

The Fog of Information Warfare: The Use of Propaganda in the Events Surrounding Operation Sindoor



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Abstract

India's Operation Sindoor took place in the early hours of May 7, 2025 (approximately 1 am to 1:30am). The operation targeted terrorist training camps in POK and Pakistan. This Operation occurred in the wake of the Pahalgam Terror incident on April 22, 2025 and was followed by 'Operation Bunyan al-Marsus'— Pakistan initiated UAV/Drone and missile attacks targeting Indian Military, Civilian, and religious sites. Ceasefire was declared on May 10 but broken within a few hours; a more stable ceasefire was established by May 13, 2025.

Propaganda and 'agitprop' were disseminated in a massive scale in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor. Narratives/counternarratives, disinformation/misinformation campaigns were carried out via social media, legacy media, and the Governments of several countries. The objectives of this 'information warfare' ranged from psychological (demoralizing/dividing the enemy), to political (capturing the narrative) to economic (promote/defame defense products such as missiles and fighter jets).

This article is a study of propaganda deployed in the events surrounding Operation Sindoor. Contemporary scholarship is used to introduce modern propaganda operations, their goals, and intended effect(s). Propaganda items selected from media/social media articles are analyzed. The objectives and comparative success of different types of propaganda, the modus operandi of dissemination, and the effectiveness of debunk campaigns against disinformation and misinformation are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Propaganda has been described as an attempt to shape the thoughts and feelings of others in ways that conform to the aims of the communicator (Marlin, 2013, 12 as cited in Dodds, 2018). Propaganda is as old as human civilization. Ancient stela, such as the great stela of Eannatum of Lagash (c.2550 BC) and the Akkadian Victory Stele of NaramSin (c.2196-2160 BC) that portray the king's almost superhuman victory demonstrate awareness of propaganda after-the-event (Taylor, 2006, 20-21). The goal of Propaganda is not limited to individual choice; rather, the object is asked 'to sacrifice, to do something for god, country, society, democracy, freedom, or organization' (Laskin, 2019, 311). That is, Propaganda aims to implant strong bias for or against an ideology and use this bias to cause action. For example, asking people to consume less electricity to reduce their bill and expenditure is not propaganda; however, asking them to consume less electricity to reduce global warming is propaganda. Even people who can easily afford to pay large bills would be convinced to consume less electricity 'for a higher cause.' As evinced by this example, propaganda can be used for the general good as well. Laskin defines propaganda as *a persuasive communication activity that establishes symbiotic relations between an individual and a larger entity into which this individual is being dissolved* (Laskin, 2019, 313). This definition is very useful while analyzing the effects of social and mass media on the individual psyche. Social movements are formed by groups of highly motivated individuals whose motivation is at least partially a result of propaganda circulated by agenda-ridden entities; therefore, recognizing the propaganda on which a social movement is built is key to understanding the movement's purpose and ultimate goals.

Most modern nation states are not based on ethnic or religious identity; they are geo-political entities. Propaganda is therefore necessary to foster a sense of 'nationalism.' In this sense, Nations are 'abstract communities' that establish a sense of belonging via narratives about history and ancestry which use the fact that citizens have a shared sense of space and time (Ismangil, 2023, 491). For example, A national flag is an abstract symbol that serves as potent propaganda that binds citizens together. Citizens report high levels of hopefulness and satisfaction in response to their own flags and negative emotions in response to enemy flags (Muldoon, 2020); this is a result of their exposure to Nationalist Propaganda. Many State and non-State actors use Nationalism as a vehicle to capture subjects for so called 'Nationalist' causes.

In fact, propaganda is so endemic and penetrates society to such an extent that we may say that the world view of humans is formed by layers of propaganda. The actions and perceptions of individuals is determined by propaganda. Propaganda is not innately 'good' or 'evil' but rather an unavoidable aspect of social living. Inasmuch as humans cannot function purely as individuals in modern nation-states, society would descend into anarchy if every individual simply attempts to fulfil personal goals without any consideration for the common needs of society (Laskin, 2019, 311). For this reason, some sort of propaganda is necessary to bind society in modern, diverse nation states.

Our reality is post-truth - public opinion is shaped by subjective factors such as emotions, identity, and beliefs rather than by objective facts (Proroković, 2024, 45). This is especially the case when it comes to modern nation states - what is beneficial for one state politically, socially, or economically may be ruinous for another. Propaganda is deployed by various actors to align public opinion either with or against the goals of the state. In fact, most mass movements are a result of propaganda powerful enough to make or break governments and foment large scale insurrections.

Deploying propaganda on a large scale has become incredibly easy in the age of social media and the subjects of this type of 'hybrid warfare' may be exposed to just one side of an issue and have trouble distinguishing truth from falsehood (Proroković, 2024, 52). Cleverly crafted propaganda is so subtle that it is very hard to counter; online 'trolling' attacks in an info-war climate may cause subjects (even academics) to self-censor (Aro, 2016). These factors increase the odds of 'one-sided' exposure to issues. The ability of propaganda to penetrate the minds of people, and thus public opinion, is contingent upon skillful framing of the issue (Marlin, 2013 as cited in Dodds, 2018).

Awareness of the forms of propaganda that mold public opinion at any given time is imperative due to a) the power of propaganda and b) the current ease of dissemination. Analysis of the propaganda with respect to objectives, framing, targeted groups (and the reason for their vulnerability/immunity), objectivity and bias (including one-sided coverage), ethical implications, instigation to violence, adherence to fact etc. is also in order. The efficacy of propaganda in achieving the ostensible goals of the propagating entity should also be considered in any analysis. Constructs such as the seven propaganda devices (Sproule, 2001) are very useful in classifying and analyzing propaganda.

2. Materials and Methods

The Pahalgam attack, operation Sindoor, the Pakistani response 'Operation Bunyan al-Marsus', and the statements of military and political leaders have been widely covered by both legacy and social media sources. Commentaries by a wide range of media personalities, news persons, academics, business persons and politicians are also available in the public domain; so is the public response to media coverage and commentary. These sources offer a detailed picture of the unfolding of events, associated propaganda, and public reactions.

Representative memes, media releases, short videos, speeches etc. from sources including social media influencers, media houses, and government handles dated from the last weeks of April 2025 to about mid-May 2025 have been picked if they fulfil one or more of the following criteria

- a) Capitalize on autostereotypes/heterostereotypes (Shlyakhova, 2018, 2) to split people into identity groups
- b) Call for action based on 'larger than self' ideals such as the ultimate good, religious truth, destruction of evil etc.
- c) Evoke the spirit of nationalism based on flags/other potent national symbols
- d) Use archetypes and powerful symbolism
- e) Use conspiracy theories to influence public opinion
- f) In general, fulfil the criteria of one or more of the seven propaganda devices (Sproule, 2001, 135)- name calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon.

The picked artefacts have been analyzed thoroughly with respect to motivation and effect on the public. Whenever suitable, contemporary scholarship on the topics of propaganda, war propaganda, agitprop and visual symbols, information warfare, and emotional/psychological response to propaganda have been used to corroborate the analysis.

The seven propaganda devices (Sproule, 2001) have been used to classify and analyze the propaganda items whenever possible. The ostensible human targets and general goals of the propaganda have been listed. The framing of the agenda has also been described. Success/failure in terms of creating a lasting impression on the subject and achievement of propaganda goals and the possible reasons for success/failure have been discussed. Notes on the effectiveness of debunk campaigns (if any) against disinformation and misinformation with respect to the propaganda topics have been added.

3. Discussion and Results

3.1 Precursor - Blood, Toil, Tears, and Xenophobia

A speech by the Pakistani Army Chief at the time, Asim Munir, is often cited as a herald of the Pahalgam terrorist attack (Gupta, 2025a; Haidar, 2025a). The speech was delivered on April 16th to a gathering of overseas residents of Pakistani origin and was immediately remarked upon widely within Indian Media (Mukul, 2025; Singh, N. 2025; Haidar, 2025b)

This speech lauded the grand efforts of the founders of Pakistan in a style very evocative of the 'blood, sweat, toil' speech of Churchill in the British house of commons when he was garnering support for his government on the eve of World War 2 ("Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat", n.d.). Munir's speech, however, had Jingoism as an additional ingredient. The speech stressed the fundamentals of the two-nation theory – that Pakistan was founded upon the sacrifices of forefathers based on innate, fundamental differences between Muslims and Hindus. The speech also reiterated the popular Pakistani notion that Kashmir will continue to be central to Pakistan ('Jugular Vein')

Saying that subcontinental Muslims are innately different from Hindus is powerful propaganda. The two groups are similar, if not identical, in terms of ethnicity. They are somewhat aligned in terms of language, food habits, social conservatism, clothes, and even pop culture and music. Over centuries, religious differences have been exploited by a variety of entities to convince subcontinental Hindus and Muslims that they have irreconcilable differences.

The two-nation solution is a result of the success of divisive propaganda. Munir's speech, which capitalizes on the two-nation theory as well as religious differences, is one of many attempts to exploit religious differences and put people who should be able to co-exist peacefully at odds. Kashmiris are described as innately allied with Pakistan only due to the common factor of religion: Kashmir is an integral to Pakistan since Kashmiris are mostly Muslim. On the ground, this notion is far from the truth – there have been anti-Pakistan protests in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (Masoodi, 2025). Conversely, during the peaceful elections of 2024 in the Indian state of Kashmir, voter turnout approached 70% ("Restoring Democracy: Jammu and Kashmir's Historic 2024 Assembly Elections", 2024) signaling the willingness of Indian Kashmiris to participate in the democratic process of the Indian state.

Kashmir is relatively peaceful after decades of insurgency; Kashmiris are getting a taste of prosperity and normalcy. Tourism to Kashmir has increased to 2.6 million in 2022 from 870,000 in 2018 ("Tourist Figure", n.d.). Despite significant challenges, Indian Kashmiris are more hopeful for a good future (Majid, 2024). In fact, a special Vande Bharat train was on the brink of inauguration even as Munir delivered this speech (Porecha, 2025). Commentators have surmised that the bombastic speech and even the attack are attempts to derail Kashmir's path to stability and prosperity (Gupta, 2025a); the government of India has also remarked that the divisive speech may have triggered the terrorist attack and that the attack was an attempt to disrupt communal harmony ("India says Pakistan Army chief Asim Munir's provocative speech was likely trigger for Pahalgam attack", 2025; Press trust of India, 2025).

Munir's speech corresponds to Laskin's definition of propaganda (Laskin, 2019, 313) since it was a) persuasive, b) a communicative activity c) an attempt to dissolve the individual identity of subcontinental citizens into the

larger ‘Muslim’ and ‘Hindu’ categories d) the ‘symbiotic relationship’ between the individual identity and religious identity in this context is intangible - preservation of culture, pride etc. – Specifically, Munir alluded to Pakistan being the only country to be formed based on the Kalima after Medina (Gupta, 2025b)

Marlin has posited that the ‘frame’ within which an issue is presented is a major contributor to the success of propaganda surrounding the issue (Marlin, 2013 as cited in Dodds, 2018)– Given the history of the subcontinent and the deep-rooted perception of ‘Otherness’ between Indians and Pakistanis as well as Hindus and Muslims, the framing of the propaganda was almost perfect. Religiously fanatic and bombastic rhetoric is not uncommon in India and Pakistan – but this speech was delivered by the man at the center of power in Pakistan rather than some extremist small-time leader. Further, this controversial speech was delivered in English (with some Hindi interjections). These are clues that the xenophobia was not accidental but rather planned and executed propaganda targeted toward both the Autostereotyped (Muslim) group and the Heterosereotyped (Hindu) group. Indian Muslims may have also been another target of the persuasive speech; the idea may have been to instill/further ‘otherness’ of Muslims within the Indian Muslim (and Hindu) psyche.

Hindus and other Non-Muslims in Kashmir have been targeted since the abrogation of Article 370 (Limaye, 2022; Press Trust of India, 2021). However, the in-your-face isolation of non-Muslims and blatant modus operandi of the Pahalgam attack - the terrorists asked victims to recite the Kalima, checked ID, and even checked for circumcision – suggests a planned implementation of the divisive propaganda goals of Munir’s xenophobic speech.

Propaganda stirs up deep rooted existing archetypical and socially ingrained beliefs to provoke action (Shlyakhova, 2018, 4). The co-opting of very young men by the terrorist group is an obvious example of action provoked by propaganda (Malpani, 2025a). However, Munir’s brash, overt xenophobia and the brazenly communal fervor of the terrorists achieved high penetration across the subcontinent among subjects highly susceptible to the communal signaling given the entrenched identity politics of the sub-continent. The attack, while devastating, could have been dwarfed by a far worse fallout.

Table 1 Munir’s Speech - Propaganda Analysis.

Criteria	Rationale
Autostereotype/Heterostereotypes	Hindus Innately Different from Muslims
Call for Action based on Ideals	Pakistan divinely sanctioned; duty towards children/ancestors to propagate two nation theory
Spirit Of Nationalism	Foundation of Pakistan based on Islam, culture uniting Pakistan etc.
Archetypes/Symbolism	Creation of the Holy city of Medina compared Creation to Pakistan
Propaganda Devices Used	Glittering Generalities – Muslims and Hindus almost different Species; ‘sacrifices’ of founders of Pakistan etc. Transfer – Authority of Medina and Islam carried over to Pakistani Nation State Plain folk – A man powerful enough to throw the elected leader of Pakistan (Imran Khan) in prison uses the pronoun ‘we’ to establish connection with the audience and citizens Bandwagon – Appeal to religion, cultural and national duty etc. to propagate the two-nation theory

3.2 Demonization and Disinformation

The government of India has said that the terrorist attack ‘aimed to spread fear, hurt tourism, and spark discord’ (PTI News, 2025). Propaganda that followed the terrorist attack capitalized on the communal nature of the attack and demonized Kashmiri Muslims and Students even though the Kashmiri Muslim community explicitly condemned the attack (“Kashmir observes complete shutdown in protest against Pahalgam terror attack”, 2025). In fact, large anti-terrorism marches, genuine vigils and protests were called ‘drama’ in social media post comments (Greater Kashmir, 2025). Several social media handles tried to foist collective responsibility onto all Kashmiri Muslims, denigrated Muslims as a group, and threatened violence. Scattered Hate speech and hate crimes against Muslims in general and Kashmiri Muslims in particular occurred across India (Maniyar, 2025). Even Col. Quereshi – spokesperson for the army – was targeted in a hate speech by an elected official (Malpani, 2025b).

Along with the challenges of dissipating and prosecuting hate speeches and hate crimes, India also had to face disinformation that used the hate crimes and speeches as ammunition to foster a narrative of a large scale, politically sponsored pogrom-like situation against Kashmiris and Muslims in India (Kulsum, 2025). This disinformation was in turn used by politically motivated actors within India and other countries. Fortunately, prompt response by law enforcement – even when the culprit happened to be from the ruling party (Malpani, 2025b), push back on Anti-Muslim/Kashmiri hate narratives from even prominent right-wing influencers (Major Madhan Kumar, 2025), and the general law-abiding nature of Indian public at large prevented the wide scale communal fallout and discord that had been anticipated by the forces behind the attack.

On May 18th 2025, a University Professor (also a member of a political party) was arrested for an innocuous social media post that ended with ‘Jai Hind’ and clearly supported India but contained criticism of a political party (Sandhu, 2025). His political rivals filed an FIR to the effect that the post ‘endangered the sovereignty and integrity of the country.’ The actual content of the post did not matter; bad faith actors were able to use communal stereotypes to get a political rival arrested on a flimsy pretext. Further, although clarifications regarding his original post/articles condemning the arrest appeared in mainstream and social media, the professor continued to be vilified by allusions to his grandfather’s support for Pakistan (Singh, B. K, 2025). This is the fallout of the climate of distrust fostered by divisive propaganda.

Table 2 - Hate Propaganda after Pahalgam – A Few Elements.

Criteria	Rationale
Autostereotype/Heterostereotypes	Kashmiri Muslims as Outsiders / identified with Heterostereotyped Pakistanis
Propaganda Devices Used	<p>Name Calling – Of Kashmiri Muslims and Muslims in general</p> <p>Glittering Generalities – Jingoist/xenophobic viewpoints legitimized by associating with Patriotism, National pride</p> <p>Transfer – Criminal Perpetrators of hate crimes ‘defending’ against ‘anti-nationals’ (transfer from military)</p> <p>Card Stacking – Overemphasis of a few Kashmiri militants to vilify all Muslims; underemphasis of genuine mourning and vigils as ‘fake’ and ‘acting’</p> <p>Bandwagon – A xenophobic assumption that all Muslims are anti-national etc. leading to hate crimes</p>

3.3 A Furor Over Flags

Symbols associated with any group are potent archetypes that elicit intense emotions from those who identify strongly with the said group (Muldoon, 2020, 265). The flag is the cardinal symbol of a nation state. The flag of India is abstract - saffron represents purity, white represents peace, green represents fertility/growth, the Ashoka chakra represents Dharma (“My India My Pride - Indian Tricolor”, n.d.). Indians are by and large taught to revere the flag.

Pasting a Nation’s flag on the ground so that passers-by may walk on it and burning a flag are acts that desecrate a revered symbol. These actions occurred both in India and Pakistan (AFP News Agency 2025; Gupta, Shobit, 2025). Videos of such events were disseminated via social media and used to spread different types of propaganda.

Flag desecration propaganda is often used to unite the ‘in’ group – Trampling/burning of the Enemy Country flag evokes a crude sense of camaraderie. Videos of such events from the enemy country – that show one own’s country flag being desecrated - are used as ‘evidence’ of the animosity of enemy country citizens towards one’s own country.

While these types of propaganda are overt in terms of framing and signaling, a far more insidious propaganda was disseminated through videos of flag desecration. In their work on Hong Kong Agitprop, Ismangil et al have noted that evolving group affiliations and identities make Nationalism a controversial topic (Ismangil, 2023) and that nationalism becomes particularly prominent during times of conflict (Breuilly, 1993 as cited in Ismangil, 2023). The ambiguity surrounding national identity is very pronounced in incredibly diverse countries like India. While the flag of India is abstract, the flag of Pakistan incorporates both the color and symbol associated with Islam. Muldoon et al have found that the degree of identification is related to the emotions elicited by a flag (Muldoon, 2020). The Pakistani flag contains powerful religious symbols and therefore elicits far stronger emotions within the in-group. More importantly, it is only natural that the universal Islamic symbols on the flag would elicit strong reactions from all Muslims, regardless of nationality. Many Indian Muslims refused to trample the Pakistani Flag and/or attempted to remove it from the road or sidewalk to prevent it from getting trampled. Popular social media accounts used videos of these actions to spread propaganda that Indian Muslims are ‘Internal Pakistanis’ who support the enemy country. Unfortunately, many Indians do not understand the significance of the Islamic symbols in the Pakistani flags and were affected by this communal propaganda (Gupta, Shobit, 2025). This negative propaganda obtained far more traction than videos of large groups of Kashmiris denouncing and marching against the terrorist attack. The divisive and communal nature of the terrorist attack further contributed to the success of this communal propaganda.

Stereotypes describe ‘othered’ groups of people using simplified cognitive models for complex scenarios (Shlyakhova, 2018, 2); the taken-for-granted association of the stereotyped group with negative traits shields other groups (Shlyakhova, 2018, 2). ‘Indian Muslims support the Pakistani flag and are therefore anti-national’ is an example of such a stereotype. The flag propaganda videos reinforced existing stereotypes about Indian Muslims. Propaganda of this sort should be refuted strongly but, in this case, there were neither rebuttals nor push-back from authorities.

3.4 Caricatures and Canards

The use of archetypes and stereotypes can make propaganda highly effective (Shlyakhova, 2018). This is why memes and caricatures – which capitalize on archetypes and stereotypes – are used extensively to spread propaganda. These vehicles of propaganda were employed by all actors in the events surrounding operation Sindoor.

People who respond well to visual stimuli (primarily youth) are captured by disinformation through memes, caricatures, and videos (Aro, 2016). After Operation Sindoor, such artefacts served as large scale propaganda tools used to mock/demoralize adversaries and shape public narrative. They were also used to garner support for military actions and disseminate patriotic sentiment. Erbschloe points out that military applications of social media warfare require far more technical skill than waging digital war using memes and propaganda videos via social media and the internet (Erbschloe, 2017 as cited in Dodds, 2018). Governments and civilian influencers widely used the latter tactic. For example, a Chinese TikTok Parody video released by Chinese State Media and widely shared on TikTok (and later X) showed four Chinese people dancing to a Bollywood-style parody song in brownface with cardboard aircraft replicas stuck on their turbans (Soch!, 2025). The performance mocked India based on Pakistan Air Force claims (thus far unverified) of shooting down three Rafales, a MiG-29, and a Su-30 (Siddiqui, 2025). The propaganda was meant to demoralize and humiliate the Indian public while projecting the superiority of Pakistan's Chinese made J-10C over India's French manufactured Rafales. While demonstrating Chinese support for Pakistan's narrative against India, the Video also weaponized anti-Indian stereotypes. Indians were caricatured – turbans, gaudy clothes, exaggerated facial expressions – to give a general impression of bungling inefficiency. The derision evoked by the caricatures of the Indians would drive viewers (perhaps already biased by Stereotypes) to assume that such persons could only be soundly defeated. Importantly, a third-party nation (China) used satire to support their strategic ally (Pakistan) against a common rival (India). This type of information warfare has a reach that is far greater than traditional military engagement. Several political cartoons and caricatures of Asim Munir, the Army Chief (at the time) of Pakistan came into circulation and are noteworthy as they represent an attempt to push him off his pedestal and thus humiliate the adversary.



Image-1 (Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-plus/toi-in-depth-stories-on-operation-sindoor/munirs-mad-bad->



Image-2 (Source: <https://x.com/satishacharya/status/1919966053955780848?s=46>

Image 1 shows Asim Munir as a petulant child throwing a tantrum. This caricature creates an image of a weak and out of control figurehead in the minds of viewers.

Image 2 shows Munir with his pants down in a powerful image of vulnerability and humiliation; in this caricature, Munir symbolizes Pakistan and is an exposed and vulnerable target for Indian guns, humiliated and caught unaware.



Image3(Source:<https://x.com/alphat00nist/status/19248679634735273?s=46>)

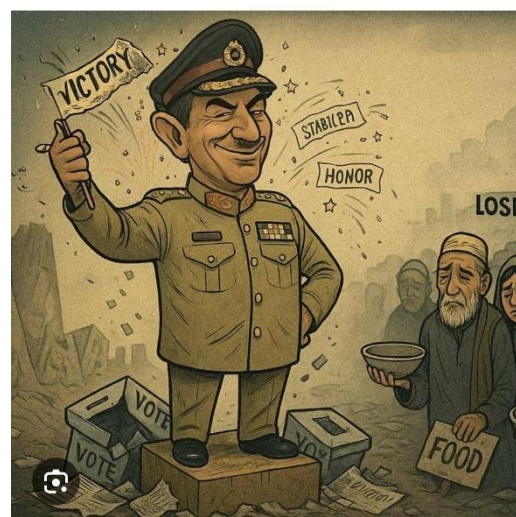


Image- 4 (Source: <https://www.indiatoday.in/opinion/story/india-pakistan-conflict-ceasefire-asim-munir-victory-citizens-lost-2724684-2025-05-14>)

Image 3 shows the irony of internal military promotions, with the “most deserving candidate” being promoted through what appears to be a rigged process; the top half represents the outward ‘fake’ honor and pride while the bottom half represents the true status quo – ‘exposure’ and defeat by the adversary.

Image 4 depicts Munir celebrating “victory” while ordinary citizens appear to be suffering, he has usurped the ‘vote’, and signals “stability” and “honor” while the citizens have lost everything and are struggling for food. This caricature portrays Munir as a cold, ego-driven leader who cares more about touting a non-existent victory than his people and uses propaganda about Pakistan’s victory to pull wool over the eyes of Pakistani Citizens.

While these cartoons and caricatures may overtly reflect the controversial nature of the promotion of General Asim Munir to Field Marshal just days after the country faced a major military embarrassment or Pakistan’s defeat, the cognitive model they use is in fact archetypal and universal - they portray the heterostereotypes of the adversary as ‘hypertropically cartoonish and caricatured’, pathetic and evil (Shlyakhova, 2018, 5)

Table 3 Propaganda Elements – Flags and Caricatures

Criteria	Rationale
Autostereotype/Heterostereotypes	Stereotypes of Bungling, clumsy, gaudily dressed Indians singing Bollywood songs Flag desecration a condition for being in the ‘In group’ and used to other Muslim Citizens
Archetypes/Symbolism	Munir as evil dictator, Munir ‘disrobed’ indicates vulnerability etc.; Trampling and burning of Flag is equivalent to National fervor
Propaganda Devices Used	Glittering generalities – Not trampling a flag associated with anti-nationalism, disloyalty, treachery Transfer – Caricatured portrayal of Indians -> Inefficiency of Indian Military; Munir’s humiliating caricature -> Humiliation of Pakistan as a whole Card Stacking – Over emphasis of stereotypical negative caricatures of Indians to veil military achievements; refusal to walk on flag equated to treachery and disloyalty of the entire community Bandwagon – Appeal to religion, cultural and national duty etc. to propagate the two-nation theory

3.5 Phony News and Psyops

Both India and Pakistan engaged in Information warfare through social media in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor. According to Erbschloe, propaganda is meant to confuse and disorient adversaries in a way that they can no longer discriminate between fact and lies (Erbschloe, 2017, 61 as cited in Dodds, 2018). The Pakistani

media misinformation campaign was a sophisticated information warfare operation that involved recycling old footage, fabricating evidence, coordinating false narratives across multiple social media platforms such as X and Facebook, and leveraging international sympathy via misleading claims of civilian targets (Chitre, 2025). These tactics confused adversaries and neutral parties. The X platform, banned in Pakistan for the fifteen months preceding Operation Sindoor, was opened again right afterwards just to flood India with Disinformation (Sharma, 2025).

Among the most prominent falsehoods was the claim that Pakistan had captured an Indian pilot and had damaged the Adampur Military base (Goyal, 2025; TOI News Desk, 2025b). These claims were quickly flagged as fake by independent analysts and India's official fact-checking mechanisms using satellite data (TOI News Desk, 2025c). Further, a photo circulated by several Pakistani social media handles claiming to show the rear-stabilizer of an Indian Rafale fighter jet allegedly downed by Pakistan on May 7, 2025 was exposed as an image from a 2021 MiG-21 crash in Punjab's Moga district (Press Information Bureau, n. d.). Pakistani media recycled old crash footage to create false narratives about current events. This type of fakery, along with unverified but also undenied reports of downed aircraft, created an impression of a Pakistani Win in the minds of many although satellite imagery and verified news clearly revealed that India held the Upper Hand.

Importantly, Pakistani disinformation was not limited to media releases but directly disseminated by the government of Pakistan ("Pakistan government posts video game footage as military response to India attack, gets trolled," 2025; "Pakistan defence minister's live TV blunder: Khawaja Asif cites social media to claim Indian jets were shot down, gets fact-checked", 2025). This aspect set apart the narratives of India and Pakistan; Indian government sources either shared verifiable information or refused to clarify on speculations. In addition, although some major Indian media sources also released misinformation regarding hits at Karachi (Zaman, 2025), there was less deliberate disinformation.

The Pakistani Media made absurd claims regarding 70% of India's power grid being knocked out by Pakistani Cyber Attacks. This fake news was quickly debunked by the PIB (PIB Fact Check, 2025). The PIB report (and the power outage propaganda) was meant for the international audience as no one was fooled by this report in India where even city-wide power outages are rare and make national news when they do occur.

The Pakistani Government disseminated large amounts of propaganda to their citizens. For instance, a Youm-e-Marka-e-Haq yearly event was declared by the Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif to commemorate the 'magnificent success' of Operation Bunyan Al Marsoos ("Youm-e-Marka-e-Haq", 2025). Whenever possible, grand themes from Islam were used in speeches to give the 'victory' archetypal and religious significance ("President, PM eulogise martyrs of Marka-e-Haq as Youm-e-Tashakur observed nationwide", 2025). Hapless Pakistani citizens were shown video game footage and told that the footage was from attacks on Indian targets. In fact, the official Twitter account of the Government of Pakistan posted footage from the video game ARMA 3, claiming it shows a real military response to India ("Pakistan government posts video game footage as military response to India attack, gets trolled", 2025).

Notably, this was not just individual social media users sharing false content, but rather Pakistan's official government account deliberately presenting video game footage as authentic military action. Pakistani citizens were psychologically manipulated into a 'victory narrative' through the elevation of Asim Munir to the rank of Field Marshall (Hussain, 2025) – after all, a promotion of this sort, only the second in the history of Pakistan, must mean victory in war. Ironically, even the commemorative photograph presented by Asim Munir to the Prime Minister during an official dinner event was not from Pakistani military action but from a Chinese military exercise onto which Pakistani military insignia and branding was superimposed (The Hindu Bureau, 2025) (Image 5).

Easily debunkable fake claims and blatantly false propaganda were widely distributed in Pakistan not only by media but the highest echelons of government and military. Not much effort was spent to make the claims seem authentic and they were either not taken seriously or debunked within hours internationally. The outlandish nature of these claims and their grandiosity is evidence that the subjects of the propaganda were not the adversaries or neutral parties but Pakistani citizens. This was a 'psy op' or psychological operation. The goal of psychological operations is to "influence changes in the attitudes and behavior of adversaries, friends and neutral public in a way that corresponds to the achievement of the national, political and military goals of the organizers of the operations" (Miljković, 2008, 8 as cited in Proroković, 2024). In this case, the powerful military elite in Pakistan disseminated propaganda about a false victory to maintain their image and stay relevant in the minds of the citizens and thus hold on to the reins of power. Media and political figureheads toed in line with the military command as dissent would mean imprisonment or worse. In the end, the Pakistani citizenry was the worst affected due to their psychological capture by the 'victory' psyop. Further, political commentators have speculated that the 'Victory' psyop would be leveraged by Munir to legitimize more drastic and desperate escalations (Gupta, 2025c).

The Chief of Defense Service General Anil Chauhan admitted that 15% of the operational time during Operation Sindoor was spent debunking fake news (TOI News Desk, 2025a). This suggests that the scale of information warfare was so significant that it required substantial military resources to counter. Pakistan relied on doctored content propagated via foreign media allies and social media to shape public opinion ("Fake claims, old pics: Pakistan intensifies misinformation after India's Operation Sindoor", 2025; Badkar, 2025).



Image 5 (Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-field-marshal-asim-munir-gifts-morphed-photo-of-chinese-military-exercise/article69624420.ece>)

While exaggerations, jingoism, and misinformation were rampant in Indian Media coverage, Independent Indian fact check agencies were instrumental in keeping citizens informed and debunking fake news (“Truth is the casualty”: How Indian fact-checkers debunked false claims during the India-Pakistan crisis, 2025). Further, official reports presented by military and government officials with evidence seemed to satisfy Indian citizens; therefore, misinformation and disinformation did not leave a lasting impression.

The most notable propaganda on the Indian side with high penetration was a purported hit on an alleged nuclear storage facility in Kirana Hills near Sarghoda in Pakistan. This rumor spread rapidly across Indian social media and mainstream media platforms (DNAIndiaNews, 2025). The Army spokesperson issued a denial along with ambiguous jocular statements that became fodder for conspiracy theorists (“We didn’t know Kirana Hills has nukes” — Air Marshal Bharti’s viral response | What India really hit, 2025).

A “Radiological Safety Bulletin” document purportedly issued by Government of Pakistan detailing radiation leak at a facility in Northern Pakistan was a widely shared propaganda artefact. Multiple fact-checking organizations debunked the viral document which was riddled with spelling and grammatical errors. Fact checkers pointed out that there was no public record of any entity called the National Radiological Safety Division or even an ‘Engr. Malik Asad Rafiq’ on any credible source or Pakistani government document (First Post, 2025). However, this propaganda was so widely disseminated through social media and YouTube channels and captured subjects so compellingly that debunking and fact checks were simply not effective. The origin of the Kirana hills propaganda remains dubious; but it has all the makings of a sophisticated Psychological Operation.

While the Pakistani ‘victory’ psyop seems to have been targeted towards Pakistani citizens, the Kirana hills nuclear storage hit/fallout psyop seems to have been targeted primarily towards Indian citizens. The former was meant to legitimize and bolster the power held by the Pakistani Military while the latter was meant to infuse confidence and reassure Indian citizens about Indian military Power. The success of such psychological operations – their capture of subjects; and resistance to debunk and fact check efforts – demonstrate that psyops have extensive national and global-scale potential to influence and are particularly dangerous because the subjects simply accept the propaganda as fact, unaware of the goals of the propagators (Proroković, 2024). Millions of people have been captured by these psyops - as suggested by Prorokovic, massive psyops wage a ‘psychological war’ that manipulates the citizenry into accepting and internalizing the propaganda of actors with political and other goals (Proroković, 2024, 47). This process is called ‘imposing a new truth’ or ‘constructing a post-truth’ and is now very easy to plan and implement on a massive scale due to technical advances and the ubiquity of social media (Proroković, 2024, 53).

Table 3 – Psyops - Propaganda Analysis of Sample Elements.

Criteria	Rationale
Autostereotypes/Heterostereotypes	Victory Psyop: Pakistani ‘victory’ vs Indian ‘defeat’ Nuclear Fallout: India ‘Fearless’ vs Pakistan Polluted, no defenses, imminent ruin
Spirit Of Nationalism	‘Victory’ lauded by a nationalist celebration; dissent not possible
Archetypes/Symbolism	Fake Victory Divinely Sanctioned; Symbolism of Nuclear Fallout and Ruin
Propaganda Devices Used	Glittering Generalities – Victory, Honor, favored by God etc associated with win propaganda Transfer – Authority of Nation and Religion used to sell Win Propaganda

	<p>Card Stacking – One or Two Suggestive images of smoke, outside a cave, fake leaflet etc used to sell mass-scale propaganda about a hit of nuclear facilities.</p> <p>Bandwagon – ‘Victory’ a government position, commemorative day declared -> accepted by everyone; nuclear fallout widely spoken off; so true</p>
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3.6 Winners, Losers, and Mediators

Donald Trump, backed by the United States Administration, also jumped in to exploit the situation through propaganda aimed at self-promotion and a favorable response towards his administration. According to Trump’s narrative, India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire following U.S.-led talks to end the most serious military confrontation between the nuclear-armed rivals in decades (Detrow, 2025). Trump presented this as a major diplomatic achievement of his administration. Trump also claimed to have used trade deals as incentives to achieve the ceasefire (“India disputes Trump’s claim that U.S. trade incentives led to ceasefire with Pakistan”, 2025). The Indian government strongly disputed Trump’s claim that the U.S.-mediated ceasefire between India and Pakistan came about due to US mediation (“India disputes Trump’s claim that U.S. trade incentives led to ceasefire with Pakistan”, 2025).

The spokesman for India’s foreign ministry said that top leaders in New Delhi and Washington were in touch following the Indian military’s intense standoff with Pakistan, but that there was no conversation on trade; and that Pakistan military command had called India and requested the ceasefire (“India disputes Trump’s claim that U.S. trade incentives led to ceasefire with Pakistan”, 2025). Prime Minister Modi also contradicted Trump’s claims, stating that the ceasefire was achieved through direct military-to-military talks and not US mediation (Oneindia News, 2025).

In face of the fact that Vice President JD Vance had insisted the conflict was “fundamentally, none of our business” just days before Trump’s grandiose claims, this U-Turn was bizarre (TOI News Desk, 2025d). Despite this inconsistency, Trump’s assertions regarding brokering the ceasefire were unquestioningly amplified by his supporters and Western Right-wing Media. Comments from supporters spoke glowingly of Trump’s achievements as a peace broker (Taheri, 2025)

For the first time, a claim made only in public speeches and social media posts by the American president without any corroborating evidence or even agreement from the involved parties was formally documented in US court records to defend tariff policies (Mishra, 2025). The US claims were widely promoted by Western Main Stream and Right-wing social media without even a mention of the Indian counter position (Taheri, 2025). The entire operation amounted to a massive psyop designed to dazzle his MAGA home base and thus enhance the Trump administration’s foreign policy credentials and garner support for his trade policies. Tens of millions of people were captured and Trump was spoken of as a global peacemaker. Astuti et al, in their study of the Russian – Ukrainian conflict, have discussed how social media may be used to efficiently disseminate propaganda; and how the dissemination is especially effective and dangerous in the ‘post truth’ era i.e. a scenario where emotions and personal bias, identity etc. guide public opinion far more than objective facts (Astuti, 2022). Trump’s peacemaking claims after Operation Sindoor serve as a practical example; not only were claims made on social media and public speeches taken for fact by a wide section of the public, the wide dissemination of these claims gave them enough gravity to be ‘true enough’ to use in court documents (Mishra, 2025). Further, the success of this psyop in the developed west shows that no citizenry is immune to propaganda.

Table 4: Trump’s Ceasefire Propaganda – A Sample of Propaganda Devices Used

Criteria	Rationale
Autostereotypes/Heterostereotypes	Strong, ‘white’, western, developed USA vs fighting, ‘3 rd world’ India and Pakistan Patronizing attitude usually used for developing nations
Archetypes/Symbolism	
Propaganda Devices Used	<p>Glittering Generalities – Peace president etc. Transfer and Testimonial – Authority of US Presidency used to sell fake claims regarding ceasefire</p> <p>Card Stacking – ‘Both Side’-ism emphasized over actual facts to give a superficial picture of neutrality Bandwagon – MAGA followers and conservative western media jumps on the ‘peace president’ Bandwagon</p>

Conclusions

Social media was the new bottle through which age-old propaganda tactics were served in the events around Operation Sindoor. Scholars have studied the use of Propaganda in wars and the use of social media in the Ukraine-Russia war; their insights also apply to the India-Pakistan military conflict. Technological advances and proliferation of social networks have boosted the scope and spread of propaganda to a massive scale; thus, millions of humans – perhaps a significant percent of the world’s population – were the subjects of psychological and propaganda operations by both state and non-state actors during and in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor. Governments used the situation to conduct psychological operations - the Chinese Government attempted to showcase their own military aircraft and humiliate India using a Bollywood parody while Pakistan and the US used social media to spread massive scale psyops regarding a false victory and ceasefire brokering to fortify their political positions. That our reality is post-truth is very evident – fact checks and debunks were only partially successful in countering the most viral propaganda. We live in a world that is more interconnected than ever; information is widely and easily disseminated and just a click away. Paradoxically, targeted propaganda disseminated on a massive scale has used our human tendencies in such a way that ‘truth’ and ‘facts’ depend on a person’s geographical location or socio-political, ethnic, or religious identity. The vulnerability of the public to propaganda that fits their own biases is a ticking time bomb; many major wars have been triggered by emotions roused by propaganda in the past; and the scale-up of propaganda operations via technical advances does not augur well. The propaganda around Operation Sindoor demonstrates that today’s world is indeed very similar to the fictional ‘Matrix’ inasmuch as reality is molded not by factual perceptions or even experience but ingested propaganda. Law abiding citizenry who are not easily swayed by communal propaganda, a free press with several independent fact checking groups, and clear, evidence backed information provided from government sources remain the best ways to counter propaganda in an info war climate.

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