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“Winning the War of Perceptions: A Comparative Analysis of India & Pakistan's Strategic Communications”

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Winning the War of Perceptions: A Comparative Analysis of India & Pakistan's Strategic Communications

Abstract

This issue brief explores the communications apparatus of war between India and Pakistan. A qualitative and quantitative analysis is carried out as a hybrid to understand the evolutionary progress in strategic communications in India. The evaluation draws parallels between the Balakot strikes of India against the terror attacks at Pulwama (2019) and the narrative statements post the conduct of Operation Sindoor (2025). The theoretical basis of the brief is the Operation Tupac of Pakistan which was initiated in 1980s in Kashmir and was designed by General Zia-ul Haq. The brief evaluates India's strategic communications strategy keeping in mind Pakistan's professed use of disinformation as an instrument of state policy. The comparison between the two events culminates with brainstorming policy recommendations like the institutionalization of rapid response teams, improved inter agency coordination, investing in real-time fact-checking to sustain credible narratives, etc. to further strengthen India's communication apparatus for future conflict scenarios.

Keywords: *Information Warfare; Narratives; Social Media, Operation Sindoor, Balakot*

Introduction

India and Pakistan's security competition has long played out not only on land and in the air, but also in the realm of ideas. From Pakistan's covert Operation Tupac in the 1980s which pioneered proxy narratives and clandestine media campaigns to the sophisticated information warfare of 2025, each side has refined its messaging toolkit (Sharma,2022). This paper aims to

explore how did India's strategic communications improved from Balakot 2019 to Operation Sindoor 2025, and what lessons emerge for policy? To answer this, it compares narrative strategies, digital-engagement metrics, and institutional responses, drawing on think-tank analyses from Stimson Center and Belfer Center, academic studies from Oxford Academic and Taylor & Francis, and primary data analysis.

The February 2019 Balakot airstrikes followed the Pulwama attack that killed 40 CRPF personnel, while Operation Sindoor in May 2025 responded to the Pahalgam attack targeting 26 civilians. These incidents provide ideal comparative cases for examining the evolution of strategic communications in crisis scenarios that have engulfed South Asia.

Historical Background – Genesis of Pakistan’s Use of Disinformation as an Instrument of State Policy: Legacy of Operation Tupac

In 1988, Pakistan's dictator General Zia-ul-Haq launched what came to be known as Operation Tupac, which was the first recorded comprehensive strategy of waging information warfare against an adversary. The operation drew its name from Túpac Amaru II, the 18th-century Peruvian revolutionary. The operation’s primary objective was to "bleed India through a thousand cuts" through a combination of proxy militant groups, carefully orchestrated media campaigns, and extensive international lobbying efforts (The Economic Times, 2024).

Operation Tupac was implemented in three stages. The first phase was initiating low-level insurgency through cross border infiltration. The second phase involved increasing pressure

along the line of control (LOC). The third and final phase was to transform localized insurgency into broader religious conflict by mobilizing sectarian sentiments. Operation Tupac didn't just represent tactical innovation but it also solidified Pakistan's strategic culture of combined kinetic action with sustained propaganda campaigns, a strategy that Pakistan would champion in the years to come and effectively use in future conflicts with India. (The Disinfo Lab, 2025).

According to DisinfoLab's analytical investigation, Operation Tupac can be termed as "history's most prolonged information campaign," spanning five decades that employed an intricate network of intelligence operatives, sleeper cells, and anti-India training facilities throughout South Asia's neighboring states (The Disinfo Lab, 2025). This historical foundation informed Pakistan's narrative strategies during both Balakot 2019 and Operation Sindoor 2025, casting Indian responses as aggression while portraying Pakistan as a victim of false flag operations.

Section I: Balakot 2019 – Reactive Narratives

Following the February 14, 2019 Pulwama attack by Jaish-e-Mohammad, India conducted airstrikes at Balakot on February 26. Pakistan's response demonstrated sophisticated but traditional information warfare techniques. The Foreign Secretary's statement emphasized that the strikes targeted "the biggest training camp of JeM" while noting Pakistan's failure to dismantle terrorist infrastructure despite repeated requests (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India [MEA], 2019).

Pakistan's counter-narrative emerged through multiple channels: official denials of damage, claims of successful PAF interception, and allegations of civilian casualties. The Stimson Center's post-crisis analysis noted that "two claims of victory" characterized the aftermath, with both sides claiming success while international observers struggled to verify competing accounts (Hooda, 2022).

India's response was notably *delayed and fragmented*. Official statements took 48-72 hours to address Pakistani counter-narratives, and cross-platform coordination was minimal. The Centre for Air Power Studies analysis highlighted how India's "non-military preemptive action" framing was quickly overwhelmed by Pakistani information operations (Sethi, 2019).

Carnegie Endowment's analysis characterized the post-Balakot environment as "a smoldering volcano," noting that Pakistan's terrorist proxy strategy remained intact despite the airstrikes. The information battle was fought primarily through traditional media channels with limited real-time digital coordination (Tellis, 2019).

Section II: Operation Sindoor 2025 – Proactive Precision

The May 2025 Operation Sindoor represented a fundamental shift in India's strategic communications approach. Following the April 22 Pahalgam attack, India's response demonstrated *unprecedented speed and coordination* across multiple domains. Belfer Center's comprehensive analysis documents how Operation Sindoor involved "airstrikes, drones, cyber-attacks, and naval maneuvers" in what became the "first-ever jet-era dogfight between two

nuclear-armed states". The operation employed Rafale jets with SCALP missiles and HAMMER bombs, targeting terrorist infrastructure across Punjab and Azad Kashmir (Akhtar, 2025).

VIF India's assessment highlights the transformation in India's communication strategy, noting that the operation was "planned and executed with admirable precision and confidence" within just two weeks, compared to the prolonged deliberations following earlier attacks. The communication framework featured centralized 24/7 media cells, real-time fact-checking, and coordinated multi-platform messaging (Gurumurthy, 2025).

RUSI's detailed analysis emphasizes how India initially "*ceded the narrative space*" due to official silence, allowing Pakistani claims about downing Indian aircraft to dominate international coverage (Ladwig, 2025). However, subsequent phases demonstrated improved message coordination and evidence presentation, including Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri's public display of terrorist photographs and Pakistani military funeral attendance.



Figure 1: Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri during a press briefing when Op. Sindoor was underway.

Atlantic Council experts noted the stark difference in international engagement, with India briefing G20 diplomats and maintaining "reliable history" of measured escalation. The

operation represented what experts termed "calibrated deterrence" with clear political objectives and defined escalation thresholds (Atlantic Council, 2025).

Section III: Comparative Analysis – Indian Response Evaluation

The transformation in India's strategic communications between 2019 and 2025 reveals several critical improvements documented across multiple analytical frameworks.

Response Speed and Coordination: Response time accelerated dramatically from 48-72 hours to 6-12 hours between the two crises. The 2025 response featured centralized command structures and 24/7 monitoring capabilities, contrasting sharply with the fragmented 2019 approach (Singh,2025).

Technology Integration: AI-generated content increased from 5% to 25% of total communications output, enabling rapid counter-narrative deployment. Real-time fact-checking systems improved misinformation detection rates from 15% to 33.9% (Blackbird AI, n.d.).

Platform Sophistication: Multi-platform coordination evolved from "limited" to "sophisticated," with verified account participation rising from 35% to 41%. The London Story's analysis documented how social media became a primary battleground, with India lifting Twitter bans while managing over 8,000 account takedowns for disinformation (Atlantic Council, 2025).

International Engagement: Media coverage increased 60% between the two crises, reflecting improved diplomatic preparation and stakeholder briefings. War on the Rocks noted how

Operation Sindoor followed "predictable patterns" with extensive diplomatic preparation, unlike the more reactive 2019 approach (Tarapore,2025).

Institutional Maturity: The shift from "ad-hoc" to "centralized 24/7" response mechanisms represents fundamental institutional evolution.

Quantitative Comparative Metrics:

Metric	Balakot 2019	Op. Sindoor 2025	Change
Response Time (hrs)	48–72	6–12	–83%
Social-Media Posts Analysed	20,000	180,000	800%
Misinformation Detection Rate (%)	15%	33.9%	126%
AI-Generated Content (%)	5%	25%	400%
Verified-Account Participation (%)	35%	41%	17%
International Media Articles	450	720	60%
Data Source: Blackbird AI https://blackbird.ai/blog/india-pakistan-digital-information-war/			

Table 1: Comparative Quantitative Metrics b/w Balakot & Op. Sindoor

Recommendations for India's Strategic Communications Apparatus

Building on the lessons learned from the Balakot 2019 and Operation Sindoor 2025 case studies, the following policy recommendations would solidify India's episodic successes into enduring capabilities if they are embedded in its communications machinery: -

First, India needs to establish *a special rapid communication unit* within the Ministry of External Affairs as well as the Ministry of Defence. This unit should be of a permanent nature which operates on real-time intelligence feeds and digital monitoring instruments. With social-media analysts, geospatial specialists, and linguists under one roof, the delays that allow rival

narratives to perpetuate would be eliminated. These units are expected to have secure dashboards which will display live twitter, Facebook and encrypted messages data alongside official government communications. Indian spokespersons should be ready with evidence, fact sheets and multi-lingual messaging templates in place when a cross-border incident occurs rather than having to put together replies immediately after the incident.



Figure 2: Deputy Chief of Army Staff reflects on lessons learned from Op. Sindoor

Second, narrative coherence demands a *unified command structure* that brings together military officers, diplomatic information officers, cyber-security experts, and intelligence liaisons. The primary difference between Balakot and Op. Sindoor response was the difference in the coordination of the aforementioned offices. To ensure calibrated coordination, India should convene a *Strategic Communications Council* chaired jointly by the National Security Advisor and the Foreign Secretary. This council will meet monthly during peacetime to run crisis-simulation exercises, develop messaging playbooks, and prescribe clear escalation thresholds for each ministry's communications arm (Singh, 2025). This will prevent turf battles and ensure that

talking points remain consistent from the Prime Minister's Office to the battalion-level spokesperson.

Third, the explosive growth of deepfakes, synthetic audio, and automated bot networks creates a compelling case for establishing a *national AI-driven fact-checking center*. The government should partner with leading AI research organizations to build an open-source intelligence system that combines geolocation verification, metadata analysis, and cross-platform signal detection. This system would provide rapid claim verification services to government agencies, news outlets, and international allies (Blackbird AI, n.d.). Within the first nine months, authorities could deploy a beta version featuring a public portal where citizens can submit questionable content and an API allowing media organizations to request verified assessments. Such transparency would strengthen public confidence while eliminating the excuses that disinformation spreaders use when circulating manipulated evidence.

Fourth recommendation is the rollout of a “*national digital literacy and resilience initiative*”. Government of India (GOI) should collaborate with universities, tech companies, and civil society groups to create educational workshops and curriculums, that teach people how to identify deepfakes, evaluate source authenticity, and responsible information sharing practices. This campaign envisages updates in school curriculum, online certification programs, and community workshops to reach diverse audiences ranging from urban dwellers to the elderly rural populations. Digital literacy should be integrated into the guidelines of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) to ensure pan-India penetration of the digital literacy campaign.

Fifth, the Government of India must collaborate with the best think tanks, international media houses and agencies globally in making the Indian story global. To provide a reasonable representation of India in the world, the Ministry of External Affairs can set up a “*Communications and Narrative Division*” to counter false media reporting by partnering with respected institutions like the Stimson Center, Chatham House and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Lastly, it is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategic communications. The Strategic Communications Council should have a strong audience engagement, course corrections speed, and alignment with different groups as key measures that should be under regular analysis by *an independent oversight body reporting to the committee*. Such reviews would identify bottlenecks which require consideration. The government may as well release an *Annual Strategic Communications Report* to facilitate transparency and welcome feedback and opinions of scholars, journalists, think tank professionals, and diplomats.

Conclusion

The reaction of India to Balakot in 2019 made it possible to understand how important the ability to influence narratives in addition to the use of military strength. A slow-moving messaging policy in that same year enabled fake news by Pakistan to go viral overtaking actual Indian successes. By 2025, India’s strategic community learned crucial lessons. The strategic community took a more proactive than reactive posture and was effective in influencing public opinion through a well-calibrated and premeditated system of communication that took advantage of diplomatic outreach, artificial intelligence, and data analysis. This strategy was

successful, and it is not an ultimate victory. To remain on the top in information warfare, one needs to be on their toes with constant vigil.

India needs enduring capabilities rather than jingoistic chest-thumping. A unified command center, AI fact-checkers, and educational programs together ensure clear messaging and help people spot false information early. By building international partnerships and relying on objective data, India can strengthen its global communication and tackle propaganda more effectively. A continuous investment in these aspects will ensure that India will face future crises with confidence and a strong voice to win the *“battle of narratives and the war of perceptions”*.

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