

BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELD: PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE IN THE PAKISTAN-INDIA CONFLICT OF 2025

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Abstract

Psychological warfare constitutes a powerful yet often invisible dimension of contemporary conflict, exerting influence over beliefs, emotions, and behavior at both individual and collective levels. In an era characterized by rapid information dissemination and digitally mediated communication, its strategic relevance has intensified. Understanding psychological warfare is therefore essential not only for military and political actors but also for psychologists, educators, policymakers, and citizens concerned with safeguarding mental autonomy and democratic processes. The May 2025 military escalation between Pakistan and India, which lasted four days and involved missile strikes, drone engagements, airspace closures, and diplomatic ruptures, represented not merely a confrontation of military capabilities but also a contest over narratives, perception management, and psychological influence. Beyond kinetic exchanges, both states employed strategies aimed at shaping domestic sentiment, influencing international interpretation, and constructing long-term collective memory. This article examines the manifestation of psychological warfare during the May 2025 conflict, with particular attention to media narratives, propaganda and disinformation, cyber-enabled information operations, national identity framing, and the broader psychological impact on populations and institutions in both countries. Drawing on factual reporting from global media and expert analyses, the article explores how cognition and information functioned as strategic resources and discusses the implications of such practices for regional stability and psychological well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological warfare represents one of the most effective means of influencing human thought and behavior, often operating with greater subtlety and persistence than conventional military force (Khakpour et al., 2017). In contemporary contexts, psychological warfare commonly referred to as Psychological Operations (PSYOP) that has transformed the human mind into a strategic battleground, exploiting cognitive vulnerabilities, emotional responses, and social identities to achieve political and military objectives (Saeed, 2024). Although its modern form gained prominence during the Second World War, psychological

warfare has evolved considerably afterwards. What once relied on leaflets, radio broadcasts, and overt propaganda has expanded into complex, digitally mediated strategies capable of destabilizing societies without sustained physical violence (Wall, 2010; Orr, 2004). Advances in information and communication technologies have amplified both the reach and psychological impact of such operations.

Different states have conceptualized psychological warfare through distinct doctrinal frameworks (Thomas, 2003). These doctrines typically classify PSYOP activities into three overlapping levels: tactical, operational, and

strategic. Tactical psychological operations focus on influencing the morale and “will to fight” of soldiers engaged directly in combat. Operational PSYOP targets both military personnel and civilian populations within specific regions, while strategic PSYOP operates on a global scale, employing advanced information technologies to shape perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes over extended periods. Strategic psychological warfare is therefore protracted in nature and may persist for years, even outside active hostilities (Wall, 2010).

Scholarly literature defines psychological warfare as the deliberate use of psychological techniques to influence emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior in individuals or groups, typically in pursuit of political, military, or ideological advantage without relying primarily on direct physical force (Pero, 2001). Its effectiveness lies in its capacity to operate below the threshold of overt violence, making its influence less visible but often more enduring.

Mechanisms and Scope of Psychological Warfare

Psychological warfare functions through carefully planned communication strategies and symbolic actions designed to erode morale, generate fear or confusion, amplify internal divisions, and distort perceptions of reality (Aleshchenko, 2022). Rather than targeting the body, it targets cognition aiming to undermine confidence in leadership, weaken social cohesion, and induce feelings of helplessness or distrust. Importantly, psychological warfare strategies are also employed defensively, enabling states to identify, analyze, and neutralize adversarial psychological operations (Herberger, 2025).

The scope of psychological warfare extends well beyond conventional battlefields. It permeates political struggles, counterterrorism efforts, propaganda campaigns, and broader information warfare, often reaching populations far removed from zones of active combat (Ducheine et al., 2016). In contemporary contexts, psychological warfare increasingly overlaps with what is described as information warfare.

A central tool of psychological warfare is propaganda that is the dissemination of biased, selective, or misleading information to shape

public opinion through controlled narratives (Plaza et al., 2023). Propaganda can be categorized into White Propaganda -where the source is openly identified and information is partially accurate; Gray Propaganda - characterized by ambiguous sourcing and mixed truth and Black Propaganda - which relies on deception, fabricated sources, and false content. Traditionally, psychological warfare in military contexts sought to encourage enemy surrender, weaken confidence in commanders, and diminish belief in victory. In modern settings, however, these strategies have expanded beyond active war zones and are now embedded within broader information operations (Plaza et al., 2023). Contemporary psychological warfare also encompasses cyber operations, political manipulation and terrorism. Cyber psychological warfare employs social media manipulation, disinformation campaigns, bot networks, deepfakes, and AI-generated content to amplify narratives and distort reality (Floridi & Taddeo, 2014). Political psychological warfare seeks to polarize societies, interfere with electoral processes, and manipulate identity-based divisions, while terrorism functions as a psychological strategy by design, aiming to instill fear disproportionate to its physical impact and attract sustained media attention (Ganor, 2005). Psychological warfare targets multiple audiences, including enemy soldiers, civilians, political leaders, media institutions, and entire societies. Civilians are frequently the primary targets, rendering psychological warfare ethically contentious. Ethical concerns include manipulation without consent, exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities, erosion of trust in institutions, and the potential for long-term societal trauma. Unlike conventional warfare, psychological warfare remains largely unregulated, particularly within digital environments (Rashi & Schleifer, 2023). Regardless of the large practice scale of psychological warfare, most of the practices are unregulated increasing the chances of manipulation of vulnerabilities of public at large.

Psychological Defense and Resilience

In an era where systemic weaknesses and human vulnerabilities are deliberately exploited as powerful tools, it becomes imperative to

recognize and develop strategies that can safeguard individuals and communities. Governments, media and other social institutes need to develop strategies that are contextually relevant relevant to counter the effects of psychological warfare. Such defenses not only mitigate manipulation and fear-based influence but also empower societies to respond thoughtfully, preserve social cohesion, and protect collective well-being in the face of sustained psychological threats.

Scholars have identified several strategies for countering psychological warfare, including the promotion of media literacy, critical thinking skills, transparent communication by authorities, and the strengthening of institutional trust (Zlobina, 2024). Additional protective factors include community cohesion, psychological resilience, and robust fact-checking mechanisms (Frankova et al., 2025; Lebid et al., 2022; Stanescu, 2022). Empirical research consistently suggests that informed populations with strong social bonds constitute the most effective defense against psychological manipulation (Radu, 2025; Rossbach, 2017).

Psychological Warfare and Persuasion

Psychological warfare is often conflated with persuasion; however, the two differ fundamentally in intent, ethical orientation, and psychological impact. Psychological warfare involves deliberate manipulation, intimidation, and destabilization, typically within adversarial contexts such as military or geopolitical conflict (Saeed, 2024). Its primary objective is to weaken psychological resilience rather than facilitate voluntary attitude change. It frequently employs deception, fear, misinformation, and covert influence, undermining autonomy by shaping cognition without informed awareness or consent. The psychological consequences may include anxiety, mistrust, social fragmentation, and enduring collective trauma.

Persuasion, by contrast, is a communicative process that seeks to influence attitudes or behavior through transparent reasoning, emotional appeal, or credible evidence while preserving individual agency. Commonly used in education, therapy, leadership, and public health, persuasion allows recipients to accept or reject messages based on personal judgment. Another key distinction lies in ethical

orientation. While persuasion can be misused, it remains ethically defensible when truthful, non-coercive, and aligned with the audience's well-being. Psychological warfare, in contrast, instrumentalizes psychological vulnerabilities for strategic gain, often with little regard for long-term harm.

The context in which each operates also differs significantly. Psychological warfare is typically embedded within adversarial or hostile settings, such as military conflicts or geopolitical disputes, where the goal is dominance rather than dialogue. Persuasion, on the other hand, is embedded in social, educational, therapeutic, or organizational contexts, where influence is sought within a framework of social norms, trust, and mutual engagement.

Psychological Warfare in the May 2025 Pakistan-India Conflict

The May 2025 Pakistan-India confrontation represented one of the most serious escalations between the two nuclear-armed states in decades. Following the Pahalgam attack on April 22, 2025, which resulted in the deaths of 26 Indian civilians, India attributed responsibility to Pakistan, suspended the Indus Waters Treaty, and sharply downgraded diplomatic relations. Pakistan strongly denied all accusations and asked for clear evidences to prove its involvement. On 7 May 2025, India initiated Operation *Sindoor*, involving missile and drone strikes on targets in Pakistan. Pakistan responded with retaliatory measures, including air operations, heightened border shelling, launching effective air strike on targets inside India along with other retaliatory measures until a ceasefire on 10 May 2025.

While international attention largely focused on kinetic aspects of the conflict (military exchanges), a parallel and critical psychological battlefield emerged where narrative control, media influence, and cognitive manipulation became central instruments of national strategy. Both states recognized that narrative dominance and cognitive influence were as strategically significant as kinetic success. The conflict illustrated the evolution of psychological warfare from traditional propaganda to digitally mediated influence campaigns, media framing, and state-directed messaging. The objective was not merely to mislead but to shape perception,

reinforce national identity, mobilize domestic support, and influence international interpretation (Taddeo, 2012).

Narrative Framing and Media Dynamics

In the aftermath of the Pahalgam incident, competing narratives rapidly emerged. Indian authorities framed the attack within a broader discourse of cross-border terrorism, portraying Pakistan as a destabilizing actor and justifying punitive measures. Pakistan rejected these allegations, emphasizing the need for independent investigation and presenting itself as a victim of misattribution rather than a perpetrator (Pakistan Today, 2025).

During the four day escalation, media in both countries played a central role in reinforcing state narratives. In Pakistan, war-focused reporting displaced other political discourse, fostering unity and minimizing dissent. Coverage primarily emphasized narratives of self-defense, civilian casualties, military resilience, and national honor (Bajwa, 2025). Indian media similarly amplified narratives of counterterrorism, portraying military actions as necessary and justified. These parallel media environments reinforced domestic cohesion while delegitimizing opposing narratives.

Social media platforms intensified these dynamics. Hashtags, viral videos, and emotionally charged content spread rapidly, often without verification. Disinformation campaigns exaggerated enemy losses, circulated false claims, and exploited emotional responses as classic psychological warfare techniques adapted to digital ecosystems.

Cognitive and Emotional Impact

Psychological warfare exploits well documented cognitive biases and emotional processes that shape decision making under uncertainty (Hernández San Román et al., 2023). Exposure to threat-laden narratives heightens fear, in-group solidarity, and out group hostility, particularly during crises (Murillo et al., 2022). Therefore, psychological warfare focuses on altered narratives as psychological dimension of conflict is not limited to elite messaging, it touches entire societies. This specific aspect of psychological warfare was also clearly evident during May escalation. In Pakistan, victory

oriented framing bolstered morale and reinforced collective identity, while in India, counterterrorism narratives strengthened perceptions of legitimacy and moral authority. Such emotional patterns serve strategic psychological objectives by shaping collective memory and future attitudes toward conflict.

Cyber and Diplomatic Dimensions

Cyber operations in modern conflict serve multiple psychological purposes including project power without physical violence, create doubt about system security and distract and exhaust defensive resources. These digital actions contribute to psychological warfare by undermining confidence in infrastructure and governance, even when the physical effects are limited. Cyber operations during Pakistan India conflict further contributed to psychological warfare by signaling technological capability and vulnerability. Reports of malware campaigns and cyber disruptions during Operation *Sindoor* highlighted how digital actions can undermine confidence in infrastructure and governance even without extensive physical damage (Paliwal et al., 2025). Simultaneously, diplomatic messaging targeted international audiences, with both states seeking to frame their actions in ways that would elicit sympathy, neutrality, or strategic restraint.

Internationally brokered ceasefire on 10 May 2025 brought kinetic hostilities to an end. However, psychological campaigns persisted as both states attempted to shape post-conflict narratives. Governments held press briefings framing outcomes favorably, social media continued contesting interpretations, and media sustained coverage that reinforced internal cohesion (Hussain, 2025).

Implications for Regional Stability and Future Psychological Dynamics

The May 2025 conflict, though short, underscored that psychological warfare is now central in Pakistan-India interactions. Its implications are far reaching, depicting that entrenchment of adversarial narratives may complicate future diplomacy, suggested that digital information ecosystems remain vulnerable to manipulation, public sentiment and national identity may be shaped by competing memory, politics and domestic

cohesion efforts could marginalize dissent and reduce democratic discourse

These patterns suggest psychological warfare will remain a core battlefield even in ceasefire periods.

Conclusion

The May 2025 Pakistan–India conflict demonstrates that modern warfare extends far beyond physical confrontation into cognitive and psychological domains. Media narratives, digital platforms, cyber operations, and diplomatic messaging collectively shaped perceptions, emotions, and collective memory. Psychological warfare functioned as a core strategic instrument, influencing domestic cohesion, international opinion, and post-conflict narratives.

Understanding these dynamics underscores the importance of media literacy, transparent communication, and psychological resilience in mitigating the harmful effects of information manipulation. As regional tensions persist, the psychological dimensions of conflict will remain central to shaping public opinion, policy decisions, and prospects for sustainable peace.

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