceived perceptions encompassing a gamut of obscurities related to assassinations,

massacres, riots and coups (Mir & Siddiqui, 2022) (Talbot, 1998). The unescapable demise of the British Empire after the World War II triggered the redrawing of the geographic as well as demographic boundaries at the global level, a phenomenon that included South Asia, (*at that time*) comprising of approximately 584 princely states, also known as native states which were under the suzerainty of the British rule (Kidambi & Boehme, 2024). So, there exists a strong rationale questioning the use of term ‘partition of India’ which, in fact, never was, but the creation of two states; India to face China at some time in the future and Pakistan as a ‘Frontline State’ (Sunawar & Coutto,

2015) juxtaposed with the 'Buffer State' of Afghanistan to defend India against the Communist invasion (Central Intelligence Agency, 1955) (Lyons, 1910). Despite the factual history written by highly professional British officers in the field, the geo-political compulsions at the strategic level prevailed over the real account. This scenario legitimised an uninterrupted era of misinformation and conspiracy theories immersed in massively divergent religious and political sentiments which still persevere in a hostile environment shaped by the populist rhetoric that generates general distrust in socio-political elite, state institutions, and international structures (Mir & Siddiqui, 2022). This particular state of socio-political dilemma in Pakistani society cultivates polarisation, fragmentation and, subsequently disintegration among the general public aimed at exploiting the human cognition which is technologically disrupted, undermined, influenced, and modified. In plain words, this is the cognitive warfare scenario under which the nation especially its youth is confronting the onslaught of psychological warfare by adversaries. In this context, the press and electronic media both dominated by the social media pose an invincible threat to Pakistan.

Significance of Study

According to Professor Ian Talbot, Pakistan since its creation during the embryonic stage of the First Cold War (1945), was embroiled into a perpetual situation of chaos that paved the way for the sense of insecurity and uncertainty among masses especially those who were forced to abandon their ancestral places of hundreds of years in order to contemplate the establishment of a new international order that divided the world into two blocs; Communism and Capitalism. This was the moment when the newly raised

nation-state was more concerned about its survival against India, a mindset that convinced the decision-makers to ally with one of the two great powers. In short, avoiding yet another subject to research why did Pakistan choose the Capitalist bloc, country's decision makers decided to be under the umbrella of the Truman Doctrine (1947) to become the 'Frontline State' against the USSR, thus creating an enemy in its neighbourhood along with India. In addition, Pakistan gave a free hand to the United States especially, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to establish itself deep into every echelon of the state. In the past 78 years, the collective mindset of the nation remains unchanged with regard to major global issues especially India as an archrival.

This study aims at exploring causes which have developed Pakistani nation's consciousness that gullibly serve the western interests followed by measures to eradicate that menace.

Research Question

Analyse adversaries' strategies pertaining to cognitive war against Pakistan, their adverse impact on the nation especially the youth followed by exploring counter measures to achieve success.

Literature Review

Although, Pakistan's nation has remained under the clutches of an extensive psychological warfare since its emergence but, there is a very less research endeavour on cognitive warfare which is the foundation of Hybrid Warfare in the 21st century. A research panel from the Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge conducted research on violence / extremism in Swat region which covers cognitive war strategies by Tehreek-e-Taliban against the

local public and law enforcement agencies including the armed forces (Savage, Peracha, Khan, Ayub, & Andleeb Zahra, 2022). A PhD scholar from the Department of Political Science, University of Balochistan has conducted a study which is relevant to the study in question. The author has included a separate paragraph, Hybrid Warfare against Pakistan which distinctly mentions about the Sino-US power struggle in South Asia in which Pakistan has almost become the battlefield between global powers (Suedfeld & Jhangian, 2009). However, there is no specific study which tackles the research question highlighted in this article within the domain of international relations.

Conceptual / Theoretical Framework

Precisely, this study is nothing but an ‘appraisal’ which assesses one of the most potent components of hybrid warfare, the cognitive aspect. It impacts Pakistan’s nation predominantly its youth from international relations perspectives with the objective of analysing the effectiveness of cognitive war tactics on the society away from military applications. Although there is fast thriving presence of this specialised field of warfare in the western scholarly discourse, our professional intelligentsia’s response towards this existential threat to the nation is alarmingly meagre. In this regard, the mainstream guideline has been gleaned from conceptual frameworks nurtured by North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the British Military Intelligence (MI), the Indian Research Analysis Wing (RAW) and Russia’s Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB) along with a number of accomplished professionals from diverse disciplines of military, non-military and civilian quarters. This research work seeks to assess the applicability of cognitive warfare

strategy within the context of Pakistan, an imminent factor that would assist the decision makers to counter the menace which has plagued minds of Pakistan’s nation, especially the youth.

Research Methodology

The foremost aspect about the nature of this study is ‘pragmatist paradigm’; the research philosophy which prioritises multifaceted practical operational functions followed by workable solutions to real-time predicaments, focusing on flexible approaches to address the concise research question. The study advocates practicality and operability over theoretical functions. Based on the aforementioned aspect, it amalgamates the quantitative and qualitative approaches during the process of research. It is the Mixed-Method research methodology in which, on one side, the quantitative type of research eliminates biases, remains emotionally detached and uninvolved with objects of study rather empirically justify hypotheses while on the other side, the qualitative type of research is value bound which dictates that it is impractical to differentiate comprehensively between causes and their impact on various segments of the society. Within the domain of Mixed Method research methodology, the ‘Convergent Strategy’ has been applied in which qualitative and quantitative data / details are collected, collated and subsequently evaluated concurrently and independently. This particular strategy has been applied with different, but complimentary data / details in order to explore better solutions to the research problem / question. Although both strands of the research; qualitative and quantitative will be implemented separately but the emphasis on them will be equal / balanced, concurrent and integrated aimed at seeking correct

interpretations to make practicable conclusions.

Cognitive Warfare – Nature and Concept

Cognitive Warfare (CW) is the spearhead component of Hybrid Warfare which encompasses multifaceted actions undertaken in synchronization with other instruments of power aimed at affecting a perceived mindset coupled with particular behaviours by manipulating, exploiting, blackmailing or influencing by any adverse means to seize advantages over belligerents (Cole & Le, 2020). CW is a set of designs that “customises” the conscientiousness of an individual or the people related to realities in which “the whole-of-society manipulation” becomes a new norm, with the human cognition transforming into a critical realm of conflictual environment (Team, Protecting the Alliance Against the Threat of Cognitive Warfare, 2025).

CW assaults individuals, groups, communities and / or nations to degrade the potential of rationalism by means of exploiting human and / or societal vulnerabilities augmented by the systemic drawbacks / weaknesses. Predominantly, its targets the non-military components of the nation-state whose perceptions are divergent on matters related to national security. In prevalent scenario, social media and state-sponsored public information operations engage the international community in an attempt to pursue their vested multifaceted strategic objectives through an amalgamation of communication technologies, fabricated information, fictitious news and exaggerated stories with the aim of manipulating public opinion / perceptions. However, the most gruesome objective of CW is to decay the public trust and confidence towards its leadership, state administration and its institutions.

CW is described as the manipulation and exploitation of the general public opinion by conducting psychological operations and orchestrating legal influence to achieve multifaceted objectives to secure success against the adversary. In this regard, “combat psychology” has compelling effect on the combat potential (Pijpers, 2024). China has evolved an “Intelligent Psychological Monitoring System” (smart sensor bracelets) which can record the facial information, emotional variations, all leading to soldiers’ psychological state to determine their combat potential (Baughman & Singer, 2023) (Deka, 2024). Additionally, out of the battlefield, CW’s impact affects law, rule-of-order, and civil constructs. This “Lawfare” is highly effective as mostly civilians are exposed.

The concept of cognitive warfare is not new rather it traces back to the millennia centuries old ideology of Sun Tzu who in his book, *The Art of War*, mentioned that “all warfare is based on deception.” “Winning without fighting” is the doctrine of Sun Tzu which highlights the importance of defeating the enemy mentally without applying the kinetic force (Profaca, 2024). Cognitive warfare focuses on the psychological aspects of human minds while pursuing the tactics of misinformation, misinformation, cyber-attacks, manipulation, coercion, exploitation, blackmailing and government-controlled media. In the meantime, the space-time recession has excelled the information warfare where ‘human minds’ are the battlefield in the current world today (Havlík, 2024). Cognitive warfare hinges on the relationship between psychology, neuroscience and behavioural science. The maxim of “New Generation Warfare” or 6th Generation warfare holds on the vulnerability of the human minds to the information. According to Gerald Zaltman, “almost 95 percent of human decision are irrational and

subconscious” (Zaltman, 2003). Cognitive warfare uses the methodology of psychological operations by the pursuit of information misleading and propaganda. The concept of rapid mass / social media has accelerated the agenda of disseminating false information through which the insights of human minds, and the way they perceive various matters can be controlled. Cognitive warfare primarily focuses on the human sentiments and perceptions by subduing them in order to win the war, which re-asserts Sun Tzu’s idea of “win the war before the war” (Pappalardo, 2022).

Pakistan in A Perpetual State of Cognitive War

Undeniably, Pakistan since its creation, continues to combat multiple internal and external conflicts (Team, 2023). In fact, the cognitive war against Pakistan broke out, even prior to its emergence in 1947 when Muslims of the sub-continent found themselves polarised on the question of their future geo-political status in the post-World War II environment. The Muslim religious hierarchy, the feudal oligarchy and the business community of the sub-continent (excluding the Bengali Muslims in the northeast India) struggled against a separate state for Muslims while foreign educated community, mostly residing in Britain wholeheartedly supported rather participated in quest for the creation of Pakistan. This clash of perceptions among various segments of the Muslim community paved multiple ways for nation’s fragmentation; conducive grounds for Cognitive Warfare. This environment of acrimony still exists in the shape of sectarianism leading to extremism, politico-religious violence and terrorism; all furnishing lucrative grounds to adversaries.

In this context, the youth of the nation was always targeted by multiple subversive

strategies in the past which are characterised as cognitive war within the context of hybrid war, most of the time, by protagonists who constitute a powerful component of our society. The “Pakistan Studies”; unquestionably the most neglected subject is replete with episodes where our young generation is extensively misguided by false aspirations, dazed by antagonism and abhorrence, ethnicism and / or religious polarisation. Presently, our youth is overawed by social media campaigns. They readily fall victim to dangerous or hostile narratives (Correspondent, 2018).

The nation is in a state of multifaceted warfare; especially psychological warfare and information warfare augmented by technology which has totally changed the nature of Future War. Presently, it is being waged and has tilted the balance in favour of those nation-states that have embraced changes befittingly. The ever-increasing threat of hybrid war, to which Pakistan is subjected to, merits futuristic approach; an unattainable goal without altering the traditional mindset. In this regard, nation’s ideological frontiers inherently claim to be the top priority objective within the domain of national security. Moreover, the response to hybrid onslaughts cannot always be kinetic in nature. There is a dire need of superior narrative to tackle threats within the cognitive domain.

Strategy to Combat Cognitive Onslaught

Cognitive warfare symbolises the strategically operational usage of critical information by employing psychological tactics with the objective of manipulating or subverting the mindset of a competitor, opponent, contestant, rival or antagonist aimed at retarding his / her cognitive functions, decision-making processes, and overall determination to engage into

competitive / contesting environment (Ibrahim, Rhode, & Daseking, 2023). Needless to mention that the nature of competition, contest or campaign remains in the process of constant evolution; the arena of literal combat which extends into the cognitive domain, entailing concentrated focus on combating (but not defending) against such devastating aggressive invasion (Arain, 2023).

Being the foremost segment of the Hybrid Warfare, CW incarnates in multiple clandestine configurations, predominantly encompassing disinformation campaigns which is meticulously designed to mislead subjects / audience irrespective of their allegiance to the originator (Bachmann, Putter, & Duczynski, 2023). Its main objective is to 'scatter' bewilderment, disorientation, distraction and confusion aimed at causing widespread embarrassment, agitation and discomfiture (Björgul, 2021). Within its domain, the propagation of concocted information through the means of broadcasting, publishing and physically disseminating is materialized. The deep fabricated media is falsely attributed to political, social and religious leaders through manipulative strategy of social media which employed troll farms (institutionalised groups of internet assigned to engage in aggressive defamation campaigns) which pursue interference in political, social and miscellaneous matters and decision-making intended to engender mental stress and anxiety with the objective of crippling the physical response (u knjizi, 2023). Cognitive assault significantly impairs the human overall reaction due to the undermined confidence and trust on the leadership, institutions and above all, the state. It impedes the decision-making and diminishes the effectiveness of efforts (Anderson & Rainie, 2017).

To combat (rather defend aggressively) the cognitive war threats, dedicatedly ardent defensive tactics are indispensable whose modus operandi may be executed in the unison order as a grand national endeavour:

First Step

(Situational Awareness). Enhance cognitive situational awareness by employing the means of intense inspection, thorough investigation and advanced surveillance of 5-Ms (men, material, means, methodology and money) aimed at monitoring, analysing, and attributing potentialities to expeditiously identify the disinformation, deep-fakes, concocted narratives, and fabricated-influence operations (Endsley, 2013).

Second Step

Strengthening cognitive resilience by bolstering and subsequently fortifying critical operational networks, personnel especially the youth, and national / strategic infrastructure against adversary's cognitive exploitation and social engineering (Giannopoulos, Jungwirth, & Hadjisavvas, 2023)

Third Step

Constantly, developing adhesively tenacious and ethically grounded counter-cognitive operational methodologies aimed at debunking misinformation with factual information directly and swiftly in order to discredit adversary's ambiguously deceptive narratives across all available communication means (APA, 2024).

Fourth Step

Continuously, cultivating the "cognitively conscious" community among the general public, encompassing proactive but

comprehensive programmes to train and skill selected / volunteer manpower to distinguish misinformation, immunize against cognitive influence methods, and authenticate validated information from reliable ends.

Fifth Step

Learning and training in employing cutting-edge technologies (artificial intelligence coupled with machine learning, robotics, and autonomous unmanned systems) as force multipliers. However, it requires prioritised education, training, and practical experience to inculcate technological proficiency among the trained staff.

Sixth Step

Keeping in mind, the unrelenting development in technological innovations and the fast-growing propensity for belligerents to exploit advancements for cognitive war objectives, investment in the counter cognitive operational strategies coupled with technology research is indispensable. Pakistan must develop the requisite means and operational capabilities for combating against cognitive threats across all operational domains. It must be known that reclusing to fight threats in the burgeoning cognitive theatre of war would surely exert profound ramifications for national security.

Doctrinal Thoughts for Decision Makers to Conduct Cognitive War

From the theoretical framework, the following thoughts emerge (Haque, 2021):

One, the art coupled with science of warfare is unanimously anticipated to be low scaled encompassing a massive array of “forms and formats”, especially the psychological warfare, further categorized as the perception

management warfare, the propaganda warfare, the social media and internet warfare, all constituting the Cognitive Warfare within the domain of Hybrid Warfare; the 21st century Warfare.

Two, if the scale of this warfare is low-intensity as being predicted, then its scope would be decidedly immeasurable rather incalculable, engulfing the complete spectrum of personnel, non-combatant civilians and civil-military combatants, identical to the “Total War” in the past.

Three, “ubiquitous permeation of social media augmented by the artificial intelligence” render it impractical for the civil and military hierarchy to remain insulated from the cognitive impact of even the most localized incident. The traditional hierarchy of sub-tactical, tactical, operational and strategic levels of military engagements is becoming obsolete. Leaders at the top levels are drawn into incidents way below their level of attention and scope.

Four, the cited arguments question the rationale of maintaining seemingly cumbersome conventional forces. The era of excessive force through the deployment of heavy weaponry has been squeezed amidst globalisation. Nevertheless, Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) unleashed an onslaught against Palestinians but remained well short of their every military objective. So far, Palestinians’ resolve has prevailed.

Five, the classically organised militaries’ methodology is upside down. In the conventional construct, the pyramid rises from sub-tactical level at the base (largest) with operational level in the middle and strategic/geo-strategic levels on top (smallest). But, in the altered construct, forces, usually the weaker side, allocate largest resources to the strategic/geo-

strategic levels (geostrategic posturing supported by diplomacy and hybrid warfare incorporating extensive media / perception manipulation and narrative formation), with sub-tactical levels resourced through inexpensive minor military operations incorporating non-state actors which rattle the strategic/geo-strategic levels of the opponent. The supremacy of Cognitive War in the 21st century has inverted the pyramid.

Six, Carl von Clausewitz precisely anticipated that the ‘character’ of war changes, but never its ‘nature’. Despite the employment of weaponised artificial intelligence augmented by the latest technologies to curtail combat forces, warfare would remain the human activity extensively vulnerable to the Cognitive fold of Hybrid Warfare.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the target of cognitive warfare ranges from one person to the entire nation. Presently, it is socially, politically and economically extremely convenient to influence any person, community or, even the entire society by means of social media campaign. It merits devising a workable mechanism to combat CW challenge.

The nation needs comprehensive, and sound doctrinal approaches augmented by robust strategies to tackle cognitive domain operations. At national level, all military and non-military security institutions and agencies should be integrated under the

Ministry of Defence. In this context, civil-military relations serve as the harbinger of success in CW with a greater role the Future War in which the demarcation between conflictual and peace situations is blurred. The non-kinetic forms of conflict have become exceedingly prevalent in which information and psychological operations are launched as major components. In this regard, Pakistan can learn a lot from China which has emerged as one of the major leaders in CW.

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