

Challenges for Pakistan in Countering Hybrid Warfare: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to find out that Hybrid Warfare is the artificially-created conflict to disturb the identity of a country. These identity pillars could be threatened by external factors using the internal factors. Pakistan has the hard power challenges and soft power challenges in the simplest form. Hard power means the military and kinetic elements whereas soft power means non-kinetic, tangible and intangible elements. If it is talked about the spectrum, then it is about the A to Z spectrum. There are tactics of maligning, there is even sectarian and ethnic exploitation taking place. Terrorism itself will only go to kinetic means. Then it is nuclear, which is a full spectrum. In the hard power domain, Pakistan did well. Our armed forces broke the 50-year-old myth that India has the upper hand by kicking out Indian air forces. However, Pakistan is weak in the soft power domain.

Keywords: Conventional, non-conventional, cyber-attacks, hard-power, soft-power, warfare generations.

Introduction

“Every era has its own sort of war,” Clausewitz observed, “and it adapts itself to the current circumstances” (Clausewitz, 1989). When considering the definition or idea of hybrid warfare, it can be concluded that conflict is nothing new for Pakistan, since it began in 1947 when a neighboring state attempted to undermine and destabilize the country (Qamar, 2021). Mostly in the version of terrorist acts by Baloch separatists, an act of terrorism on the embassy of China in Pakistan for intimidating the CPEC project was a sort of hybrid warfare on CPEC. Similarly, an attack on the Srilankan cricket team is a deliberate effort from India to portray Pakistan as an extremist country. Hence Pakistan has paid a high price for Indian conspiracies as well as their intentions towards Pakistan (Musawar, 2019). The majority of these conflicts are caused by historic conflicts and ideological disagreements, whereas social and economic clashes are caused by disparity. Pakistan is a state with multiple cultures, a diverse religious population and a developing economy. It is experiencing identity problems as a result of inequity in places like Baluchistan and Gilgit, and its adversaries are taking advantage of this. “The secession of the East part of Pakistan, which again was fueled by India, was partly a result of social and economic struggle” (Qamar, 2021).

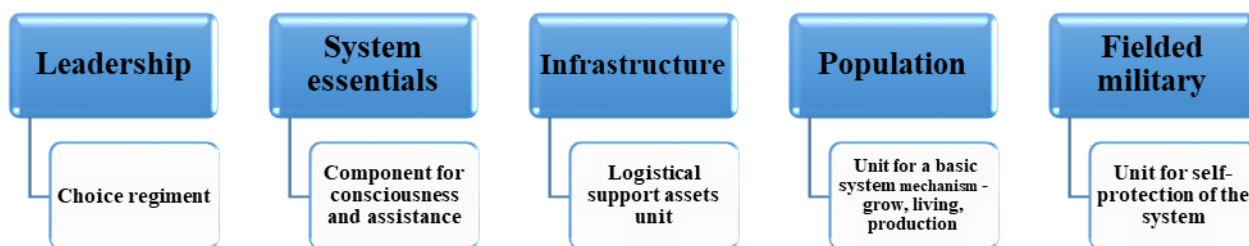
Following the 9/11 event, the long-lasting hybrid warfare conducted from its both vulnerable borders (east and west). United States intervention in Afghanistan resulted in an upsurge in terrorist acts in Pakistan that carried out attacks on innocent citizens of Pakistan. The term hybrid warfare, as well techniques and methods utilized in it, are similar to those used in earlier wars. The distinction between the earlier ones and this one is that all those wars which used to be waged on battlegrounds by conventional forces (military troops) have now evolved into “a broader range of conflict involving not only two but more than two conventional forces” (Basma, 2020). Technology advancements in the twenty-first century have “encouraged the merging of several kinds of conflict, enabling hybrid tactics and warfare a viable alternative for achieving specific agenda” (Nazir, 2020).

Hybrid warfare's vagueness and ambiguity make it an appealing alternative for governments to wield indirect influence since they don't have to worry about identification and retaliation. Due to the general fact that this issue is of large conflicts, it has grown in popularity. Earlier warfare like that of conventional warfare itself has now become significantly risky with the emergence of nuclear weapons throughout the twentieth century, even in India and Pakistan, and in several military battles (Bilal, 2020). The repercussions of big battles have caused a shift in tackling the perceived conflicts. Countries that seek to wield power have discovered new ways to get it. The United Nations has now debating whether the catastrophic effects of the world-wide-web may be considered acts of war. It's truly related to indirect violence and such warfare (Sattar, 2020). Because it immediately confronts the viewers and produces uncertainty and rage, media is considered as the highly effective instrument for this new warfare. The information given by it is shot through into the public's eye like a gunshot, just like Harold Lasswell's 'Magic Bullet Theory.' “Given how often Pakistan has committed to hybrid warfare, it is imperative that they take it very seriously” (Sattar, 2020). Hybrid warfare poses a serious danger to Pakistan's domestic security since it extends beyond its boundaries and therefore cannot be countered with military assets. To counter the problem of hybrid warfare, it is necessary to first comprehend the notion of the plan including strategy and then build a grand strategy simultaneously (Khan, 2020).

The theoretical concept of Hybrid Warfare: Warden's Five Rings Theory

Hybrid warfare is a theory of military strategy, which employs political warfare and blends conventional warfare, irregular warfare and cyber warfare with other influencing methods, “such as fake news, diplomacy, lawfare and foreign electoral intervention. Warden outlined a hypothesis that the opponent side (enemy) could be perceived as one system” (Warden, 2020). Furthermore, as seems to be the instance with several other structures, it consists of the following basic units:

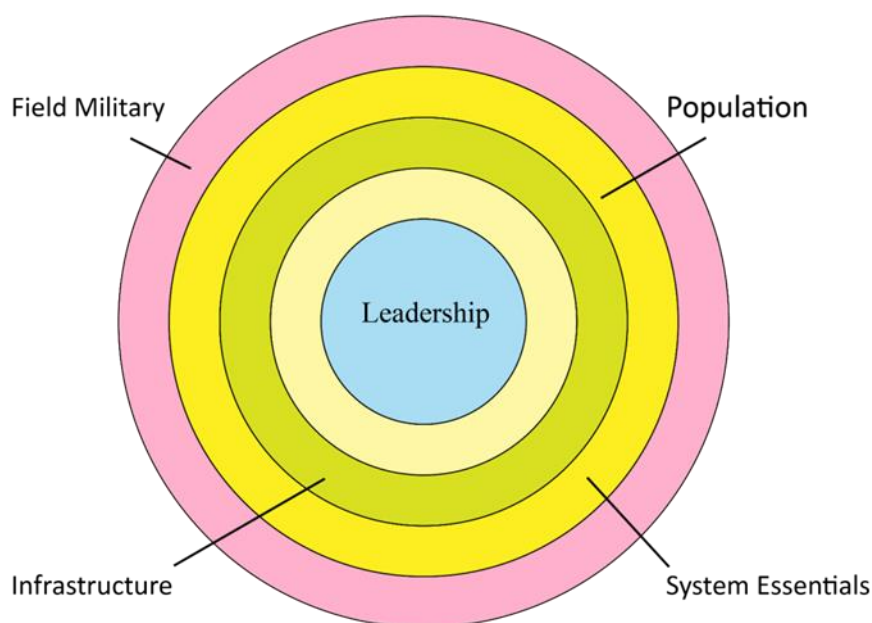
1. Leadership (choice regiment)
2. System essentials (component for consciousness and assistance)
3. Infrastructure (logistical support assets unit)
4. Population (unit for a basic system mechanism - grow, living, production)
5. Fielded military (unit for self-protection of the system).



Source: Walden's five key concentric rings with the decision-making unit

These 5 building components might be organized into rings, with the decisional unit at the core. Because it serves as a system protector, its outer ring is "fielded military". The idea for arranging the priority of other rings is the same. The second ring i.e. "system essentials" ring sits next to the first one i.e. 'leadership' ring. The "population" ring is next to the "fielded military" ring, with the "infrastructure" ring somewhere between all of them (Nikolic, 2018).

Warden's Five Rings Theory



The strength of any nation lies in these five rings. Therefore “if one nation wants hybrid warfare against its enemy then it should first hit the population ring. Because it is one of the easiest to target among the other rings” (Waller, 2020). It can be done through instigating wrong information like fake news, diplomacy, lawfare and foreign electoral intervention and making the population against the leadership and military. Here arise two scenarios. First, if the leadership and military rings start to suppress the population with the force then there is a likelihood of civil

war and ultimately the country becomes destabilized like Bashar ul Asad did in Syria. Second, if the leadership surrenders or failed to stop the population then occur the regime change and hence the objective will be achieved by installing the puppet government (Waller, 2020).

Pakistan's National Security: Hybrid Warfare

Pakistan's security is threatened by both domestic and global foes. To intimidate and structure its policy initiatives to obvious benefit, its potential enemies are trying to target and to operate underneath the target level of traditional war, “employing a mix of counterinsurgency tools, including sectarian militias such as radicalized militant groups and ethno-cultural separatist groups, computer hackers mechanisms, and intelligence analysis” (Hutchinson, 2018). They are attempting to manipulate ethno-religious divisions in Pakistan through deceptive propaganda (Mir, 2018). They are funding extremist radicals in the nation to carry out terrorist acts. From the inception of the 21st century, transnational militant cells and their local affiliates have carried out deadly terror attacks across Pakistan. India's military assault was averted by Pakistan's military preparation and nuclear weapons capacity. As a result, India has used a variety of powerful and influential tactics and techniques against Pakistan, with a focus on hybrid warfare and such tactics. To destabilize the state, India has used a wide spectrum of covert hybrid warfare technologies. By using internal racial, religious, ideological, and socioeconomic political divisions, it has been plotting schemes to trigger asymmetrical conflict (Korybko, 2017).

Institutional and Governance Challenges

The very structure of the state creates significant vulnerabilities that are exploited in hybrid campaigns.

Civil-Military Dichotomy

The civil-military dichotomy in Pakistan presents a profound vulnerability in the face of hybrid warfare, as adversaries strategically exploit this institutional fissure to cripple national coherence and response. By weaponizing information, hostile actors can simultaneously amplify two contrasting narratives: one portraying an overbearing ‘deep state’ that undermines democratic governance, and another depicting a corrupt and inefficient civilian leadership that is a threat to national security. This deliberate amplification of the existing trust deficit between institutions creates a paralyzing friction, slowing critical decision-making, fostering policy incoherence, and confusing the public. Ultimately, this internal division, exacerbated by hybrid campaigns, erodes the unified national front essential to effectively countering multi-domain threats, turning Pakistan's primary power dynamic into its greatest strategic liability. (Yousaf, K. 2023)

Governance Deficits

Pakistan's significant governance deficits—characterized by institutional corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and a failure to deliver essential public services—create a fertile ground for hybrid warfare by fundamentally eroding public trust in the state. When citizens

experience a lack of justice, economic opportunity, or basic services, they become disillusioned and more susceptible to malicious narratives that portray the state as illegitimate or predatory. Adversaries exploit this vulnerability by using information operations to amplify real-world grievances, turning public frustration into widespread social unrest and political instability. This strategy allows hybrid attackers to weaken Pakistan from within, as a population that does not trust its own government is far less likely to unite in resilience against external threats, thereby undermining national security without the need for conventional military engagement. (Haider, S. S. 2023)

Exploitation of Internal Security Fault Lines

The exploitation of internal security fault lines constitutes a central pillar of the hybrid warfare campaign against Pakistan, where adversaries strategically leverage pre-existing ethnic, sectarian, and political fissures to foment instability at a minimal cost. Hostile agencies are reactivating dormant proxy networks or inflame legitimate regional grievances, such as those in Balochistan or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, to orchestrate a cycle of low-intensity violence and separatist agitation. Legitimate political grievances in these provinces are easily amplified and exploited by hostile intelligence agencies to fuel secessionist sentiments and low-intensity insurgencies, tying down significant military assets. This compels the state to divert substantial military and economic resources towards internal security, thereby stretching its capacity and diverting attention from broader geopolitical maneuvering. By transforming domestic vulnerabilities into persistent security dilemmas, this tactic effectively bleeds the nation from within, creating a deniable yet devastating front in the larger hybrid war (Yousaf, K. 2023).

Indian Hybrid warfare against Pakistan

India used hybrid warfare to strike Pakistan on numerous fronts, isolating it from the rest of the world. It has openly financed militants for many years. On the international stage, India's governmentally supported terrorism had been a struggle to show the world that Pakistan is a failed and terrorist country. India made several efforts to undermine Pakistan's national defense, but Pakistan responded magnificently and vanquished India mainly to its robust hybrid attacks. Abundantly clear insurrection by state-supported terrorist activities by the "abduction of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution abrogated the special status of Indian-Occupied Kashmir are some of the measures employed by India to disrupt Pakistan's security" (Raania,2020). India's defence secretary, Ajit Doval, admitted to secret operations and diplomatic isolation against Pakistan. India's asymmetric warfare strategies against Pakistan are revealed via the usage of Indian email and the FATF's lobbying activities. In May 2015, Manohar Parrikar, the Indian BJP's defence minister, stated unequivocally, "To combat terrorism, India would reward terrorists" (Indian Defense News, 2021). President Alvi of Pakistan stated firmly that For asymmetric warfare, India is using Afghan land against Pakistan. Similarly, a slew of other observable events, such as Indian support for the TTP and PTM, "as well as subversive actions supported by the Indian government in Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, provide substantial proof of how India has acted to weaken Pakistan" (Shafiq.2020).

Is Pakistan Vulnerable in terms of Hybrid Warfare?

In the hard power domain, Pakistan did well as our armed forces in February 2019 broke the fifty years old myth that India has the upper hand by kicking out Indian air forces. Similarly, when their navy moved in our forces detected their submarines, which can call the submarines a “sitting duck” once it is identified (Ikram, 2018). Their army also deployed missiles but when they realized that Pakistan would retaliate at a massive level, they removed the Brahmas missiles. Hence their conventional myth came to an end. This has a significance which does not realize that when India’s myth broke, the Indian Prime Minister began nuclear rhetoric. Normally “the conventional nuclear-armed states who are superior or are in an advantageous position, do not opt for nuclear rhetoric instead stays on conventional rhetoric” (Ambreen, 2019).

In 2002, Pakistan used nuclear rhetoric whereas this time, it was observed that Pakistan didn’t say anything about nuclear rhetoric (David, 2012). Only once, it is observed during the post-Palwama India Pakistan standoff, that Pakistan’s Prime minister chaired the NCA meeting and didn’t even publish a press release afterwards. India on the other used words like, “We haven’t kept the nuclear arms for Diwali” and they can’t even use nuclear arms. In the hard power domain, Pakistan is quite capable and can defend itself” (Haider, 2020).

Range of Hybrid threats to Pakistan

In the soft power domain, Pakistan is vulnerable such as in the media. Until now, we haven’t been able to justify what is in our favor and what is not. For this, we can’t blame our media as it is working in this domain but this requires work in the education sector. We have a problem in this country that our society or our people are not harmonized with our political leadership which is exploited by the adversary (Sabtain, 2019). Secondly, there is a diplomatic shift in which we are vulnerable because if Pakistan goes into the soft power domain, on one side look at the FATF, “while on the other side, our government themselves claim that they launder money” (Haider, 2020). Our allegations are on political elites, so how will they believe that there is no money laundering? Therefore, our government has to be sensitized about this. Our adversary is exploiting the absence of political maturity. Our political parties do not have a think tank that can guide them. Therefore, the biggest threat to Pakistan is the fragility of the political system. (Hafsa, 2020).

Indian Hands behind Grey listing Pakistan in FATF

The persistent assertion that "Indian hands were behind the grey listing of Pakistan in the FATF" is a compelling political narrative that has been central to Pakistani official discourse. This viewpoint frames Pakistan's placement on the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) increased monitoring list not as a consequence of its own financial governance, but as a strategic, politically motivated campaign orchestrated by India. Proponents argue that India, leveraging its growing international influence and strategic partnerships with key Western nations, actively lobbied within the FATF to diplomatically isolate and economically pressure its regional rival. (The Express Tribune. 2022, October 10).

From this perspective, the technical process of the FATF was instrumentalized as a tool of geopolitical coercion, aiming to tarnish Pakistan's global reputation and cripple its economy by

persistently highlighting its alleged role as a safe haven for militant groups opposed to Indian interests in the region. Hence Indian governments were responsible for maintaining Pakistan on the grey list, according to the FATF, which kept Pakistan in its grey list lasted for four years due to governmental pressure and intimidation from India. Despite substantial proof of complicity in terror funding, bank fraud, and even terrible spreading of weapons and nuclear crimes in Pakistan, India is excused and no judicial actions are being taken against India by the financial action task force (Iftikhar, 2020).

Countering the Risks of Hybrid Warfare

The shifting nature of conflict necessitates a rethinking of national sovereignty policies. As a result, in order to deal with such a complicated and important challenge of hybrid warfare and hostility arising as a result of an opponent's strategy, the national security of Pakistan needs more attention and policymakers of Pakistan must come up with new ideas. They require new regulations and techniques for defending the state and keeping people safe. "The new plan must be built on a comprehensive approach, which means a convergence of economic, political, ideological, information, and militaristic reactions" (Haider, 2020). They must securitize the danger as complicated, unclear, unstable, and, above everything, multimodal, and make the Pakistani people aware that the Army alone would not be able to effectively confront the hybrid warfare threat. The military forces of Pakistan have carried out coordinated nationwide operations "such as mission Zarb-e-Azb (June 2014) to eradicate militant organizations' safe havens in Northern parts of Waziristan as well as mission Radd-ul-Fasaad" (February 2017) for eliminating hidden terrorist terror cells all across Pakistan. Furthermore, the NAP, which has been enacted in 2015, is critical in combating the opponents' guerrilla warfare tactics assault. Pakistan has been battling the threat of Guerilla Warfare tactics. Nonetheless, there is an opportunity for improvement in the countermeasures. "We now have a larger obligation to guarantee that our citizens, particularly the younger generation, remain informed and firm against propagandist relentless attacks made through the covert attack, General Bajwa correctly stated" (Anis, 2018).

Pakistan's guerrilla warfare strategists would need to devise a master plan (grand strategy) for responding to multilayered dangers in a coordinated way. The entire population, including the governments and all of their departments, the mass media, press and society organizations, need to respond to hybrid warfare attacks in a coordinated manner. Both energetic and non-energetic defense walls should be used to defend against it. As a result, we must devise a comprehensive counter-plan to a highly advanced, sophisticated, and covert operation conducted against Pakistan (Shazia, 2020).

Recommendations

Despite the fact that this warfare is progressively getting acceptance in Pakistani defense debates, it still needs appropriate regulation. As a result, the government, through Hybrid Warfare Stratagem Center (HWSC) can help Pakistani lawmakers understand better the asymmetric warfare danger occurrence, experience and develop to keep track of activities, methodically identify exploitable flaws, and consider evolution in the future.

The HWSC should also create an integrated sharing of information system that spans all federal agencies, intelligence officials, and the military. To fulfil the requirements of modern times, the domestic police coordination system has to be restructured. Information exchange and coordination between several departments are currently lacking. They need to be taught and well-equipped to defend.

Furthermore, the government must encourage a culture of spreading knowledge and devising collective remedies amongst and among the different provincial and federal authorities. The policymakers must revise current legislation and pass new legislation to improve the government's inquiry and legal process equipment so that it can uphold various legislations, ensure justice, and find a safe place without provoking extrinsic and intrinsic causalities.

Finally, media is considered as a dangerous and effective weapon in cyber warfare and asymmetric to attack the opponent's willpower attack its shortcomings. It is utilized to influence the opinion of the opposing populace about their government. As a result, the government works to guarantee that PEMRA effectively implements regulatory regulations on media outlets in order to avoid distortion, deception, and deliberate misinformation.

Conclusion

In order to harm Pakistan's public safety, India as well as its affiliates have developed their warfare capabilities. They have utilized terrorists' attacks to spread misinformation, deception, and disinformation through social networking sites, utilizing cyberspace technologies and manipulating sociological political divisions. India has keeping the Pakistani armed forces engaged while maintaining military tension on the border and are violating international border rules by repeatedly firing across the Line of Control. As a consequence, Pakistan's power elite must reassess its homeland security strategy to actively promote the country's socio-religious narrative and shield community and society at large. Hence the scenario requires the implementation of a disciplinary strategy that encompasses the entire country to confront guerrilla warfare tactics assault. "War is a moral conflict", Sun Tzu remarked in The Art of War, and recognized that its incidents must be recognized and publicized at global conferences. Long before they really battled, they were won in temples.

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