

HYBRID WARFARE - A NEW BASELINE OF INSTABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA

*Ambassador (Retired) Sanaullah**

Abstract

Security and stability in the South Asian region has remained delicate and fragile, to say the least, since the British left the Subcontinent in 1947. Pakistan's current security environment and subsequent vulnerabilities are shaped by a combination of events and actions at the global and regional levels. Since the 1998 nuclear tests first by India, followed by Pakistan, conventional war between the two rivals under the nuclear threshold has become too risky and too dangerous. Super powers' divergent interests have (further) added to the complexity of the region making it unpredictable.¹ The security environment amid the evolving strategic inter-relationship between US, China, India, Pakistan and Russia is fast shifting the threat perceptions, and each one of these powers wants to enforce a rebalance (of its choice) onto the region.² In the above context, the geopolitical developments in South Asia add a new dimension to hybrid threats the security of Pakistan has been facing and their severity makes it incumbent on traditional security establishment to educate all segments of population on current and future threats of hybrid warfare. The paper would explore whether Pakistan would be able to diffuse the current threats without losing its significance as part of the solution rather than the problem in the region.

Keywords: Hybrid War, Regional Security, Hidden Agenda, Non-Conventional War, Strategic Environment, South Asia, Pakistan, India, US, China, Russia, Afghanistan.

Introduction

In hybrid warfare, the target is mostly the population, social, legal and economic systems and infrastructures. The state usually tries to use "all instruments of power at its command to target perceived specific vulnerabilities of the enemy

*Ambassador (Retired) Sanaullah has served as a diplomat in India, China and Belgium, and as ambassador in Romania, accredited to Bulgaria, Republic of Moldova, and in Indonesia with accreditation to East Timor and Papua New Guinea. He was Pakistan's first ambassador to ASEAN and also worked as Deputy Secretary General at the Tehran based Economic Co-operation Organization. He is associated with CRSS (Center for Research and Security Study) and writes on security and foreign policy issues in national and international newspapers. He has authored six books including, The Saga of Trusted Friendship between Indonesia and Pakistan in Changing East-Asia. The authors' email address is mian.sana@gmail.com.

state. The elements of ambiguity³, non-linearity, surprise, cognitive skills of warfare and secrecy normally help achieve the desired objectives without fear of retaliation. The targeted country is often unable to detect the impact of hybrid wars to undermine its security till only after signs of destructive effects become apparent. Even then it may not still fully grasp the dimensions and scale of the hybrid attack and the elements involved. Hence the traditional security establishments usually find themselves unprepared to deal with the modern hybrid warfare. The principle of deniability is always at work to offset the apprehensions or avoid alerting the target country.

Hybrid warfare is a different ball game than a conventional war, albeit still not fully defined despite its resurgence and renewed practice in Ukraine⁴ in 2014 and in Syria⁵, Lebanon and Middle East.⁶ It is almost impossible to quantify serious threats hybrid warfare can pose to any state. NATO defines "the hybrid war as a wide range of overt and covert military, paramilitary, and civilian measures employed in a highly integrated design".⁷ The term also implies infiltration into government, military and security systems and disruption through social media, fake news and engineered alternate narratives with the aim to manipulate opinions, perceptions and buy influence in an adversary country.

It is presumed that hybrid war by nature never stops. It continues to be waged everywhere⁸ but nowhere to be seen, by anyone at once with all or some tools of state power with a synchronized action⁹ to influence societal weakening or collapse in a targeted country. Different in nature and expanded in unregulated activities but still similar in many ways to conventional war tactics, it is another dimension of the efforts where "states competing with each other for power, prestige and status used a broad repertoire of instruments, including politico-diplomatic, economic, cultural and other tools of statecraft that scholars and practitioners of strategy have been familiar with ever since the writings of Sun Tzu some 2,500 years ago."¹⁰ Furthermore, "the hybrid warfare is synchronized and systematic – the response should be too..... comprehensive cross government effort to understand, detect and respond to hybrid threats" is required.¹¹

Within this context, it has never been difficult for Pakistan to identify its traditionally hostile and strategically competing countries in the region. The high tech communication equipment and globalization, and changes in the World Order have transformed the old form of hybrid war into more effective and an affordable mode to practice policies aimed at sapping and breaking the will and belief system of an adversary. Resultantly, more countries have joined the rank.

Only in this context, one can understand why the regional turmoil and chaos in South Asia has been an unending circle.

Realization of Hybrid Warfare Threats

Pakistan has faced threats to its survival since its infancy. While political statements and manipulative political games are well recorded in history books, but what remains repressed is a huge network of attempts to undo Pakistan's entity is nothing short of a well-managed "Hybrid War". Fresh knowledge and leaks are beginning to lead to a comprehensive understanding of how the Indian leadership has used words as swords in conjunction with deceptive operations to break the will of a struggling nation. Initially, Pakistan's institutions failed to decipher the engineered disinformation and to pick up the high degree of deceit and hostility in associated covert operations. However, they woke up to decode the vanishing traces of an irregular war waged by India and consequently supported by its allies.

What constituted, as fresh realization in Pakistan, are the ominous aspects of hybrid warfare. The repeated claim of the current military leadership of Pakistan that a "hybrid conflict" has been imposed on Pakistan manifests the seriousness of the realization.¹² In April 2018, General Zubair Mahmood Hayat, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee had warned that a "hybrid war" had been imposed on Pakistan.¹³ He made no bones about the challenges such warfare can impose at the target country and further added "Pakistan is faced today with multidimensional political, economic, social and ideological hybrid threats both internally and externally and the aim of these hybrid attacks was to hurt the progress of the state encompassing all development areas including mega projects, education, reputation, and consequently the building of a national narrative".¹⁴

Instability, Strategic Contests

Pakistan is apprehensive about the unrelenting uncertainty created by the on-going hybrid antics in South Asia. Without stability, the region is likely to remain a hot bed of proxy wars, a live theatre of power games with consequences well beyond this region. Each state has been professing full support for elimination of terrorists, proxy wars and deployment of irregular troops to achieve their political agenda. While in practice, each one of them is doing the opposite in practical terms. The hidden agenda is raising alarm bells in all South Asian capitals. South Asia as a region is suffering irreparable colossal economic loss. If major components of today's hybrid war including surgical strikes, drones, terrorist and cyber-attacks, economic undermining and coercive diplomatic pressure continue

unabated, the capacity of the military and political leadership would fall short unless trained to comprehensively respond and timely address the threats involved in a 'hybrid war'.

If one has to classify hybrid challenges broadly at the global, regional and bilateral levels, the US foreign policy exasperation at its declining lone super power status holds the key. The US current strategic interest is to preserve and prolong its global outreach and influence. This focus is feeding into new regional understandings, strategic partnerships and alliances at all three levels in the same timeframe. For the first time in history, US finds itself pitted against three resurgent regional powers, China, Russia and Iran and is unable to manage its relations with European Union allies, neither is able to restrain the growing influence of the above trio in their immediate neighborhoods.

Shift in US Policy

The myriad challenges of the South Asian and Asia Pacific regions are basically embedded in the geopolitical developments connected with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. The US is impatient to quit its abroad wars which have costed her trillion of dollars. The new US policy for Afghanistan and South Asia, announced in August 2017, expressed serious concerns about Pakistan's role in Afghanistan as well as challenges allegedly posed by China, Russia, and Iran. The policy invited a more robust Indian economic and developmental role in Afghanistan while speaking about "safe havens for the agents of chaos" and accusing "Pakistan as part of the problem and India identified as part of solution".¹⁵ President Trump in his speech also expressed concern over "the tense relations between the nuclear armed Pakistan and India that might spiral into a conflict".¹⁶

The policy reaffirmed the tone that shifting relationships, alliances and understandings would continue to determine the security environment in South Asia. The region would be dealt with in the light of American perception that "China and Russia are playing power games at regional and global levels to undermine US interests by creating their respective spheres of influence". The new US Afghan policy was viewed in the region as a response to this challenge. It was therefore, natural for the US policy strategists to view Pakistan's deepening relations with China, its fresh understanding with Russia and the renewed interest of China and Russia in Afghanistan as negative developments.

The US National Security Strategy (December 2017) further fortified the view by explicitly singling out "China and Russia as competitors challenging American power, influence, and interests." US sought "favorable regional balances of power in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, and the Western Hemisphere," declaring that "Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security". Iran was branded as a state that "continues to sow violence and remains the most significant challenge to Middle East stability."¹⁷

US Drift towards India

In contrast, "the US National Security Strategy describes India as central to its Indo-Pacific strategy and an essential component of Indo-Pacific security architect".¹⁸ The strategy asserts, "we will deepen our strategic partnership with India and support its leadership role in Indian Ocean and throughout the broader region...we welcome India's emergence as leading global power and stronger strategic and defence partner. We will seek to increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia and India".¹⁹ President Trump's 1st January 2018 tweet further aggravated the environment when he accused Pakistan of 'lies & deceit'.²⁰ The tweet followed with tangible actions by suspending all military aid to Pakistan and placing of Pakistan on a special watch list for severe violations of religious freedom²¹.

The matter did not end here. The US also approached the Financial Action Task Force, a Paris based group, to place Pakistan on a global terrorist-financing watch list. Consequently, Pakistan was placed in the grey list,²² making foreign loans it urgently required prohibitively expensive. The situation may get worse in September 2019 if Pakistan again "fails to satisfy the FATF concerns about deficiencies in Pakistan's implementation of its anti-money laundering/counterterrorism finance regime as required by UN Security Council Resolution 1267".²³ Encouraged by the US administration, its senators have been leveraging with FATF and IMF.²⁴ It should be borne in mind that India is a member of the FATF Board that is assessing Pakistan's actions and decides whether to exonerate Pakistan or place it on the black list. This makes Pakistan's efforts to avoid being listed in black category more difficult.

The depth of US-India strategic collusion is also manifest from the fact that US Indo Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) pays special attention to the Indo-Pacific region and on the Indian role in the region. Admiral Philips Davidson,

Commander of the US Indo Pacific Command told a Congressional hearing in February 2019 that US and India in September 2018 signed Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). He described the signing as “pivotal moments” bilateral relations.²⁵ The agreement envisages “sale of sensitive US military equipment, facilitates interoperability and information sharing capabilities and high-end technology between the two militaries”²⁶. It also “allows the US to offer real-time data sharing with the Indian military over secure channels”²⁷. Another agreement namely, the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) signed in 2016²⁸ enabled the US Navy “to replenish supplies from Indian Navy logistics platform and vice versa.” A robust China containment policy is hence taking concrete shape with India playing a pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific region.

Implications for Regional States

The US objective in its Indo-Pacific strategy is “to respond to regional security challenges and resist adversary’s military and economic coercion”.²⁹ The US is now obliged to take India into confidence before taking any major initiative with respect to other South Asian countries. India thus enjoys significant power on certain security related matters between US and South Asian countries. The US Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, therefore, poses a major security dilemma not only for Pakistan but also for China as it further disturbs the strategic balance in the region. “COMCASA allows the Indian army to use high-tech weapons and high-tech encrypted sensitive communication technology to monitor China and Pakistan’s military movements”.³⁰ The recent US move to label and at the same time enable India as a ‘Net Security Provider’ for the region and beyond has caused heightened security concerns for Pakistan. Russia and Iran perhaps can live with the idea, as they may not have any problem with the Indian design to help US restrain China’s assiduous rise perceived by US as a threat to its global power status. Pakistan does not accept the NSP status for India.

The new multi-dimensional warfare is essentially “not new” in the context of Pakistan-India hostility or at the regional or sub-regional levels in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The only glaring change is that many earlier wars have “had both regular and irregular components, occurring in different stages, theaters or formations but in hybrid wars into the same force at the same time and in the same battle space”.³¹ In this context, Pakistan's security concerns multiply manifold about the growing Indian influence in Iran and Afghanistan as a serious challenge to its aspirations for peace and stability in its neighborhood. In such trying conditions, Pakistan seeks solace and strength from its time-tested strategic relations with

China for economic progress and development as well as a cushion against any US or Indian misadventure.

Challenges for Pakistan

The growing security and defence cooperation between US and India “at the cost of US traditional cordial ties with Pakistan”³² has unfortunately emboldened an already hostile India. It is now publically committed to isolate Pakistan diplomatically, especially in the region and the Muslim world. The essence of this onslaught is to project Pakistan as a terrorism sponsoring state, a dangerous place for investment and tourism.

Evidently, the Indian government has been pursuing this policy aggressively at all levels in its bilateral, regional and global interactions. The covert part of the same policy that aims at breaking the will and resolve of the people either remains hidden or is widely ignored by the world. Pakistan may not have the capacity to expose the full spectrum of the threats of the covert warfare involved but has a fair understanding of Indian intentions in the context of its past history and present adventures.

Major strands of the Indian hybrid war against Pakistan range from diplomatic isolation to coercive policies to seeking compliance on regional and global issues and in case of refusal subject Pakistan to a host of restrictions through new found allies. India's hybrid activities instigate instability, support to sectarian strife, weakening national aspirations and the government's will to act in a timely fashion to address these threats.

India fermented trouble in the two Pakistani provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan in 1950s as part of its policy to punish Pakistan for Kashmir cause. Later indirect support in the form of scholarships helped India to widen its influence among local elite as a friend. "The Indian-Soviet partnership proved a recurring theme in Pakistan's brush with hybrid warfare in subsequent years".³³ Pakistan's breakup in 1971 is the most glaring example of modern hybrid warfare executed by India.³⁴ To prepare the ground, on January 30, 1971 India staged the hijacking of an Indian Airlines Fokker to Lahore. The Pakistani leadership welcomed the hijacking, thinking Kashmiri separatists had done it. India used the pretext to deny its air space to Pakistani aircraft, flying to former East Pakistan. Pakistan later became severely handicapped to defend its territory against Indian onslaught in 1971. Balochistan has been another primary target of Indian 'hybrid

warfare' for decades.³⁵ The Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) agent Lt Comd Kulbhushan Jadhav, a serving Indian navy officer operating from Iran since 2013, was financially supporting the Baloch separatists and militants, fuelling sectarian violence in the province and the country.³⁶ 'kante se kanta nikalna',³⁷ episode indicated the Indian penchant for "employing terrorists to catch or kill terrorists, and for covert actions against its perceived enemies. As a calculated policy "the Kashmiri freedom struggle was projected as terrorism to erode its legitimacy as established under UN resolutions. For this purpose false-flag operation, infiltration of militant Kashmiri groups and concerted propaganda was carried out".³⁸

The Indian move to oppose the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project first "as a violation of Indian territory" and then to malign it as a debt trap for Pakistan is a reminder of how a connectivity project, which can bring prosperity to the entire region as a flagship of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been made controversial. Misinformation and data manipulation are being used as tools to create doubts about the efficacy and real objectives of the connectivity project. The American military establishment perceives CPEC as a Chinese strategic move to access the Indian Ocean by using "disputed territory"³⁹. Sections of KPK and Balochistan population have been so influenced to have become skeptical and started to criticize and trivialize CPEC's obvious benefits for the country. In July 2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tried to jeopardize an IMF financing program for Pakistan arguing that it should not be used to repay Chinese 'bond holders' and banks. A Wall Street Journal video projected "Pakistan and CPEC as the fulcrum of US-China strategic competition".⁴⁰ A consistent media campaign was launched so that CPEC be derailed or stalled by denying IMF package to achieve the required stabilization of Pakistan's economy. "The US has a grand interest in disrupting, controlling, or influencing the Silk Road and CPEC".⁴¹

US has employed the tool of "exaggerated proliferation concerns and coercive diplomacy to hold back Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs"⁴², and punished Pakistan by slapping sanctions. In contrast, the US has played down "the militarization of outer space dimension of the Indian testing of its first domestically produced Anti-Satellite Missile (ASAT), hitting a defunct Indian satellite at an altitude of 300 kilometers".⁴³

Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that Indian troops fought along Mukti Bahini in East Pakistan⁴⁴ and admitted to an Indian conspiracy to divide Pakistan, there have been similar confessions from other prominent Indians. Earlier, in 2013, the Indian Army Chief, General Vijay Kumar Singh admitted that

"following the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the Indian army raised a Tactical Support Division (TSD), which carried out bomb blasts in Pakistan, and paid huge incentives to the 'separatist' elements in Balochistan".⁴⁵ The infamous Doval Doctrine reemphasized the Indian intention to assert its retribution regime against a country, which in Indian calculation was a threat to its interests. This regime may include "surgical strikes or engagement of terrorists".⁴⁶ At the Heart of Asia Conference Amritsar, India encouraged Afghanistan to embarrass Pakistan.⁴⁷

The growing Baloch nationalist movement and the rise of the group known by its title Pakhtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) is an obvious demonstration of a hybrid war aimed at dividing the population. "The PTM never emerged during the TTP and affiliated group's insurgency between 2007 and 2015 that supposedly protected the Pashtun community. Surprisingly, the rise of the PTM after the return of relative normalcy to the Pakhtun regions of Pakistan raises many questions".⁴⁸ The above facts are just a few examples of how hybrid means and machinations are being employed to destabilize and malign Pakistan.

Regional Future Prospects Afghanistan

Despite the recent positive development where America has finally started a dialogue with Taliban, Afghanistan is nowhere close to being a normal functional sovereign state again. Though all regional countries are on board with America, the fact that the Taliban are not ready to talk to the Afghan government indicates the difficulties an intra-Afghan settlement entails in terms of power sharing. Unfortunately the Afghan leadership on both sides (Afghan government & Taliban) have failed their people who continue to suffer. The insensitivity of the Afghan leadership on both sides is likely to deepen the chaos by infighting. This time, in case the on-going negotiations culminate in an agreement, the Taliban leaders would not feel obligated to any state for bringing them into power. They would be inclined to be more independent and intolerant to any opposition. The way they have been conducting them at the current Doha negotiations with the US and resisting the US pressure to talk to official representatives of the Afghan government foretell the future Afghan nightmare.

The likelihood of civil war cannot be ruled out if American forces suddenly decide to leave Afghanistan. Since the national security of both Pakistan and Afghanistan cannot be separated from each other due to "sufficient close links"⁴⁹, many old contentious issues may crop up. For instance, new turmoil may lead to a

fresh wave of Afghan immigrants to Iran and Pakistan. The Afghan- Pakistan border management in such a situation would be critical for Pakistan to remain relevant in final solution of the Afghan imbroglio. In case of future migration, Pakistan authorities have to be watchful of pro India Afghans and subsequent wave of terrorist acts on Pakistan soil. Pakistan may also have to deal with water and trade issues afresh. For the time being, Pakistan may not be seen giving unrequited advice, especially in public, to the Afghan government on any issue other than those of directly impacting on its national interests. The current policy to support Taliban- US talks with or without participation in the negotiations is the best policy. It conveys the message that Pakistan has no favourites in Afghanistan. In fact, Pakistan may not see the refusal of Taliban to hold intra-Afghan dialogue in Pakistan as an upsetting development; rather it is an act of salvaging Pakistan's neutrality in Afghanistan.

United States

Despite “perceptible US pressure”⁵⁰, Pakistan’s relations with the US are central to its national interests. Proactive diplomacy and engagements are required to acknowledge the shortcomings in their respective approaches. The almost casual disregard of Pakistan’s intense counterterrorism and counter-insurgency efforts is a continuing problem between the two countries. Pakistan is still in a position to help US in resolving the Afghan problem.

The US understands Pakistan's special dependence on China. Therefore, it is possible for Pakistan to have stable working relations with US without diluting bilateral relations with China. However, strategists in Pakistan must not ignore that Pak-US relations would remain mired in problems as US finds it difficult to overcome its misconceptions about CPEC, “harboring terrorists”⁵¹ and Pakistan's defence cooperation with China. Nevertheless, the transactional nature of relations with US makes it a bit easy to deal with contentious issues. Focus on security and stability in Afghanistan is just one aspect of the bilateral relations with US. Greater engagement with US may be initiated without indulging in ambiguous statements that normally fortify the existing mistrust. Preferably, during talks, commitments and stance be stated clearly and recorded. Any disruption in relations would allow India to work unhindered against Pakistan in a country which matters most for Pakistan with regard to stability and implementation of its mega projects, injecting substantial economic dimension in its excessively political ties with the Central Asian Republics (CARs). The positive development is that both Pakistan and US are engaged with each other despite complex relationship. Pakistan has to focus on its immediate problems, recognize its power potential to impact US foreign policy

objectives and act accordingly. There is an urgent need to build a group of friends in Congress and Pentagon who can connect the missing dots in Pak-US perceptions on peace and security in South Asia.

India

The Indo-US growing defence cooperation is no doubt a challenge. The bigger challenge however, is to be able to mitigate the Indian hybrid warfare and take timely actions. There is no harm to keep working for a “sustained and structured dialogue with India on all issues and disputes to understand each other’s position better”.⁵² With the anti-Pakistan agenda upper most in the Indian policy construct, engagement with India currently seems a futile exercise. But in the long run this process would help manage bilateral relations and also, to some extent, facilitate realization of Pakistan's economic projects. As long as Pakistan's nuclear deterrence remains credible, Pakistan can withstand the Indian coercive diplomacy and “can prevent adversary (India) from gaining escalation dominance, employment of coercive tactics in a crisis or to attain power at its expense”.⁵³ Therefore, there is a limit to how far India can diplomatically isolate Pakistan. However, if Indian capacity to sustain the on-going aggressive hybrid warfare against Pakistan dramatically increases, the risk of a nuclear standoff between these two rivals does not remain so far-fetched.

Recommendations

Pakistan is faced with daunting challenges. Apart from internal political, economic and social issues, the non-traditional challenges such as those emanating from climate change, burgeoning young but unemployed population, underperformance in social sectors etc. will mainly determine Pakistan's strength and will to fight back hybrid war being waged against it.

Pakistan needs to be cautious of a possible implosion due to statecraft's failures or deficiencies, and hybrid antics inspired by India and its allies. Institutional and structural response to galvanize critical ministries including the foreign ministry would be helpful to focus on real issues in real time and avoid reactive diplomacy. For instance, the administration and political wings maybe separated to allow maximum time to the foreign secretary to deal with complex external challenges which are not easy to handle, given sudden and frequent changes in geopolitical situation at the regional and global levels. In order to sustain pressure and sinister implications of the on-going hybrid war against Pakistan, concomitant efforts are required to ensure financial stability and credible

rule of law in the country. Attention is also required at the highest political and the Federal Cabinet levels to gear the national plans in a way to address other non-traditional security challenges.

Conclusion

The current influx in alignments at the regional and international levels and the emphasis on regional solutions bypassing the United Nation is a trend fraught with serious pitfalls. Moreover, with technology advancement and artificial intelligence, non-kinetic but lethal tools are now available to achieve national security objectives. A situation can no longer be ruled out where the functional balance of power between US, Russia and China may entail a serious risk of collapse.

Pakistan is on the cusp of change. There are vast opportunities for peace and development of the region. As Pakistan progresses towards stability and prosperity, the challenges from its adversaries will concomitantly grow. Pakistan's security and military agencies are deeply aware and apprehensive of the sophisticated ways of the country's adversaries to undermine Pakistan's security. The political leadership unfortunately has not been able to build national consensus within its ranks and where it did (on fighting terrorism) was unable to deliver. Pakistan is facing active hybrid warfare, as it never ceases and its agents are faceless. The trend unfortunately in South Asian region is that it will keep increasing “especially after the checkmating of the Indian Cold Start Doctrine by Pakistan”.⁵⁴ Pakistan's future challenges are likely to intensify as the continued instability and hybrid wars would not allow implementation of connectivity and energy projects and the region would further plunge into poverty. Pakistan needs to remain engaged with the world powers for regional prosperity. Without the positive contributions from world powers interested in South Asia and Indo pacific region, dreams and aspirations of people would remain elusive. It is politically imprudent to overstretch time-tested relationships. Ultimately a country has to fight its own survival battles, pursue its own strategic options in a complicated and challenging environment and assert its own strategic autonomy.

NOTES

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