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Web of Lies - Pakistan's Propaganda Push During Operation Sindoor by Idrees Aftab

Maj Gen Alok Deb, SM, VSM (Retired), is a former Deputy Director General of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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BOOK REVIEW

WEB OF LIES - PAKISTAN'S PROPAGANDA PUSH DURING OPERATION SINDOOR

By

IDREES AFTAB

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Alok Deb*



The outcome of the partition of India in 1947 continues to bedevil the state of India Pakistan relations. Given prevailing circumstances and collectively viewed as the best decision at that moment of time, partition has had unintended consequences for India. Even though Pakistan's founder and first Governor General, Mohammad

Ali Jinnah soon spoke the language of moderation in his maiden speech to the Constituent Assembly on 11 August 1947 by declaring that religion had nothing to do with the business of the State, the aftermath of division was bitter. For Pakistan, it has generated an attitude of hostility and deep suspicion towards India, aggravated by military dictatorships and quasi military rule. This mindset has manifested itself across generations through the unprovoked wars of 1947, 1965 and 1971, the undeclared war on the Siachen Glacier, the Kargil conflict of 1999 and innumerable acts of terror across Jammu and Kashmir and elsewhere in India. This includes the horrific Mumbai attacks of 2008, the terrorist acts in Uri in 2016, Pulwama in 2019 and Pahalgam in 2025, the last where Indian civilians were targeted on the basis of religion.

Since independence Pakistan has repeatedly failed in its attempts to achieve parity with India. Its greatest disappointment has been the inability to capture Jammu and Kashmir by force, despite using the nuclear threat while prosecuting high

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risk conventional operations. To overcome an inherent asymmetry of resource, it has consistently used tools like fifth columnists, overground workers, propaganda, subversion through media, and other means to target India while shaping public opinion at home. This playbook has been analysed by many authors, and in today's digital era acquires deeper resonance. The phrase 'Cognitive Warfare' with associated implications is a fitting description of Pakistan's strategy.

It is in this regard that the book '*Web of Lies – Pakistan's Propaganda Push During Operation SINDOOR*' by Idrees Aftab and his team of scholars from the South Asian Centre for Strategic Studies provides very valuable insights. It has dissected the long history and modus operandi of Pakistan's information warfare strategy, the organisations, people at the helm and the various contexts in which specific tools were selected and employed for spreading misinformation, disinformation and malinformation (MDM) to further the Pakistani cause.

The layout of the book gives an idea of its extensive coverage. Chapter 1(Prologue) sets the stage, outlining in brief the strategic

compulsions behind Pakistan's India strategy and how post 1971, Kashmir came to symbolise issues of Pakistan's identity, legitimacy and *raison d'être*. To that extent, the book's title is a misnomer as its canvas is much broader. However, the subsequent chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the Pahalgam attack, including its planning, execution and aftermath, at the national and international levels. This is supplemented by an extremely revealing case study bringing out the various social media and other tools used by the Pakistani state to further its narrative on Operation SINDOOR. Importantly, this book is among a few that has holistically analysed the evolution of Pakistan's strategic thought vis a vis India, and how MDM has effectively been employed as an asymmetric strategy at home and abroad since 1947. Of special importance is the chapter on Pakistan's 'Information Warfare & Propaganda Factory' which explains the role of the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) Directorate of the Pakistan armed forces and the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, in furthering the national aim through MDM. Equally revealing is the coordinated all of nation approach', comprising efforts of think tanks, mainstream media,

diaspora and foreign lobbies and of course cyber-bots, under the aegis of DG ISPR. The chapter on Pakistan's civil military relations (Chapter 10) where the authors opine that '*...Pakistan's civil-military nexus functions as a deeply embedded system that shapes governance, political behaviour, and national narratives. Rather than viewing the military and civilian institutions as separate or competing entities, it presents them as part of an interconnected ecosystem where cooperation, dependency, and mutual incentives sustain a hybrid model of power...*', is a crisp summation of the mindset and modus operandi of the Pakistani state.

The authors also provide a detailed perspective on the scale, resources and complexity of the Indian response to Pakistani information warfare. Thereafter, to create a single strategic narrative for further flow of strategic communication, they provide suggestions for India. Foremost is the creation of a '*National Information Command*' or *Strategic*

Communications Authority with cross-agency authority'.

Considering the plethora of agencies already existing in India and its democratic traditions, further analysis of this proposal is required for developing a holistic Indian model, more so if there is scope for optimization of existing structures. Other suggestions like intelligence sharing with partner countries, diplomatic and economic pressure and the like are well taken.

The book provides short biographies of the victims (and survivors) of the Pahalgam massacre, injecting a dose of pathos in an otherwise clinical rendition. This ensures that the human cost incurred by India and the suffering of the victims at Pahalgam is never forgotten. To nail Pakistan's lie, it lists out the evidence gathered by the National Investigation Agency (NIA), tying the perpetrators to their handlers across the border. All in all, it is a very useful addition to the existing literature on Pakistan, the mindset of its rulers since independence, and what to expect in the next round. ■

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