

Applicability of Hybrid Warfare in Pakistan: Challenges and Policy Options

Dr. Shereen Gul

Lecturer at the Women University, Multan

shereen.6084@wum.edu.pk

Abstract: *War is the combination of hatred, violence, and intensity, consisting of the elements of probability, chance, and political concerns of the warring parties. These elements are a result of people who interact, military forces who fight, and the governments that govern both. As time changes, a conflict arises, changing its nature. War changes its characteristics according to the changing situations and circumstances. The State of Pakistan is encountering traditional and non-traditional security challenges, and in the 21st century, certain unfamiliar forms have been seen in war, including regular and irregular forces joined together to fight on the battleground, and this new form is called hybrid war. There is an urgent need for Pakistan to understand the essence of this new phenomenon, as it is one of those countries that is affected by it, and it would also help Pakistan to understand the destabilization that has happened to it in recent years. Pakistan also has those fault lines that are prone to exploitation for an offensive strategy. Pakistan's socio-political, economic, and sectarian fault lines have the potential for opposing forces to use them in their favor to destabilize Pakistan. Hybrid warfare includes terrorism, piracy, cyber war, propaganda, transnational crimes, asymmetric low-scale conflicts, demographic changes in certain areas, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which are framed as hybrid threats. Pakistan needs to understand this fifth domain of war as a global threat to prepare for a possible response and deterrence within its social and political context.*

Keywords: Hybrid warfare, destabilization, demographic changes, cyber war, sectarian fault lines, transnational crimes.

Introduction

Theoretically, hybrid warfare was a tool for weaker states to weaken stronger enemies through unconventional means to overcome their superior conventional rivals, but in the 21st Century, it is being used by major, militarily superior powers. The Crimean War is an example of 21st-century hybrid warfare fought by Russia in 2014. Apparently, the phenomenon of hybrid warfare is a contemporary feature of the international security environment, but it has been practiced since ancient times. In the past, there were numerous examples of using different tactics and tools to overcome the core values of hostile states by manipulating their

cultural biases and factional differences among states and their intelligence agencies. Currently, the same tools are being applied by states; the only difference is the use of information technology. In today's globalized world, the old hybrid warfare tools are operationalized in a combined form, which has increased their effectiveness (Jaspal , 2020, p. 7).

Pakistan has been facing the threat of conventional warfare since its inception in 1947 and has fought three conventional wars with India in 1948, 1965, and 1999. As long as the issue of Kashmir is unresolved between India and Pakistan, the notion of war will remain viable. In conventional war, the aggression comes from outside the state, and it is visible to deal with, while in hybrid war, the enemy attacks through internal faction sources, and it is invisible. In a country where the social, economic, and religious fabric of society faces fault lines, the potential of hybrid warfare increases. An enemy through hybrid warfare weakens the state and tries to achieve its interests by exploiting those fault lines. In conventional wars, objectives are aimed at the acquisition of territory or the overthrow of government, but in decentralized hybrid warfare, the main objective is to make the state fragile by destroying its intangible dimensions, which enable a nation to be united.

Hybrid warfare in the global threat scenario is a complex phenomenon. It is also called the 5th generation warfare. The phases of war, from 1st generation to 5th generation, have ranged from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, and sovereignty has been considered the central character of the nation-state system. Regular or conventional wars were the source of breaching states' sovereignty. After the Second World War, the nation-state system founded the United Nations to safeguard the sovereignty of states. One of the United Nations' basic objectives was to prevent wars among states. It was the Cold War era, and there were two power blocs: the United States and the Soviet Union (Hassan, 2019, p. 33).

The era of new warfare emerged after the end of the Cold War era. An incident of unpredictable threat shook the world order and also brought a paradigm shift from state actors to non-state actors. A threat of strategic uncertainty hit the world at the millennium, which Samuel Huntington predicted in his detailed work, "Clash of Civilizations". The international system, which was laid on the foundations based on 'Nation State' and 'Nationalism', is being challenged by ethnic forces, disharmony, and separation movements in almost one-third of the states that are members of the United Nations. Moreover, globalization is also one of the contributing factors to challenge the state's sovereignty in many respects; borders of states are becoming porous, along with information and knowledge, the currency of a state is also out of the control of a central government, and there is free trade and free movement of people from one state to another due to speedy means of transportation. Besides this, there is also free movement of terrorists, drugs, and weapons across the world, which is threatening the sovereignty and peace of states. Along with this, another threatening element for state sovereignty has also been observed, and this emerging force is post-nationalism, by which international or regional institutions have undermined the decision-making power of a state, as political authority is not a matter of a nation-state nor can it control it. There are other organs in the international system, such as

the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Union (EU), or the United Nations (UN) can serve as organs of political authority (Kanwal, 2018, p. 15).

The incident of 9/11 called the super power to have conventional military superiority is enough in the immediate future. Opposing forces are developing alternative means to achieve their goals. Although technological advancement is very crucial, it's not sufficient, as we see in cases of Iraq and Afghanistan; strategic, cultural, and geographical realities, traditional legacies, and societal patterns turned the victories into long-term strategies to achieve the goals from the opponents. Hybrid warfare is comprehensive in its nature as it includes all the levels of war, from tactical to operational and also to the strategic level (Mansoor, 2012, p. 11).

It is a complicated war because it is blurring the lines between peace and conflict. It is continuous and has no time frame to start or end the war. It has a transformative impact on the contemporary international security environment by altering the foundations of conventional security. Hybrid warfare has also impacted the deterrence pattern of security. Today's security threats are not only conventional and simple but also multidimensional and complex (Parsheh & Chegnizadeh, 2025, pp. 311-315). The economic, psychological, and digital threats are also creating significant challenges for Pakistan's security. These sources are increasing the capabilities of non-state actors to destabilize the socio-political structure and create chaos in the country. Winning without fighting has become the new strategy of states to weaken their rival state. The Indo-Pakistan conflict evolved into a complex multidimensional stability-instability paradox. Direct wars are costly, and nuclear deterrence between rival powers prevents states from engaging in large-scale confrontation. Instead, hybrid warfare provides indirect competition by creating low-intensity wars between rivals. This scenario demands a broader strategy for Pakistan, beyond military strategies, to address non-conventional threats (Qureshi & Khalid, 2024, pp. 460-462).

Sources & Indicators of Hybrid Warfare:

Hybrid wars are the result of identity conflicts provoked by external forces, and these forces could be state or non-state actors. Pre-existing identity conflicts are present in every state of the world, but they get catalyzed even more when they flare up due to external powers. So, the key point is the existence of an external actor to ignite the domestic issues. There is a variety of sources by which external forces provoke domestic targets. There are five identity indicators, and each country contains at least one of these differences, which may not be present there in active form but could be ignited by the external force. These indicators include history, religion, ethnicity, socio-economic structure, and geography. These differences can be manipulated by the external opposing forces to create an artificial conflict, as in the case of Pakistan, which has the chance to be manipulated by the invisible enemy.

All the protest movements, whether they are plausible or not, have some sort of common trigger in them, whether they are provoked by any external force. Any independent movement, when it demands a political change, is turned into a Color Revolution, which

definitely develops its links with external forces. NGOs are the easiest way to gain financial aid and political support from outside power which aim at the destabilization of the respective state. Then there is the media, which can be used to mislead the narrative and can help to turn any protest movement into a Color Revolution and then towards unconventional wars. The foreign force does not rely on peaceful protests because they do not bring political change, but it's the unconventional war that increases the security threat and becomes successful in overthrowing governments. There are several examples where people's protests turned into Color Revolutions and then into unconventional wars, where ultimately the toppling of the government took place. The successful examples of such unconventional wars are Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, 2004, and 2005, Ukraine, and Lebanon in 2005. External influence created unconventional wars (Korybko, 2017, p. 221). In 2025, the Indo-Pak limited-scale war highlights the changing dynamics of the South Asian security paradigm. Though it was a 4-day conflict, it gives insights for states regarding their behavior to adapt a warfare posture in a multi-challenging security threats. Projection of power is an important strategy, but operational capacity is the key to achieving strategic targets. India made huge investments in traditional and modern warfare technologies such as AI-based algorithmic warfare, space, and integrated autonomous strike systems. But this sole dependency on AI-centered warfare exposed the need for human-centric strategic clarity. The lack of human intellect and tailored operational capacity of algorithm met with the several miscalculations. There are four traditional operational domains of warfare: land, sea, air, and space. In hybrid warfare, cyberspace is the additional new realm impacting national and international security. The stability of the region and deterrence between traditional rivals are in danger due to the incompatibility of handling the proliferation of new technologies. (Murtaza, Arshid, Ali, & Murtaza, 2025).

Applicability & Prevailing Threat of Hybrid Warfare in Pakistan:

In Pakistan, the threat of hybrid warfare is prevailing due to the presence of fault lines in its socio-political and economic structure, along with external factors, which could cause the potential of finding a host for the foreign enemy within the state, and these fault lines can serve as the sources of hybrid warfare in creating internal security and governance issues for the government. The details of these fault lines are as follows;

- i. Pakistan's strategic geography, its 2400km long border with Afghanistan, where the presence of India and other anti-Pakistan forces causes key security issues in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan.
- ii. The fundamental territorial and ideological differences with India, the presence of unresolved issues between both states, and particularly the Kashmir issue, provide an external factor to cause an easing in Pakistan.
- iii. Religious extremism, radicalization, and sub nationalism can weaken the core values of the state.
- iv. The human security issues due to religious, ethnic, social, and economic divides.

- v. Economic downfall, inflation, and its negative impact on the masses.
- vi. Absence of a centralized, well-defined national security management system.
- vii. Absence of an effective role of media in shaping public opinion and bringing social harmony (Nisar, 2018, p. 8).

After acquiring the status of a nuclear-capable state, Pakistan was on the radar of international media for creating misconceptions about its nuclear program. The incident of 9/11 flared up this agenda that Pakistan's nuclear assets could fall into the hands of terrorists. Despite making several reassurances that Pakistan is a responsible nuclear state, Pakistan had to keep all its efforts to contain and develop its nuclear technology for an effective deterrence with India. Pakistan also defended its stance on all political and diplomatic fronts. So, Pakistan has been facing hybrid warfare as a strategy for a very long time. Pakistan is actually fighting 5th generation warfare, and its Baluchistan is the most affected area of this war. Pakistan needs a comprehensive strategy to tackle this situation. Pakistan's political instability and economic dependence are the key challenges, not only creating harmony in the country but also to respond effectively against the hybrid warfare attacks by India and other anti-Pakistan mindsets (Ahmed & Junaid, 2025, pp. 1210-1219).

“Indian Chronicles,” the Propaganda Warfare against Pakistan:

Pakistan is the victim of hybrid warfare, which India sponsors, and its unrefuted evidence has been uncovered by an NGO, which is a European-based organization. This report was published on 9 December, 2020. This huge campaign is part of India's Fifth Generation Hybrid warfare against Pakistan. According to EU DisinfoLab, India has been launching a campaign of misleading narratives against Pakistan since 2005, which it named “Indian Chronicles”. EU DisinfoLab found that a network consisting of 256 pro-Indian websites operates across 65 countries, and its center is the Srivastava Group, based in New Delhi. This network is aimed at a propaganda war against Pakistan through fake media outlets. EU DisinfoLab also uncovered that the Srivastava Group organized an Indian Think Tank group of 27 members who visited the European Union Parliament in October 2019, related to the developments taken by the Modi Government on Kashmir. Moreover, the Srivastava Group has launched an operation against Pakistan, which is spread to 117 countries, and through that, it targeted the members of the EU and the United Nations. The serious point is that this organization is using 10 United Nations Council-accredited Human Rights organizations, which are criticizing Pakistan internationally. China is also on the agenda of this group, to aggravate feelings against China in India and internationally. The objective of this fake campaign is to get the support of international institutions such as the UN and the EU against Pakistan (Machado, Alaphillipe, Adamczyk, & Gregoire, 2020, p. 47).

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) & the Indian Hybrid Warfare:

Economic downfall is the fault line of Pakistan, and Balochistan is the economically most deprived province of Pakistan. India has used both these weaknesses to exacerbate the ethnic differences. After the announcement of the China-Pakistan joint venture of CPEC and Gwadar

Port, India and its allies started cyber and political warfare against Pakistan. India is using all warfare tactics to destabilize Pakistan. CPEC is a Chinese multi-billion-dollar investment that would work as a game-changer for Pakistan's energy and infrastructure sectors. Indian intelligence agency RAW is very active in Balochistan, and Pakistan captured Kulbhushan Yadav and its network, which is evidence of an Indian anti-Pakistan campaign in Balochistan. India is also creating misunderstandings among provinces of Pakistan by spreading false news about the route of CPEC. The United States is also a part of the hybrid warfare against CPEC because of its strategic importance for China (Mirza & Babar, 2020). The presence of natural resources, geostrategic location, and now Chinese heavy investment in two game-changer projects, the construction of Gwadar Port and the CPEC, made Baluchistan the central target of hybrid warfare by India and its allies. On 3rd January 2021, the killing of 11 mine workers in the Machh area of Baluchistan who belonged to the Hazara community is also being considered an attack under the 5th Generation warfare program against Pakistan (Junaidi, 2021).

Pakistan's Nuclear Assets and Propaganda Warfare:

Since Pakistan became a nuclear power in 1998, India and its allies have propagated fake narratives against Pakistan that a nuclear Pakistan is a threat to world peace by projecting Pakistan as the center of nuclear proliferation. On security concerns, they also alleged that Pakistan's nuclear system that it could be used by terrorists. There is also a narrative that Pakistan, without nuclear power, would be more secure and peaceful, with social harmony and economic stability. It would have friendly relations with its neighbors. All these fake narratives are part of 5th Generation warfare tactics. Pakistan needs to have effective counterpropaganda on the safety of its nuclear assets and also its use (Mustafa, 2017, p. 45). Pakistan's strategic security environment was wrecked after the incident of 9/11, and since that time, it has been facing an invisible enemy with a multifaceted war on all its fronts. For the past 20 years, although there has been no civil war or a war on the border, it has lost hundreds of military personnel and thousands of its civilian casualties. Pakistan was not facing threats to its peace and security, but it also went through severe economic instability. Pakistan is facing 5th Generation war or hybrid warfare, and there is a need to be prepared against this invisible, highly technological, decentralized 5th Generation warfare, which is aiming to weaken the state of Pakistan internally by attacking the religious and ethnic fault lines of the state. For Pakistan, it is necessary to understand the essence of this warfare, its nature, causes, and consequences, and also the counterstrategy and possible policy options.

Recommendation & Policy Options for Pakistan:

First of all, to meet the challenges of hybrid warfare, it is necessary to realize that the threat of hybrid warfare is real and complex.

- Hybrid warfare is the most dangerous form of war because in this war, the target is not visible, and it is also difficult to know from which direction the weapon is being used by an unknown adversary. To compete in this new form of warfare, Pakistan has to make a strong

hold on its internal affairs. If there is any vacuum on domestic grounds, the enemy can get the chance to use it as a fault line, so it should be filled to overcome the expected threat.

- Pakistan should formulate a comprehensive strategy to fight this form of warfare both internally and externally.
- Modernization of intelligence and a multilateral intelligence mechanism is necessary to share and unveil the activities of the enemy to fight this 5th-generation warfare.
- To cut down the links between the insurgents and foreign support, and also neutralize the insurgents.
- Pakistan should work to overcome the vulnerabilities in its socio-political and economic sectors. National cohesion and a homogeneous society reduce the chance of being used by the adversary for factional purposes. Economic and political stability increases national power.
- Pakistan needs to develop a mechanism for coordinated government machinery.
- A long-term strategy is needed for the de-radicalization of the masses and bringing ethno-religious harmony through coordinated work.
- Media role and public opinion are the most important tools within the state and also on the international level to meet the challenges of propaganda, false narratives, and information warfare.

Pakistan's national security is highly under threat from India and its allies. They are highly proficient in using hybrid warfare tactics to exploit the social fault lines of Pakistan on one side and, on the other side, by engaging Pakistan's military both on its eastern and western borders. On the western border, India is firing on the Line of Control (LOC), and on the eastern border, along with its like-minded forces, it is launching terrorist activities. This situation demands a comprehensive approach from both political and military elites to involve the nation against the enemy on all fronts. There is a need for a cognizant and vigilant civil society that will act as a first defensive line against the hostile state's hybrid warfare tactics. Along with civil society, all the print, electronic, and social media need collaboration with the help of academia to counter the narrative set by anti-Pakistan forces. Pakistan also needs technological innovation, a competitive digital infrastructure, and concrete national cyber policies to defend against this multidimensional threat.

References

- Mustafa, M. Q. (2017). Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Programme: Criticism, Propaganda and Response. *Strategic Studies*, 3(4), 39-64. Retrieved from <http://issi.org.pk>
- Ahmed, S., & Junaid, A. (2025). Fifth-Generation/Hybrid Warfare and Its Implications in Pakistan. *Journal for Current Sign*, 3(4), 1206-1219. Retrieved June 27, 2026, from <https://www.currentsignreview.com/index.php/JCS/article/view/459>

Hassan, H. (2019). Pakistan's Susceptibility to 5th Generation Hybrid Warfare due to its Prevailing Fault Lines: A Comparative Analysis with Yugoslavia. *NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability*, 11(1), 27-40. Retrieved from <http://njips.nust.edu.pk>

Jaspal, Z. N. (2020). Pakistan's National Security: Hybrid Warfare Challenges & Countermeasures. *National Security and Anti Terrorism Information*, 11. Retrieved from <https://cati.nwupl.edu.cn>

Junaidi, I. (2021, January 5). India Involved in Killing of 11 Hazara Coal Mines. *The Dawn News*. Retrieved January 15, 2021, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1599718>

Kanwal, G. (2018). The Changing Character and the Taxonomy of Conflict. In V. Deshpande, & V. Deshpande (Ed.), *Hybrid Warfare: The Changing Character of Conflict* (pp. 1-25). New Delhi, India: PENTAGON PRESS.

Korybko, A. (2017). Applicability of Hybrid Warfare to Pakistan: Challenges and Possible Responses. *Hybrid Wars* (pp. 207-229). Islamabad: National Defense University.

Machado, G., Alaphillipe, A., Adamczyk, R., & Gregoire, A. (2020). *Indian Chronicles*. Brussels: EU DisinfoLab. Retrieved 01 13, 2021, from <http://disinfo.eu/publications>

Mansoor, P. R. (2012). Introduction: Hybrid Warfare History. In W. Murray, & P. R. Mansoor, *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present* (pp. 1-18). The United States: Cambridge University Press.

Mirza, M. N., & Babar, S. I. (2020). The Indian Hybrid Warfare Strategy: Implications for Pakistan. *Progressive Research Journal of Arts and Humanities (PRJAH)*, 39-52. Retrieved from <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs>

Murtaza, Z., Arshid, H., Ali, A., & Murtaza, K. (2025). Decoding Sixth-Generation War in South Asia: Lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan War. *International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin*, 3(12), 1107-1116. Retrieved June 30, 2026, from <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/1717>

Nisar, M. (2018). 5 GW and Hybrid Warfare its Implications and Response options. 5 GW and Hybrid Warfare its Implications and Response options. Pakistan. Retrieved from <https://bdex.eb.mil.br/jspui/bitstream>

Parsheh, S. K., & Chegnizadeh, G. (2025). International Security Evolutions and Hybrid Warfare in the 21st Century. *International Relations Researches*, 4(14), 309-327. doi:10.22034/irr.2024.457271.2544

Qureshi, H. I., & Khalid, I. (2024). Hybrid Warfare in the 21st Century: Implications for Pakistan. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 5(4), 469-468. Retrieved May 28, 2026, from <https://ojs.jdss.org.pk/journal/article/view/1266/118>