

INDIAN HYBRID WARFARE AGAINST PAKISTAN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS WITH PAKISTAN'S 2025 RETALIATORY RESPONSE

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Abstract

War has a profound impact on history, shaping societies and lives, and with the advent of nuclear weapons after World War II, warfare took a sophisticated and lethal turn. Conventional war between major powers has become outdated, focusing on displaying capabilities for deterrence. In the twenty first century, warfare has transformed from conventional battlefield confrontation into a multidimensional struggle involving cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, diplomatic isolation, proxy warfare, and psychological operations. This modern form of conflict is widely known as hybrid warfare. Pakistan, due to its strategic geography, ideological identity, economic vulnerabilities, and regional rivalries, has become a major target of such warfare. India-Pakistan relations, shaped by historical hostility and strategic competition, provide a significant case for understanding how hybrid warfare operates in South Asia. This research critically examines Indian hybrid warfare against Pakistan and explores its strategic implications. It analyses how hybrid warfare combines conventional and unconventional means to weaken the target state without direct full scale war. The study investigates India's strategic objectives, including political destabilization, economic weakening, diplomatic isolation, exploitation of ethnic and sectarian divisions, and the sabotage of Pakistan's strategic partnerships, particularly with China. The study also evaluates the Doval Doctrine, covert operations, proxy warfare, cyber-attacks, media manipulation, and fifth generation warfare as major instruments of hybrid conflict. Special attention is given to the 2025 India-Pakistan confrontation, particularly the large scale aerial dogfight and Pakistan's retaliatory military response. This event demonstrated how conventional warfare and hybrid warfare are now deeply interconnected. Electronic warfare, cyber preparedness, media narratives, diplomatic messaging, and missile technology became as important as physical combat itself. The study employs a qualitative research methodology based on Strategic Theory rooted in the work of Carl Von Clausewitz and Grand Strategy Theory developed by B. H. Liddell Hart. This theoretical framework provides a comprehensive lens to examine the changing nature of warfare, particularly the shift from conventional conflict to hybrid warfare. Strategic Theory explains how states use ways and means to achieve political objectives, while Grand Strategy Theory expands this understanding by including military, diplomatic, economic, informational, and psychological dimensions of conflict. The findings reveal that hybrid warfare has emerged as one of the most serious national security challenges for Pakistan, requiring a comprehensive response based on cyber security, strategic communication, economic resilience, institutional coordination, and national unity.

Keywords

Hybrid Warfare, Fifth Generation Warfare, India Pakistan Relations, National Security, Cyber Warfare, Information Warfare, Strategic Stability, South Asia

1. Introduction

The nature of warfare has changed significantly in the modern world. Earlier conflicts were fought through visible military confrontation involving armies, territorial invasions, and direct battlefield engagements. Victory depended largely on military strength, strategic planning, and territorial control. However, the twenty first century has introduced a far more complex form of conflict where wars are often undeclared, enemies are hidden, and destruction occurs without traditional battlefield engagement. This transformation has led to the rise of hybrid warfare.

Hybrid warfare refers to the combination of conventional military force with unconventional methods such as cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, economic coercion, diplomatic pressure, proxy conflicts, and psychological operations. Its purpose is not necessarily territorial conquest but strategic destabilization. Instead of defeating an enemy through direct war, hybrid warfare seeks to weaken the target state internally by damaging political stability, economic strength, social cohesion, and institutional credibility. Frank Hoffman defines hybrid warfare as the simultaneous use of multiple modes of warfare by state and non state actors to achieve political objectives.

South Asia provides one of the most important regional contexts for understanding hybrid warfare, particularly in the relationship between India and Pakistan. Since partition in 1947, both countries have experienced conventional wars, border crises, political hostility, and strategic rivalry. However, the nuclearization of South Asia has reduced the likelihood of direct conventional war. As a result, indirect forms of conflict have become increasingly important. Hybrid warfare offers a practical strategy because it allows strategic pressure without the risks of full scale war.

Pakistan faces a particularly complex security environment because of its geographical location, internal political divisions, economic pressures, and strategic partnerships. Its proximity to Afghanistan, its close relationship with China, and its rivalry with India make it highly vulnerable to multidimensional threats. Hybrid warfare exploits these vulnerabilities by creating instability from within.

India's hybrid strategy is often associated with what is known as the Doval Doctrine, linked with Ajit Doval after his appointment as India's National Security Advisor in 2014. This doctrine emphasizes offensive defense, meaning indirect pressure through covert operations, information warfare, and proxy conflict rather than open war. It seeks to exploit Pakistan's internal vulnerabilities while maintaining strategic ambiguity.

The 2025 India Pakistan confrontation further demonstrated the changing nature of warfare. Following regional escalation, both countries engaged in one of the largest beyond visual range aerial battles in modern history. Advanced fighter aircraft, long range missiles, radar warfare, cyber coordination, and media narratives all played central roles. The conflict proved that modern warfare is fought not only in the skies but also in information systems, diplomatic forums, and digital platforms.

This research examines Indian hybrid warfare against Pakistan and analyzes its strategic implications. It also studies Pakistan's retaliatory response during the 2025 confrontation to understand how conventional and hybrid dimensions of warfare now function together. The significance of this study lies in recognizing that national security can no longer be understood only through military preparedness. It must include cyber defense, economic stability, institutional trust, and strategic communication.

This study argues that hybrid warfare is one of the most serious national security challenges facing Pakistan because it operates silently, gradually, and deeply. Recognizing this threat and developing a coordinated national response is necessary for protecting sovereignty, stability, and long term peace.

2. Review of Related Literature

The concept of hybrid warfare has gained major scholarly attention because it reflects a significant transformation in modern conflict. Unlike traditional warfare, which depends mainly on direct military confrontation, hybrid warfare combines military, political, economic, informational, cyber, and psychological tools simultaneously to achieve strategic objectives. Frank Hoffman is considered one of the foundational scholars of hybrid warfare. He argues that modern conflict involves the simultaneous use of conventional force, irregular tactics, terrorism, criminal behavior, and propaganda to achieve political goals. According to Hoffman,

modern adversaries no longer rely on a single method of warfare but use multiple strategies together to exploit the weaknesses of stronger states. This makes hybrid warfare more complex and difficult to counter because the attack is often indirect and spread across multiple domains rather than limited to the battlefield.

Williamson Murray and Peter Mansoor further explain that hybrid warfare is not entirely new, but it has become far more effective because of technological advancement and globalization. Information spreads faster, cyber attacks cross borders instantly, and narratives shape public perception more rapidly than ever before. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 is often cited as a major example of hybrid warfare, where Russia combined cyber attacks, media propaganda, covert military presence, and political manipulation without launching full scale war. Similarly, China's use of public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare demonstrates how hybrid methods are increasingly central in international competition. These examples show that modern conflict is no longer measured only by territorial conquest but also by the ability to influence perceptions, institutions, and international legitimacy.

In South Asia, hybrid warfare is closely connected to India Pakistan relations. Since nuclear deterrence reduced the possibility of direct conventional war, indirect conflict has become more central. Information warfare, diplomatic pressure, economic targeting, and proxy influence are now major tools of strategic rivalry. Pakistan's security discourse often links Indian hybrid warfare with the Doval Doctrine, where India is believed to use covert strategies to exploit Pakistan's internal vulnerabilities. The arrest of Kulbhushan Jadhav in 2016 became a major case supporting Pakistani claims regarding covert Indian involvement in Balochistan. The sabotage of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor is also frequently discussed in literature, particularly attacks on Chinese nationals, the Chinese Consulate attack in Karachi in 2018, and the Pearl Continental Hotel attack in Gwadar in

2019, which are viewed as attempts to weaken Pakistan's strategic alliance with China. The EU DisinfoLab report further exposed a large scale anti Pakistan disinformation network involving fake media platforms and coordinated propaganda campaigns, showing how international narratives were manipulated to damage

Pakistan's diplomatic image. The 2025 India Pakistan aerial confrontation further expanded this literature by demonstrating that hybrid warfare and conventional combat are now deeply connected. Air combat, electronic warfare, cyber preparedness, and strategic communication worked together, proving that victory is measured not only by military outcomes but also by diplomatic perception and media dominance. The literature clearly shows that hybrid warfare is not simply a military issue but a broader struggle over legitimacy, perception, and institutional resilience, making its understanding essential for Pakistan's national security and survival.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to critically examine the nature, objectives, and implications of Indian hybrid warfare against Pakistan. Since hybrid warfare is multidimensional and includes political narratives, cyber operations, diplomatic pressure, media warfare, proxy influence, and strategic perception, qualitative analysis is considered the most appropriate method for this research. The study is primarily based on Strategic Theory and Grand Strategy Theory, which explains how states combine conventional and unconventional tools to weaken an opponent without engaging in direct full scale war. The analytical framework is further supported by the concepts of Hybrid Warfare, Fifth Generation Warfare, Information Warfare, Psychological Operations, and Strategic Security Studies, which help explain how modern conflict extends beyond military confrontation and targets institutions, public trust, and national cohesion.

The research uses both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary sources include official policy documents, government statements, military briefings, strategic reports, defense analyses, and public statements by policymakers. Secondary sources include academic books, peer reviewed journal articles, think tank reports, research papers, and credible newspaper analyses. Special attention is given to the 2025 India Pakistan aerial confrontation as a contemporary case study to understand how conventional aerial warfare now intersects with cyber defense, electronic warfare, strategic communication, and information management. This case demonstrates how military operations are increasingly connected with diplomatic narratives and media dominance.

One delimitation of the study is the restricted access to classified intelligence and covert operational details, as hybrid warfare often operates through hidden channels and unofficial networks. Therefore, the research relies mainly on open source documentation and publicly available strategic assessments. Another limitation is that hybrid warfare continues to evolve rapidly with technological advancement, making it difficult to capture every emerging dimension. Despite these delimitations, the methodology provides a strong foundation for understanding the strategic nature of hybrid warfare and its serious implications for Pakistan's national security, institutional stability, and regional peace.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study uses Strategic Theory and Grand Strategy Theory as its theoretical framework to analyse Indian hybrid warfare against Pakistan. Strategic Theory, primarily associated with Carl von Clausewitz in „On War“ (1832), explains strategy as the use of engagements for the purpose of war and establishes the relationship between political objectives and military action. It provides the foundation for understanding how states employ ways and means to achieve desired policy ends. Grand Strategy Theory, later expanded by B. H. Liddell Hart and further developed by Colin S. Gray in „The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice“ (2010), broadens this concept by including all instruments of national power such as diplomacy, economy, cyber warfare, information warfare, and psychological operations. Since hybrid warfare is not limited to conventional military

confrontation, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for examining India's use of both physical and psychological strategies against Pakistan. They help explain how military pressure, proxy warfare, propaganda, economic coercion, cyber-attacks, and diplomatic isolation are strategically employed to weaken Pakistan's national security and stability.

Strategic theory offers a comprehensive perspective to analyse warfare since it assumes that all battles in history have certain traits in common. Although it is complex to understand at first glance, it clarifies the validity and soundness of new thoughts. Osinga views strategic theory as a collection of ideas on formulating successful strategy. It is a system of interconnecting ideas and precepts related to strategy that holds that all wars share a set of characteristics, and that politics is a more comprehensive category of interpersonal interactions and behaviour. It offers advice on how to handle the difficulties of employing force to further policy objectives (Caliskan, 2019).

It is important to note that strategy, and hence strategic theory, is an attempt to explain what has already been practiced throughout history. It represents the constant and timeless characteristics of strategy making. Gray remarked that the essential logic of strategy can be found in all locations and eras of human history, regardless of whatever term was used by different societies or cultures. Since humans are the common denominator between the past and the future, they are compelled by their need for security to act politically and strategically to ward off prospective threats (Heuser, 2010; Caliskan, 2019).

Clausewitz provides a concise definition of strategy: “strategy is the use of the engagements for the purpose of the war.” Building on this definition, Colin S. Gray defines strategy as “the

direction and use made of force and the threat of force for the purposes of policy as decided by politics” (Gray, 2010). Beatrice Heuser defines strategy as a comprehensive way to pursue political ends, including the threat or actual use of force, in a dialectic of wills (Heuser, 2010). In short, strategy can be summarized as the use of ways and means to achieve desired ends and serves as the bridge between policy and military action.

Strategic Theory has several important components that help explain how states plan and execute conflict to achieve political objectives. Since modern warfare is no longer limited to direct military confrontation, these components provide a broader understanding of how military power, diplomacy, economic pressure, cyber operations, information warfare, and psychological influence are used together. Strategic Theory explains that war is not fought only on the battlefield but also through policies, perceptions, and the management of national resources.

One of the major components of Strategic Theory is the trinity of strategy, which includes ends, ways, and means. Policy ends refer to the objectives a state wants to achieve, ways are the methods used to reach those objectives, and means are the resources available for implementation. Another important component is the levels of war and strategy, which include policy, strategy, operations, and tactics. These levels show how political goals are translated into practical action on the ground. Strategic Theory further expands into Grand Strategy, where military action is combined with diplomacy, economy, intelligence, media, and political influence to achieve broader national interests.

Grand Strategy also includes the physical and psychological poles of conflict. The physical pole focuses on weakening the enemy’s military capacity and strategic resources, while the psychological pole aims to break morale, confidence, and public trust through propaganda, fear, and information warfare. It also includes five major strategies used in hybrid warfare: extermination, exhaustion, annihilation, intimidation, and subversion. Together, these components provide a complete framework for understanding how hybrid warfare operates and how India applies multidimensional pressure against Pakistan without relying only on direct conventional war.

4.1 THE TRINITY OF STRATEGIC THEORY

Strategy is usually expressed by the formula of retired U.S. Army Colonel Arthur Lykke(1989). It consists of three simple elements: policy ends, strategic ways, and military means. Policy ends denote the goals to be achieved, strategic ways correspond to the methods used to achieve them, and military means are the resources employed. Recently, a fourth element, assumptions, was added because strategy is future oriented and planners must make educated guesses about uncertainties (Caliskan, 2019).

Sun Tzu (5th century BCE) said, “supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.” This idea is clearly visible in hybrid warfare where indirect tools like cyber attacks, disinformation, economic coercion, and proxy actors are used instead of direct military confrontation. Indirect warfare remains one of the most effective ways of defeating an adversary without direct engagement. Mass communication for propaganda, intervention into foreign electoral systems, cyber warfare, economic coercion, and sabotage are all instruments included in hybrid warfare.

Strategic theory is proposed as the comprehensive approach providing holistic thinking to defense communities regarding the management of state resources in pursuit of policy ends. Clausewitz stated that strategy is the use of engagements for the purpose of war and acts as the link between policy and military. Strategic theory guides decision makers in utilizing resources efficiently to entertain national interests and achieve policy objectives at the maximum level. For example, India’s policy end against Pakistan is to weaken Pakistan strategically and diplomatically. Its ways include propaganda, cyber warfare, support for proxy groups, and

diplomatic isolation, while its means include RAW networks, military pressure, economic lobbying, and international influence. This shows how strategic theory helps explain hybrid warfare in practical terms.

4.2 LEVELS OF WAR AND STRATEGY

There are four levels of war adopted by most armies: policy, strategy, operations, and tactics. Policy answers the question of why and what, while strategy answers how. Operations and tactics implement strategic goals on the ground. The operational level was formally emphasized in modern military doctrine during the 1980s.

For example, India's policy objective may be to isolate Pakistan internationally. Its strategy includes FATF lobbying, anti Pakistan propaganda, and support for insurgent groups. The operational level includes specific intelligence coordination through RAW, while tactical actions include cyber attacks on Pakistani institutions, support to separatist movements, and diplomatic campaigns against CPEC.

Strategy fills the gap between political goals and military capabilities and ensures that all levels work together effectively.

4.3 GRAND THEORY OF MILITARY STRATEGY

Grand Theory of Military Strategy provides a broader and more comprehensive understanding of conflict by connecting military power with political, economic, diplomatic, and social instruments of the state. It explains that modern warfare cannot be understood only through battlefield operations because national security is influenced by multiple interconnected dimensions. This theory helps analyze how states pursue long term strategic goals by combining both conventional and unconventional means.

4.3.1 AN OFFSHOOT OF STRATEGIC THEORY

Earlier thinkers like Carl von Clausewitz (1832) and Antoine-Henri Jomini (1838) limited strategy to military force, but modern scholars expanded it to include diplomacy, economy, media, intelligence, and political influence. This broader approach is called Grand Strategy.

The Grand Theory of Military Strategy revolves around three major components:

- The nature of war
- The nature of society and the state
- The nature of strategic thinking

These three are interconnected. The nature of war includes technology and military capability. For example, India's acquisition of S-400 missile systems (2018), nuclear submarines like INS Arihant (2016), and anti satellite tests (2019) reflects the technological side of strategic competition.

The nature of society and the state includes political, social, and economic conditions. India attempts to exploit

Pakistan's internal ethnic and sectarian divisions, especially in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, by supporting unrest and instability.

The nature of strategic thinking refers to how leaders manipulate conventional and unconventional methods.

India's use of proxy warfare, diplomatic pressure, cyber attacks, and media propaganda reflects this strategic thinking.

Colin S. Gray (2010) argues that all strategies are grand strategies because military conflict always includes political, diplomatic, economic, and social dimensions. This is clearly visible in India Pakistan relations where conflict extends far beyond the battlefield.

4.4 THE STRUCTURE OF GRAND THEORY

The structure of Grand Theory of Military Strategy links two important poles:

4.4.1 THE PHYSICAL POLE

The physical pole seeks to eliminate the enemy's capacity for war by damaging military strength, infrastructure, and strategic resources.

For example, India's repeated ceasefire violations along the Line of Control, military aggression after Pulwama

(2019), and the use of conventional pressure through arms build up represent the physical pole. India's attempts to undermine CPEC projects and attacks on Chinese interests in Gwadar (2018–2019) also reflect physical pressure on Pakistan's economic security.

4.4.2 THE PSYCHOLOGICAL POLE

The psychological pole seeks to break the enemy's will to fight through fear, propaganda, and psychological pressure.

For example, India's fake news campaigns, anti Pakistan lobbying in Europe and the United States, cyber attacks on Pakistani banks and government websites (2018–2019), and Modi's statement "blood and water cannot flow together" (2016) are examples of psychological warfare. These actions aim to create insecurity and weaken public confidence inside Pakistan.

4.5 STRATEGIES USED IN HYBRID WARFARE ACCORDING TO GRAND THEORY OF MILITARY STRATEGY

Grand Theory of Military Strategy focuses on five major strategies used by states to subdue their enemies:

4.5.1 EXTERMINATION

Extermination refers to the destruction of a state, people, or ethnic group through continuous violence and destabilization.

In Pakistan's case, India is accused of supporting separatist movements in Balochistan and facilitating terrorist attacks through groups like TTP and BLA. This includes attempts to create unrest from the western border and weaken national unity. Indian Prime Minister Modi's statements regarding the isolation of Pakistan (2014 onward) are often cited in this context.

4.5.2 EXHAUSTION

This strategy aims to weaken the enemy's resources and will to resist rather than directly defeating its military.

After the Mumbai attacks (2008), India used diplomatic pressure to isolate Pakistan internationally. It pushed for stronger action against militant groups and tried to damage Pakistan's image globally. FATF pressure, economic propaganda, and support for anti Pakistan narratives are examples of exhaustion strategy. The case of Kulbhushan Jadhav (2016), who confessed involvement in supporting insurgency in Balochistan, is also linked to this strategy.

4.5.3 ANNIHILATION

Annihilation involves destroying the enemy's military power through force and strategic aggression.

The 1971 war is a major example where India used large scale military force that resulted in the fall of East

Pakistan. In modern times, repeated violations along the Line of Control (especially 2015–2018) and aggressive military posturing continue to reflect this strategy. India's conventional superiority and limited operations under the nuclear threshold also support this approach.

4.5.4 INTIMIDATION

Intimidation is a major strategy of hybrid warfare that aims to create fear and a perception of superior strength in the opponent in order to force political or military compliance. It includes military intimidation through arms build up, missile systems, nuclear submarines, and advanced defense technologies such as India's acquisition of S-400 missile systems (2018), MH-60R helicopters (2020), and INS Arihant (2016).

Political intimidation is carried out through diplomatic pressure, international lobbying, and threats after incidents like the Mumbai attacks (2008). Propaganda and disinformation are also important aspects, where fake news, media campaigns, and anti Pakistan narratives are used to damage Pakistan's image globally. Cyber intimidation involves attacks on banking systems, government websites, and strategic command systems to create insecurity and economic uncertainty.

Economic intimidation includes pressure through FATF lobbying, trade influence, and hydro warfare such as violations of the Indus Waters Treaty (1960, with intensified disputes after 2016). Together, these methods are used to weaken Pakistan's confidence, create instability, and force strategic submission without direct full scale war. Diplomatic intimidation was also seen after the Mumbai attacks (2008) when India successfully pressured other states to increase pressure on Pakistan. Media propaganda during the Balakot crisis (2019) also served as intimidation by shaping international and domestic perception.

4.5.5 SUBVERSION

Subversion uses covert and indirect means to weaken political, economic, and social systems from within.

India's alleged support for propaganda campaigns, fake news networks, RAW operations, and anti CPEC activities reflect subversion strategy. The EU DisinfoLab revelations (2020) about fake media platforms linked to anti Pakistan narratives also strengthen this argument. Attempts to destabilize Pakistan's economy through FATF lobbying and hydro warfare through Indus Waters Treaty pressure are also examples of subversion.

4.6 HYBRID WARFARE THROUGH THE LENS OF STRATEGIC THEORY

Hybrid warfare is a military strategy that blends conventional warfare, irregular warfare, cyber warfare, diplomacy, propaganda, and economic coercion. Frank Hoffman (2007) explains that in such wars, the population becomes the primary target of both physical and psychological attacks.

Pakistan is currently a major target of Indian hybrid warfare. Since direct military coercion became difficult after nuclearization (1998), India shifted towards indirect methods. It exploits political instability, ethnic divisions, economic weaknesses, and international diplomacy to weaken Pakistan from within.

India uses propaganda, cyber attacks, proxy actors, diplomatic pressure, and support for separatist groups to pursue its strategic goals. It also attempts to sabotage CPEC (launched 2015), undermine Chinese investment, and isolate Pakistan globally. Cyber attacks on banking systems, hacking of government websites, and efforts to weaken Pakistan's nuclear command systems show the technological dimension of this warfare.

Thus, Strategic Theory and Grand Strategy Theory explain how India uses both physical and psychological methods to destabilize Pakistan. Hybrid warfare is not fought only on the battlefield but also through media, diplomacy, economy, and internal unrest. This makes Strategic Theory the most suitable framework for understanding Indian hybrid warfare against Pakistan.

The Doval Doctrine, associated with India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval (2014), also fits within this framework. It emphasizes offensive defense, where indirect pressure is used to exploit Pakistan's vulnerabilities through covert operations, proxy actors, and strategic destabilization rather than direct war. This doctrine reflects the practical application of hybrid warfare in South Asia.

The 2025 India Pakistan aerial confrontation (2025) further supports this theoretical framework. Although it involved direct aerial combat, the larger conflict environment was shaped by radar deception, cyber preparedness, electronic warfare, diplomatic messaging, and

media narratives. The battle showed that even conventional combat is now deeply influenced by hybrid tools. Victory is no longer measured only by destroyed aircraft but also by strategic perception and narrative dominance.

Together, these theories explain that hybrid warfare is not simply a military strategy but a comprehensive national challenge. It targets governance, legitimacy, economy, identity, and institutional confidence. This framework helps analyze how India employs multidimensional pressure against Pakistan and how Pakistan can respond effectively.

5. Hybrid Warfare and Its Nuances

Hybrid warfare represents one of the most complex forms of modern conflict because it combines traditional and nontraditional methods of confrontation into a single strategic design. Its purpose is not always military victory but strategic destabilization. Instead of occupying territory directly, the goal is to weaken the target state internally so that it becomes politically divided, economically fragile, diplomatically isolated, and socially unstable.

One of the main features of hybrid warfare is ambiguity. The aggressor often avoids direct responsibility, making attribution difficult. Cyber-attacks may appear as technical failures, propaganda may look like ordinary journalism, and proxy violence may seem like domestic unrest. This uncertainty delays response and weakens international legal accountability.

India's hybrid warfare strategy against Pakistan is often explained through what is commonly referred to as the

Doval Doctrine, associated with Ajit Doval after becoming India's National Security Advisor in 2014. This doctrine emphasizes offensive defense, meaning that instead of relying only on conventional military deterrence,

India seeks to exploit Pakistan's internal vulnerabilities through covert operations, proxy actors, diplomatic pressure, and information warfare. The objective is to keep Pakistan politically unstable, economically weak, and regionally vulnerable without engaging in full scale war. This approach reflects the idea of shadow war, where conflict is fought indirectly through hidden operations rather than open military confrontation.

Cyber warfare is one of the most important dimensions of hybrid conflict. States target banking systems, communication networks, energy infrastructure, and government databases to create disruption and fear. Even small cyber-attacks can create major political consequences by reducing trust in institutions and demonstrating vulnerability. In Pakistan's case, cyber security threats have become increasingly serious because digital systems now control financial networks, communication sectors, and strategic institutions.

Media warfare is equally significant. Through media manipulation, fake news, disinformation campaigns, and propaganda, hostile actors shape public opinion both domestically and internationally. Indian media outlets often amplify anti Pakistan narratives during crises to influence international opinion and weaken Pakistan's diplomatic credibility. Psychological operations through media are designed to fuel distrust, intensify internal divisions, and create strategic pressure. In fifth generation warfare, perception itself becomes a battlefield.

One major element of this strategy is covert operations through proxy groups. Pakistan has repeatedly accused

India's intelligence agency RAW of supporting separatist and militant organizations such as the Balochistan Liberation Army and Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan. The arrest of Kulbhushan Jadhav in 2016 became a major example used by Pakistan to support these claims. Pakistani authorities presented him as evidence of Indian covert involvement inside Balochistan. Similarly, commanders such as Aslam Achu, linked with the BLA Majeed Brigade, were accused of orchestrating attacks on the Chinese Consulate in Karachi in 2018 and the Pearl Continental Hotel in Gwadar in 2019. These incidents were viewed as attempts to destabilize Pakistan internally and sabotage strategic projects connected with China Pakistan cooperation.

Pakistan's strategic alliance with China, especially through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, has also become a major target of hybrid warfare. Since CPEC strengthens Pakistan's economic future and regional connectivity, destabilizing Balochistan and attacking Chinese interests directly affects Pakistan's long term development. Repeated attacks against Chinese nationals and strategic projects are often seen as part of a broader effort to weaken Pakistan's strategic partnership with China and reduce its regional influence.

Economic warfare is another tool used in hybrid strategy. Trade restrictions, financial destabilization, diplomatic lobbying, and attempts to weaken investor confidence can create national insecurity without military action.

Economic pressure increases public frustration and can then be politically exploited.

Cyber warfare has further expanded the scope of hybrid threats. The EU DisinfoLab report exposed a large scale network of disinformation campaigns designed to damage Pakistan's international reputation. Fake media platforms, false human rights narratives, and coordinated propaganda were used to influence global opinion. This demonstrated that modern warfare is no longer confined to borders or battlefields but extends into digital spaces where narratives shape diplomacy and legitimacy.

The 2025 India Pakistan aerial confrontation further demonstrated that even conventional military encounters now operate within a hybrid environment. Advanced missile systems, radar jamming, surveillance technologies, satellite tracking, and immediate media warfare all became part of the same conflict. Public perception of victory became almost as important as battlefield outcomes.

These nuances show that hybrid warfare is a total strategy aimed at national paralysis rather than battlefield conquest. Its danger lies in its invisibility. People often become participants in hybrid warfare without realizing they are part of it, which makes national awareness and institutional preparedness essential.

6. Objectives of Indian Hybrid Warfare Against Pakistan

India's hybrid strategy toward Pakistan can be understood through multiple strategic objectives that go beyond traditional military rivalry. The purpose is not only to counter Pakistan's conventional capabilities but to weaken its long term political, economic, and ideological stability. Hybrid warfare is designed to create gradual exhaustion rather than immediate destruction.

The first major objective is political destabilization. Political instability weakens governance, reduces policy consistency, and damages international credibility. By encouraging polarization, institutional distrust, and internal divisions, hybrid strategies aim to make the state appear unstable both domestically and internationally.

Political chaos reduces the effectiveness of national decision making and weakens strategic focus.

The second objective is economic weakening. Pakistan's economy remains vulnerable due to debt pressures, inflation, unemployment, and dependence on external financing. Any disruption in investor confidence, trade stability, or international financial reputation can have serious national consequences. Economic pressure creates social frustration, which can then be politically exploited to increase instability.

The third objective is diplomatic isolation. By portraying Pakistan as a state associated with terrorism, extremism, or instability, efforts can be made to reduce its international support. This affects foreign policy, trade relations, and strategic partnerships. Diplomatic isolation also weakens Pakistan's position in regional and global institutions and limits its strategic influence.

Another major objective is the exploitation of ethnic, sectarian, and regional fault lines. Pakistan's diversity is a strength, but it can also be targeted through disinformation,

propaganda, and support for divisive narratives. Hybrid warfare seeks to transform social differences into political conflict, weakening internal unity and national identity.

One of the most important strategic objectives is the sabotage of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and

Pakistan's broader strategic partnership with China. Since CPEC strengthens Pakistan's economic future and regional connectivity, destabilizing Balochistan and targeting Chinese nationals directly affects Pakistan's long term development. Attacks such as the Chinese Consulate attack in Karachi in 2018 and the Pearl Continental Hotel attack in Gwadar in 2019 were viewed as attempts to create insecurity around CPEC projects and discourage foreign investment.

The strategic lessons of the 2025 aerial confrontation also show another objective: demonstrating military and technological superiority to shape regional perception. Even when direct military outcomes remain disputed, projecting dominance through media, diplomacy, and international defence narratives becomes an objective in itself. Strategic perception influences alliances, defence partnerships, and deterrence credibility.

Another objective is strategic distraction. If Pakistan remains occupied with internal crises, border instability, and political conflict, it becomes less capable of pursuing regional influence or strengthening long term strategic partnerships. This limits Pakistan's ability to compete effectively in regional politics.

These objectives show that hybrid warfare aims at gradual erosion rather than sudden destruction. It is a long term strategy of strategic exhaustion where the target state weakens internally without formal declaration of war.

7. Emerging Challenges for Pakistan

Pakistan faces several emerging challenges in responding to hybrid warfare. The first and most serious challenge is institutional fragmentation. Effective response requires coordination among military institutions, civilian leadership, intelligence agencies, diplomatic bodies, cyber authorities, and media regulators. Weak coordination creates strategic gaps that hostile actors can exploit easily.

The second challenge is digital vulnerability. Cyber security infrastructure in Pakistan remains underdeveloped compared to the scale of emerging threats. Data breaches, hacking attempts, cyber espionage, and misinformation campaigns can spread faster than institutional response mechanisms. Critical infrastructure such as banking systems, energy networks, and communication systems remain vulnerable.

One of the most serious security challenges is the alleged nexus between RAW, Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan, Balochistan Liberation Army, and other militant networks operating from Afghan territory. Pakistani security officials have repeatedly argued that cross border attacks continued even after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, showing that the threat did not disappear with the political transition in Kabul. Attacks such as the Panjgur and Noshki incidents in 2022 were cited as examples where Afghan origin weapons and cross border militant coordination were involved.

Reports also suggested efforts to unite various anti Pakistan militant groups including TTP, BLA, and ISKP, creating a more dangerous security environment. Such linkages increase the complexity of Pakistan's counterterrorism operations because the threat becomes both internal and external at the same time. United Nations security reports discussing militant movements and regional security concerns have also highlighted the growing risks associated with cross border extremist networks.

Political polarization is another major issue. Deep internal divisions reduce national unity and make external manipulation easier. When citizens lose trust in political leadership and state

institutions, hybrid warfare becomes more effective because the target society begins to weaken itself from within.

Economic fragility also increases vulnerability. Inflation, unemployment, currency instability, and dependence on external loans create dissatisfaction among the population. Economic hardship makes citizens more susceptible to propaganda, protests, and psychological operations aimed at increasing state instability.

Media polarization is equally dangerous. Competing narratives often create confusion instead of awareness. Social media accelerates the spread of misinformation, while sensational reporting sometimes weakens national security discourse. Without responsible strategic communication, false information spreads rapidly and shapes public perception before facts emerge.

Another challenge is diplomatic pressure at the international level. Negative narratives against Pakistan in global forums affect trade opportunities, investment flows, and foreign policy credibility. Diplomatic isolation weakens national confidence and limits international support during crises.

The 2025 India Pakistan dogfight also exposed the challenge of technological competition. Modern warfare increasingly depends on advanced air defence systems, missile technology, cyber integration, and electronic warfare capacity. Pakistan must continuously modernize its defence systems to maintain credible deterrence.

These challenges show that countering hybrid warfare requires internal strength before external defence.

National resilience depends on political stability, economic strength, institutional trust, and strategic awareness.

8. Implications of Hybrid Warfare on Pakistan

The implications of hybrid warfare are deeper and more dangerous than conventional military threats because they affect the state from within. One major implication is the weakening of national cohesion. Social distrust damages the relationship between citizens and institutions, reducing collective confidence in the state.

Another implication is strategic paralysis. Continuous political instability prevents long term policymaking and weakens governance capacity. Security institutions become reactive rather than proactive. Instead of planning for future development, the state remains occupied with managing immediate crises.

Economic consequences are also severe. Investor uncertainty, damaged international reputation, reduced foreign investment, and financial instability slow national development and increase dependency. Economic weakness directly affects national security because financial fragility reduces strategic independence.

Diplomatically, hybrid warfare reduces strategic space. Negative international narratives affect alliances, trade opportunities, and regional partnerships. States facing constant reputational attacks struggle to maintain diplomatic credibility in global institutions.

Media warfare and disinformation campaigns create another serious implication. Indian media amplification during security crises often strengthens anti Pakistan narratives internationally. The EU DisinfoLab case showed how fake media platforms and coordinated propaganda were used to influence diplomatic perception and weaken Pakistan's global image. Such campaigns create reputational damage that affects both diplomacy and economic partnerships.

Social fragmentation is another serious implication. Ethnic divisions, sectarian tensions, and political polarization weaken the national identity required for collective resistance. A divided society becomes easier to manipulate externally.

The psychological impact is perhaps the most dangerous. Fear, hopelessness, and distrust create a culture of pessimism where citizens lose faith in national institutions and leadership. Once this mindset becomes normal, national resilience declines significantly.

The 2025 aerial confrontation also demonstrated that military crises now produce psychological and diplomatic consequences beyond physical losses. Public perception of strength or weakness influences deterrence and regional power balance. Narrative management became almost as important as operational success.

Most importantly, hybrid warfare normalizes crisis. When instability becomes routine, society begins to accept dysfunction as normal. This is perhaps the most dangerous outcome because it weakens the national will to resist and makes long term strategic recovery more difficult.

9. Pakistan's Retaliatory Response in the 2025 India–Pakistan Confrontation

The 2025 India–Pakistan confrontation became one of the most significant military escalations in South Asia after the Balakot crisis of 2019. Following the Pahalgam incident in April 2025, India launched what it described as “Operation Sindoor,” carrying out missile strikes, drone incursions, and aerial operations against multiple targets inside Pakistan. India claimed these strikes were necessary for strategic deterrence and linked them to cross border security concerns. Pakistan rejected these accusations and considered the attacks a direct violation of its sovereignty, requiring a strong and immediate retaliatory response.

Pakistan responded through a carefully calibrated military strategy designed to restore deterrence without pushing the region toward full scale war. The Pakistan Air Force played a central role in this response. One of the most discussed aspects of the confrontation was the large scale beyond visual range aerial engagement involving more than one hundred aircraft from both sides. Pakistani J 10C fighter jets, equipped with advanced radar systems and long range PL 15 missiles, reportedly engaged Indian Rafale aircraft and other fighter platforms. Defense analysts described it as one of the largest aerial dogfights in recent military history.

Pakistan claimed that several Indian aircraft were shot down during the confrontation, including Rafale jets, while India maintained strategic ambiguity regarding losses. Regardless of the disputed numbers, the confrontation demonstrated Pakistan's operational readiness and its ability to respond effectively to advanced technological threats. The engagement also showed that modern air warfare depends not only on pilot skill but also on electronic warfare, radar dominance, missile integration, and cyber supported command systems.

Pakistan's retaliatory strategy was not limited to aerial combat. Air defense systems were placed on high alert, missile readiness was strengthened, and strategic installations were secured against further escalation. The military response was accompanied by strong diplomatic engagement. Pakistan immediately raised the issue in international forums, emphasizing the violation of sovereignty and the risk of regional destabilization. Diplomatic messaging aimed to prevent India from controlling the international narrative and to maintain Pakistan's legitimacy in global opinion.

Media management also became an essential part of retaliation. In hybrid warfare, controlling perception is as important as controlling territory. Pakistan used official military briefings, press conferences, and international media engagement to shape strategic perception. The purpose was not only to communicate military success but also to strengthen deterrence by demonstrating confidence and preparedness.

Cyber and electronic dimensions were equally important during the confrontation. Surveillance systems, electronic countermeasures, radar deception, and communication security became central to operational effectiveness. This proved that the conflict was not simply a conventional dogfight but a hybrid battlefield where technology, information, and narrative control operated alongside missiles and fighter jets.

Pakistan's response reflected the principle of credible deterrence. Instead of uncontrolled escalation, the strategy focused on limited but visible retaliation that restored strategic balance. This approach reinforced Pakistan's long standing doctrine that while it seeks regional peace, it will respond decisively to any violation of sovereignty.

The 2025 confrontation also provided important strategic lessons. It highlighted the need for continuous modernization of defense systems, stronger cyber capabilities, and better coordination between military preparedness and diplomatic strategy. It showed that future conflicts between India and Pakistan will not be fought only on traditional battlefields but across multiple domains at the same time.

Ultimately, Pakistan's retaliatory response in 2025 demonstrated that hybrid warfare and conventional warfare are now inseparable. Military success depends not only on physical defense but also on strategic communication, technological readiness, and institutional resilience. The confrontation became a practical example of how modern deterrence functions in the age of hybrid warfare.

10. Strategies to Counter Hybrid Warfare

Pakistan requires a comprehensive national strategy to counter hybrid warfare. Military strength alone is insufficient because hybrid threats operate across multiple domains. The response must be multidimensional, coordinated, and long term.

The first strategy is strengthening cyber security. National cyber defense institutions must be modernized, coordinated, and supported by skilled professionals. Critical infrastructure such as banking systems, communication networks, defense databases, and energy sectors must be protected against cyber attacks. A strong cyber defense system is now as important as traditional military defense.

The second strategy is strategic communication. The state must actively manage narratives rather than react late. Clear communication builds trust and prevents misinformation from dominating public perception. Information warfare can only be countered through credible and timely national messaging. Public confidence is a strategic asset in hybrid warfare.

Economic resilience is equally important. Stable economic policies, investment confidence, reduced dependency on external borrowing, and strong financial institutions strengthen national resistance to external pressure. Economic stability directly improves national security because financial weakness increases vulnerability to foreign influence.

Educational reform and media literacy can reduce the effectiveness of propaganda. Citizens who critically evaluate information are less vulnerable to manipulation. Universities, schools, and public awareness programs should promote national understanding of hybrid warfare threats and strengthen civic responsibility.

Diplomatic engagement must also improve. Strong international partnerships reduce isolation and strengthen

Pakistan's credibility in global forums. Regional cooperation, balanced foreign policy, and strategic alliances enhance national resilience. Diplomatic strength reduces the effectiveness of international propaganda campaigns.

Defense modernization remains essential. The lessons of the 2025 India Pakistan confrontation show that technological preparedness in air defense, missile systems, electronic warfare, surveillance, and cyber integration is necessary for credible deterrence. Conventional readiness and hybrid defense must work together rather than separately.

Institutional coordination is another critical strategy. Military institutions, civilian leadership, intelligence agencies, cyber authorities, and media regulators must work with a unified national approach. Fragmented responses weaken national defense and create opportunities for hostile actors.

Finally, national unity remains the strongest defense. Hybrid warfare succeeds where internal divisions already exist. Social cohesion, institutional trust, inclusive governance, and political stability are therefore essential security priorities. A united society is far more resistant to external manipulation.

11. Conclusion

Hybrid warfare has fundamentally changed the nature of conflict in the modern world. It is no longer limited to battlefields or direct military confrontation but extends into cyberspace, diplomacy, economy, media, and public perception. For Pakistan, hybrid warfare represents one of the most serious national security challenges because it attacks the state from within rather than from across borders.

This research demonstrates that Indian hybrid warfare against Pakistan is aimed at political destabilization, economic weakening, diplomatic isolation, exploitation of internal divisions, sabotage of strategic projects such as CPEC, and long term strategic exhaustion. Unlike conventional war, hybrid warfare operates gradually and often invisibly, making it more difficult to detect and counter. Its success depends not only on external pressure but also on the internal vulnerabilities of the target state.

The study shows that India's strategy is often linked with the Doval Doctrine, which emphasizes offensive defense through covert operations, proxy actors, media warfare, cyber attacks, and psychological pressure rather than open war. The use of disinformation campaigns, proxy militancy, and diplomatic narrative building reflects how modern conflict now targets legitimacy and institutional trust rather than only military positions.

The 2025 India Pakistan confrontation further proved that conventional warfare and hybrid warfare are now deeply interconnected. The aerial dogfight involving advanced fighter jets, missile systems, radar warfare, and electronic operations demonstrated that modern military engagement cannot be separated from cyber defense, information control, and strategic communication. Pakistan's retaliatory response showed that deterrence today depends as much on perception and narrative control as on physical military capability.

The study also highlights that Pakistan's response must be multidimensional. Military preparedness remains important, but national security now depends equally on cyber defense, strategic communication, economic stability, diplomatic resilience, and institutional trust. Hybrid warfare cannot be defeated by force alone; it requires the strength of the state and the confidence of the people.

Ultimately, the greatest defense against hybrid warfare is national cohesion. A politically stable, economically strong, technologically prepared, and socially united Pakistan is far less vulnerable to external manipulation. The challenge is not only to defend borders but to protect institutions, identity, and public trust. In the twenty first century, the strongest states are not simply those with powerful armies, but those whose societies remain united against invisible wars.

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