

# FAKE NEWS AND DISINFORMATION IN MODERN STATECRAFT

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## Abstract

*The revolutionary development and spread of information technology added a new dimension to domestic and external political relations. In modern statecraft, media has been the biggest facilitator of implanting and diffusing public narratives. Information resources have also become instruments of power for states, primarily motivated by realpolitik. In the given circumstances, creating fake news, disinformation, or exaggeration of information has become an instrument of conducting statecraft. This practice largely compromises the fundamental ethics of journalism. Additionally, with the rapid development of modern communication tools, the means for achieving state interests have also diversified. Fake news and disinformation are now increasingly manifest in internal politics and the advancement of interests across borders. In this post-truth era, states must be capable of responding to the challenges created by such disinformation. This paper discusses the incidents of disinformation in major powers like China, the United States, Russia, India, and Pakistan. The paper also debates the moral and ethical dimension of fake news and disinformation in modern statecraft by mainly analysing the practice whilst employing a realist approach.*

**Key words:** *Post-modernism age, modern statecraft, realpolitik, information technology, digital media, fake networks, disinformation warfare, favourable perception, political advantage*

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## **Introduction**

Statecraft entails skilful management of the government and diplomacy. It depends on various elements of power. In this age of information technology, the methods of conducting state affairs are also changing. The world has become a global village. In this post-modernist period, the fast and easily accessible means of communication play an incredible role in restructuring economic and political development in the world. On the other hand, the development of social networks has seemingly created challenges for the state's sovereignty and overall security. The world is facing the fallouts of the rapid advancement of technology without actually being prepared for the challenges. Emerging issues such as cyber-attacks, hacking and the phenomena of fake news and disinformation call for serious attention and require effective remedies.

Statecraft or state affairs have a history of being compromised by lies and deceit even before this rapid growth of information technology. There are many instances in history whereby leaders used tactics such as lies and spreading misinformation for promoting national interests or personal political interests. However, the tools used for disinformation in the past were limited in their scope and minimal in terms of their impact. In the contemporary world, the modern tools of information dissemination bear the worrying potential of multiplying the impact of lies. As much as they seem alike, there is quite a variation in the objectives and forms of disinformation. Unlike the past events, the current order involves multiple actors engaged in creating and spreading disinformation. This multifaceted engagement of various actors further renders disinformation to bear dangerous consequences in the contemporary scenario.

As this paper is aimed to examine the role of disinformation with regards to state affairs, it is important to study the growing influence of modern media tools in international relations. In view of the above, the growing role of non-state actors and forces such as

multinational groups and corporations in international politics led to new (and more evolved) theoretical debates in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>1</sup> These debates further led to the rise of transnational and interdependence theories, which argued that multinational actors changed the 'traditional balance of power politics' by diminishing a state's dominant position in international relations.<sup>2</sup> The discourse revolving around non-state actors strengthened with the entry of postmodernism in world politics in the latter part of the 1980s with the advancement of communication technology.<sup>3</sup> This phase was marked by the 'expanding role of media', civil society organisations, and well-informed individual citizens. The transborder influence of these actors has been enhanced by new communication technologies and mass media. The role of media in international policymaking is now a recognised approach to studying international relations.<sup>4</sup>

The 'political role of media in this regard, can be assessed from the fact that access to the entire world now stands one click away. With extensive outreach and accessibility, mass media has a correspondingly large influence in shaping narratives, opinions, and policy orientations. Internet and the introduction of smartphones have further energised this process. It is understood that individuals, groups, or states use media for promoting certain agendas. However, the increasing role of disinformation and fake news disseminated through the newly developed tools of communication in state politics has not been studied extensively.<sup>5</sup> Whereas it can and must be studied in the relations between rival states. Such as the Indian propaganda war against Pakistan in the post-Pulwama attack in February 2019 and the revelation of India's disinformation network to discredit Pakistan, as discovered by the EU DisinfoLab on 9 December 2020.<sup>6</sup> Another example of the rival states resorting to disinformation and propaganda war is that of the Russian and US involvement in generating propaganda and disinformation. The Western media has the advantage of disseminating its narrative through its powerful

international media outlets such as CNBC, Reuters, The Guardian, New York Times, CNN, BBC, DW, and many more along with NGOs and various influential think tanks. To make the impact of these various information sources speedier, social media tools have been employed such as Twitter, Facebook, and Google. Such social media tools are strengthening countries' narratives against each other and the element of disinformation is also becoming a tool of statecraft for achieving certain interests against rivals.

With this massive impact of media on modern statecraft, the element of disinformation and propaganda can be considered a tool of war for one state and national security threat for another. Therefore, in today's world, states are guided to not only protect their geographical boundaries but also to defend against information warfare.<sup>7</sup> Within this context, this paper is aimed to focus on the usage of disinformation in modern statecraft. The paper analyses this phenomenon within the purview of realpolitik in which states or political leaders advance their interest in the given circumstances without any regard for morality or ethics.

### **Statecraft in the Age of Information Technology**

*In war, the truth must be protected by a bodyguard of lies.*

– Winston Churchill<sup>8</sup>

Statecraft is the art of conducting state affairs within the country and with the outer world.<sup>9</sup> Foreign Policy is the major instrument used by the states to further their national interests across the border. Negotiations, international agreements, and laws help states in the peaceful conduct of their external relations. That said, the primary objective of statecraft is safeguarding and preserving the country's independence, security, and integrity. These core national interests provide legitimacy to the statecraft apparatus with regard to acting in a certain way. To achieve such objectives, information is added as another element of national power. It is now regarded as a key instrument or powerful tool in state-to-state relations and public

diplomacy.<sup>10</sup>

States have seemingly adapted to the new technological tools in policymaking. New terms are now used to describe external relations such as digital diplomacy. The tools for the acquisition of power, influence, and then wielding that power for the achievement of the countries national interests have also changed.

Recognising the importance of digital diplomacy, the US Department of State dedicated a special Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Digital Strategy who uses several official Twitter accounts in different languages including English, Arabic, Farsi, Spanish, etc. This "U.S. focus on digital networks and technologies to serve foreign policy goals has been referred to as 21st Century Statecraft."<sup>11</sup>In the words of the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "To meet these 21st century challenges, we need to use the tools, the new 21st century statecraft."<sup>12</sup>

In addition to mass media, social media has wildly become a force multiplier and an effective medium for strategic narratives and successful information operations in modern statecraft. Several developed countries, including Israel, the UK, and the US, have equipped their militaries with the usage of social media against the psychological warfare of adversaries and also to control narratives during war times. Among them, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) was the first military that developed its social media force in the 2000s to strengthen itself against the "powerful information and psychological operations that Hezbollah had conducted during the 2006 Lebanon war and which contributed to Israel's defeat by creating a normative environment depicting Israel's operation as a failure."<sup>13</sup>

### **Role of Media in International Politics**

In the 1990s, the concept of 'the CNN Effect' earned prominence in international politics. The term CNN effect was used for the overall impact of mainstream news media in foreign policy decision making. Television coverage of various crises in different

corners of the world had motivated the humanitarian intervention of the US and the United Nations.<sup>14</sup> In addition, in the 2000s, the advent of the internet and other networked technologies accelerated the information influence on global politics, especially on democratisation and terrorism, which came to be known as ‘the Al-Jazeera Effect’.

It is important to understand how these media outlets promoted certain abovementioned agendas.<sup>15</sup> Media is not just effective in domestic politics but also plays a significant role in “building a global civil society, public sphere and political activism.”<sup>16</sup> However, the importance of social media in politics is widely recognised in today’s world given its undeniable role in bringing people from across the globe together. In internal politics, diplomatic ventures abroad and getting influence in international organisations, the social media tools are extensively used by state’s leadership, business corporations, civil society organisations, and individual citizens. According to NATO Review, in 2009, there were 4.1 billion mobile phones in the world. In 2011, there were more than 5 billion, with 75 per cent of that growth in the developing world. Out of these users, 2 billion consumers are connected to the internet. The internet as a transnational infrastructure is not only a generational shift but represents the shift of mass media from print to broadcast and digital. While mass media played a gigantic role in the political developments of many states, social media proved way more effective as it reflected its efficacy and influence right from the beginning a decade ago in the 2011 Arab spring.<sup>17</sup> With the development of 5G, the quality and speed of information sharing have increased manifold. The sources of information have become a strategic industry with its ever-increasing role in every sphere of life.<sup>18</sup>

Digital media also played a significant role in the redistribution of power among different types of actors. The role of mass media can also be discussed in the context of the rise of global terrorism. The battle of narratives uses similar instruments of communication both by

states and non-state actors, such as terrorist groups like Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other criminal networks.

Alister Miskimmon introduces the idea of strategic narratives constituting a critical aspect concerning content production when it comes to false news and disinformation. Miskimmon describes strategic narratives as “ means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors.”<sup>19</sup> Strategic narrative is a vital component in today’s statecraft to establish and maintain influence in the world and the modern communication tools are the facilitators.

According to Joseph S. Nye, shaping others’ preferences through persuasion without using coercion is soft power. That in view, strategic narratives can be considered as “soft power in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”<sup>20</sup> In the interaction of soft power with hard power, which Nye calls smart power, modern communication tools can be the primary asset.<sup>21</sup> In this postmodernist age, “the battle of narratives has become the bedrock of international politics, and social media a powerful tool to fight this battle.”<sup>22</sup> In this battle, “Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, or Instagram all have become strategic actors on their own.”<sup>23</sup>

Another major, and perhaps the most crucial role of media in modern statecraft is its expanding influence on elections. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, media is an essential component of the electoral process. Social media has further accelerated the interference of media in domestic politics.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Concepts of Disinformation and Fake News in International Relations**

Disinformation can be defined as the spreading of false or misleading information deliberately to deceive with the perceived objectives and results. While the debate on disinformation is quite old, it can be categorised into different kinds, depending on the desired

objectives, the magnitude of its impact, and the actors involved. The involvement of state actors in disinformation against a rival state accords it an international aspect. Information manipulation has become a prominent instrument at domestic, bilateral, regional, and global levels. Ideational influence is believed to support material power.<sup>25</sup> Information warfare has two components, i.e., Perceptions and attacks on important information infrastructure. Using both against the rival are components of hybrid warfare. "Over the past two decades, state and non-state actors have increasingly used the internet to pursue political and military agendas, by combining traditional military operations with cyberattacks and online propaganda campaigns."<sup>26</sup> In military-strategic terms, this practice is known as foreign influence operations. The disinforming state aims to strategically benefit and ultimately increase its relative international influence against the other to achieve the desired objective without a material loss.<sup>27</sup>

Fake news is also defined as those "news stories that are false, fabricated, with no verifiable facts, sources or quotes."<sup>28</sup> According to the Ethical Journalism Network, fake news is not only misleading but also causes doubt about the 'verifiable facts'.<sup>29</sup> Council of Europe's Information Disorder Report of November 2017 calls the phenomenon an information disorder. They also included mal-information into the ecosystem of news which they defined as "based on reality but used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country."<sup>30</sup>

The issue of fake news is mostly studied under the domain of poor-quality journalism for which different causes and remedies are suggested.<sup>31</sup> However, disinformation is widely discussed not just in media studies is inherently a significant part of the evolving political discourses in the wake of such maligned dissemination. Some experts also consider it as a deliberate strategy of deceit. Propaganda can be differentiated from disinformation as it is used mostly to persuade internal masses with mixed objectives and unclear results. That is the



reason that propaganda is not considered as harmful as disinformation. However, it must be noted that disinformation is employed with a clear objective and intended results of achieving an advantage over the adversary even without engaging in a formal armed conflict and without wasting any material resources. Disinformation can be considered more lethal in modern statecraft because it is used as a stab in the back tactic by the rival country.<sup>32</sup>

Historically, is rife with various examples of deception, disinformation, and propaganda in interstate politics. After the Second World War, the United Kingdom responded to Soviet Union's propaganda by setting up the Foreign Information Research Department (IRD) in 1948. Deception can be different from lies or fake news but, according to the expert Gill Bennett, "In military context its meaning can be positive, even celebratory."<sup>33</sup> Whereas disinformation constitutes deception. Deception has different forms like "subterfuge, media manipulation and decoy tactics, lies and disinformation."<sup>34</sup> Some of the aforesaid were also used during Operation Fortitude to deceive Hitler in World War II and Operation Desert Deception in the First Gulf War.

Moreover, disinformation is an ancient concept. Thucydides discovered the impact of information manipulation and distorting facts on "the political polarisation on truth and democracy; Plato thought it was fine for rulers to lie to the populace in the interests of public safety and state security. Both agreed that the intention of those disseminating the information makes a difference."<sup>35</sup>

Another important example explains the interstate interference and manipulation to sabotage the election results. Zinoviev's letter in this regard was "a classic piece of disinformation. Probably forged, this document was passed through secret service channels and leaked to right-wing interests during the British General Election campaign of 1924 to damage the Labour Party."<sup>36</sup>

These historical instances illustrate the practice of disinformation in the past. The technological advancements in the current times have only added to the tools and tactics of spreading fake news and disinformation. Concerning as it is, with the current communication tools and growing political instabilities across regions,<sup>37</sup> disinformation is taking the form of war without borders among rival countries.

### **Disinformation and Fake News as Unrestricted Warfare**

According to André W.M. Gerrits, manipulation of information is becoming a “strategic foreign policy toolkit of a great deal of governments, at bilateral, regional and global levels.”<sup>38</sup> According to Jarred Prier, the evolution of internet technology supplemented by expanding social media platforms has become a tool of modern warfare. “Social media creates a point of injection for propaganda and has become the nexus of information operations and cyber warfare.”<sup>39</sup> Social media by changing the traditional tailorable form of communication<sup>40</sup> made it easy for state entities, political forces, and extremist outfits to shape perceptions for their desired objectives.

The term ‘fake news’ became popular in the wake of the election victory of the United States President Donald Trump. Hence, Western media’s debate over fake news is more about the interference in President Donald Trump’s election campaign 2016. Mostly, it is referred to as a ‘new Cold War media strategy’ designed to undermine the domestic political processes of the Western democracies.

The debate revolves around Russian President Vladimir Putin who, the Trump government believes waged an information war against the Western democracies by disrupting their ‘information infrastructure’. The rise of ‘right-wing political groups’ and the growing ‘anti-globalisation sentiments’ are also accorded with Russian disinformation.<sup>41</sup> Western experts trace Russia’s involvement in events and accusations pertaining to them predating Trump’s election to

polarise Western societies. This was broadly aimed at displacing “the liberal internationalist conception of world order based on globalization and freedom of the world media.”<sup>42</sup>

The US and Europe accuse Kremlin of creating fake news, especially after its annexation of Crimea in 2014 to harm the neighbouring states. “For some observers, the Russian state is hell-bent on civilizational conflict – determined to weaken western states (and the EU) by generating fear, mistrust and schism using so-called ‘wedge issues’ including the status of minority communities, LGBT rights and immigration.”<sup>43</sup> The US report gives the example of a fake story of Russian Channel One on 12 July 2014. According to the story, there is a woman who claims about the torture of a three-year-old boy to death and the dragging of his mother to the back of a tank by a squad of Ukrainian soldiers near the Russian border. However, an investigation into the story by an independent Russian journalist revealed no evidence of such an occurrence. This report suggests that the story was doctored and it was reported ahead of leading the way for Russian troops to capture Crimea.<sup>44</sup>

Apart from the Cold War debate in which the Soviet Union was blamed for disinformation, in later history, liberal democratic states not only violated various international norms but also used lies for the attainment of certain defined motives. The US and Britain lied to its public about the intended attack by Iraq with the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) within 45 minutes.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, a diplomatic spat started between China and Australia over China’s foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian’s Twitter post. The spokesperson posted the picture of an Australian soldier holding a bloodied knife to the throat of an Afghan child on 30 November 2020. Australia protested over the post but China refused to apologise amidst the then ongoing tensions in trade relations between the two countries. China did provide explanations that the photo described the reality narrated in Australia’s investigative war

crimes report. "The United States called China's use of the digitally manipulated image a "new low" in disinformation."<sup>46</sup>

False and fabricated audio and videos are considered the most dreadful content in terms of interstate relations. It is argued that a picture cannot be believed easily as much as a video or an audio recording. An article in the Foreign Affairs pointed out the consequences associated with fake videos and audios for states with fragile and hostile relations in the Middle East, such as Iran and Israel.<sup>47</sup>

Western media's emphasis on the human rights violations in Xinjiang, the media coverage of Taiwan elections in 2020, and the Hong Kong protests of 2019 with the anti-communist party narrative was declared as propaganda war against China by the Chinese government. Similarly, the western media also accused China of its propaganda war and disinformation. Some scholars like Huang put China and Russia in the same basket when it comes to destabilising democracies and weakening the governance in the West "by sowing doubts and chaos in its society, undermining its self-confidence, and increasing polarization and disunity."<sup>48</sup> Huang, who is a Taiwanese citizen and a strong supporter of the democratic rule in the island, highlighted that the Chinese government was employing various tactics including disinformation to create disunity by polarising the Taiwanese society. The study also indicates that China, along with other social, political, and economic tools, manipulated the weaknesses in Taiwan's information sector. That said, the author also mentions the success of Taiwan's government to counter the Chinese disinformation in its 2020 election.<sup>49</sup> Such views and studies support the Western narrative against the Chinese Communist Party. However, the unfolding reality is contrary to what it looks like. "The balance of power has been shifting in Beijing's favour in important areas of US-Chinese competition, such as the Taiwan Strait and the struggle over global telecommunications networks."<sup>50</sup> China's high-tech company

Huawei also accused the US of spreading misinformation about its products.<sup>51</sup>

The US is very critical of what it refers to as the triad of disinformation, i.e., China, Iran, and Russia. "The coronavirus pandemic has brought authoritarian narrative convergence against the United States to new heights,"<sup>52</sup> according to Cint Watts. Furthermore, the West criticised China for earning praises for its aid to the affected countries of a pandemic for which the US trade war was considered a barrier. Russia was also criticised by the US for "promoting martial law in different countries, generating class warfare, and takeover of foreign governments."<sup>53</sup> Iran was criticised for considering the US sanctions as a reason for its "inadequate response to coronavirus pandemic while also suggesting that an Israeli-U.S. partnership might have created the virus."<sup>54</sup>

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the war of propaganda further intensified between China and the US. US President Donald Trump called it a Chinese Virus, which he referred to as a slip of tongue later. But the western media criticised the Chinese political system for censoring the news of the spread of the virus.<sup>55</sup> Such a narrative was rebutted by China through its media and diplomatic sources. According to some analysts, this criticism over China for controlling the virus harmed its hard-earned international image for its peaceful economic rise. The World Health Organisation (WHO) was also alarmed by such interstate propaganda warfare over the source and spread of the virus. Some conspiracy theorists, without any strong evidence, called it a human-made virus developed in a lab; a claim which was denied by the scientists.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, the WHO was also appalled by the misinformation on the cure and spread of the virus circulating on various social media sources. WHO issued a notice to all nations to report any kind of misinformation that will be detrimental to the control of pandemics. "There seems to be barely an area left untouched by disinformation in relation to the COVID-19

crisis, ranging from the origin of the coronavirus, through to unproven prevention and 'cures', and encompassing responses by governments, companies, celebrities and others,"<sup>57</sup> said Guy Berger, a Director at UNESCO.

### **Fake News and Disinformation in South Asian Politics**

The role of false/fake news in the domestic politics of many countries in South Asia can be assessed through the Facebook closure of fake accounts. Facebook shut down many leading news outlets and fake personal accounts just ahead of the elections in Bangladesh on December 20 2018. Similarly, Twitter also closed around 15 accounts. Both social networks blamed state-sponsored actors for irresponsible information sharing. State-sponsored fake news in Bangladesh was aimed at maligning the opposition. According to the head of Facebook's cybersecurity policy Nathaniel Gleicher, the investigation proved that individuals from the Bangladesh government were involved in the activity.<sup>58</sup>

The fake news problem is widely recognised in India given the growing consumption of WhatsApp. In 2013, before the elections of 2014, there was a fake video of a lynching spread through WhatsApp in the town of Muzaffarnagar, which led to Hindu-Muslim riots. On another occasion, in the Indian state of Assam, fake news about the involvement of foreigners in the abduction of children instigated violence against innocent people in July 2018.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, to discredit other political parties, a massive disinformation campaign was launched on WhatsApp before the Indian elections in 2019.<sup>60</sup>

Facebook was criticised for its contribution to sectarian and intra-communal violence in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. In response, Facebook began working towards the removal of deliberately inciting content from several accounts.<sup>61</sup>

In South Asian politics, the classic example of disinformation in interstate rivalry is that of India and Pakistan. Kashmir conflict is central

to the rivalry between India and Pakistan but the opposing national identities and the antagonistic strategic culture has also deepened the mistrust. Fundamentally, the conflict between the two countries is both territorial and ideological. The opposing national narratives have already played a damaging role in furthering animosity between India and Pakistan. Disinformation and fake news, in this lieu, has added much fuel by shaping and reshaping antagonistic public opinions in both countries.

Despite tense relations between India and Pakistan since 2014, a media war emerged as a prominent feature in their conduct of relations. In such an environment, local political forces with conservative and more hawkish views against the enemy gain more support from the public. After the two terms in government, the Indian National Congress was defeated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) based on his two strong slogans. He appealed to the public through his aggressive economic agenda and his approach towards Pakistan in the post-Mumbai attack scenario.

Indian public attached strong expectations to the Modi-led government, particularly with regards to Pakistan. The terrorist attacks in Pathankot and Uri in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) in 2016 tested Modi's election rhetoric and his strong opposition to the Congress party. To satisfy public expectations, India, under Modi, resorted to fake claims. As an all-out war is not possible with Pakistan due to nuclear deterrence, media and disinformation war has substantially benefitted BJP in its five-year rule so far.

India blamed the attack on Pakistan without any credible evidence. It claimed surgical strikes inside Pakistan administered Kashmir with much media hype on 29 September 2016, with the desired results of destroying terrorist sanctuaries. Pakistan strongly denied any such strikes or damages to any kind of infrastructure.<sup>62</sup>

To add weightage to its claims, Modi while speaking to the Indian diaspora in London made another fake claim contending that India had informed Pakistan about the military action before announcing it to the media. He justified the move, saying that an attack on Indian soldiers deserved such a response.<sup>63</sup> Even though Pakistan, time and again, denied all these claims, an insight into how the Indian government continued to build this narrative with India as the dominant power while relying on media resources, is critical to this study.

Close to another term election in India in 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi got another opportunity to play the Pakistan card to bag votes. India blamed Pakistan without any credible evidence for the terrorist attack in Pulwama in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) on 14 February 2019 in which 40 security persons were killed. India also conducted an airstrike inside Pakistan territory in Balakot on 26 February as revenge for the Pulwama attack claiming to have killed 300 persons in Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) camp.<sup>64</sup> The media hype for this occurrence was much louder in India. In a tit-for-tat move, Pakistani media was equally responsive in shunning down every misinformation propagated from the other end of the border. . Pakistan once again rejected Indian claims of destroying any such facility. In its formal denial of any such incident taking place on its soil, the Pakistani government contended that Indian planes actually 'intruded' inside Pakistani territory but the attempt of the airstrike was foiled by the Pakistan Air Force. "Under forced hasty withdrawal aircrafts released payload which had free fall in open area. No infrastructure got hit, no casualties," Major General Asif Ghafoor, the then DG ISPR mentioned in his tweet.<sup>65</sup> Some independent media groups such as Reuters came up with the facts that uninhabited areas were hit with payloads. By providing satellite images of the alleged JeM facility, it was proved that the area stood unharmed.<sup>66</sup>



Pakistan's response through airstrikes two days later started a new saga of fake claims. Pakistan shot down two Indian planes and captured a pilot in a dogfight. India claimed that it shot down Pakistan's F-16 fighter jet. No proof was found of such an incident.<sup>67</sup> This claim from India was aimed to create controversy on the issue of F-16 which Pakistan purchased from the US in the lieu of countering terrorism. However, this attempt failed too as the US refused to take any position on India's complaint against Pakistan by arguing that they were closely following the situation.<sup>68</sup>

According to Reuters, "with India and Pakistan standing on the brink of war several false videos, pictures and messages circulated widely on social media, sparking anger and heightening tension in both countries."<sup>69</sup> The author Akash Sriram called the framing of these events by media in both countries 'the war of words'. The impact of the media content and popular statements of leaders in both countries seemingly produced the desired results in each country.<sup>70</sup>

Although India also accused Pakistan of using 'social media platforms' to create fake news. India's Permanent Mission to the United Nations "quoted a report by the Stanford Internet Observatory that as many as 103 Facebook Pages, 78 Groups, 453 accounts, and 107 Instagram accounts were taken down on August 31, 2020, for engaging in 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour'.<sup>71</sup> Another small instance of fake news occurred in October 2020, which was an explosion after a gas leak in Karachi and Indian media reported it as a civil war situation. "A fake video circulating on Twitter even claimed to show some of the alleged unrest. In reality, none of it was true.<sup>72</sup>

The discovery of a big disinformation network active since 2005, by the European Union DisinfoLab was a watershed moment for accentuating the threat of disinformation warfare. In this investigation, 750 media accounts were identified operating in 116 countries. In its forward note, the report asserts that the researchers engaged with the task were at first "[...] astonished by the multiplication of layers of

fake, something we had never encountered in other investigations”<sup>73</sup> which they named as ‘Indian Chronicles’. This network had “resurrected dead media, dead think-tanks and NGOs, as well as dead people. The actors behind this operation hijacked the names of other people and institutions, tried to impersonate regular media and press agencies such as the EU Observer, the Economist and Voice of America, used the letterhead of the European Parliament, registered websites under avatars with fake phone numbers, provided fake addresses to the United Nations, and created publishing companies to print books of the think-tanks they owned.”<sup>74</sup> This investigation found the biggest chunk out of this network as 265 fake media in 65 countries were found to be active against Pakistan — ‘reproducing negative content about Pakistan online’. The report reveals that the network was created by the same ‘malicious actors who were the architect of the EP Today’. EP was a fake magazine of the European Parliament in Brussels from 2006 which actively served as a platform for the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and other politicians to express their views in favour of the Indian interests and against those of Pakistan.<sup>75</sup> The main target of this disinformation network was aimed at changing perceptions against Pakistan on influential forums.

It is noteworthy that India’s disinformation campaign not only shaped negative perceptions regarding the general image of Pakistan but also hampered Pakistan’s economic development. Additionally, the narratives created in the lieu of this organised campaign had a direct negative impact on Pakistan’s attempts for pursuing the case of Indian occupied Kashmir in the UN. The 9/11 bombings provided India with an opportunity to wrongly project the Kashmir freedom struggle as terrorism. Pakistan’s soft image that it had built for itself over the years was distorted. Ironically, based on Pakistan’s frontline role in the US-led war on terror, India managed to project Pakistan as a ‘dangerous’ place. Whilst, in reality, Pakistan’s decision to engage with

the Americans on Afghan soil had some reckless consequences for the country to bear at home. The phrase 'haven for terrorists' resonated with the US. For many years, the US demanded of Pakistan 'to do more'. It tried to neutralise the Kashmir issue both on the domestic ground and internationally. Such damaging perceptions disenfranchised Pakistan's efforts for achieving its national development goals on various fronts.

In recent times, India has shifted its focus of disinformation and propaganda towards the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It has seemingly already joined the bandwagon of the Western propaganda against China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), perhaps to cater to its historical tussle with the rising power. By referring to the multi-billion dollar project as a 'debt trap for South Asian countries' India has managed to malign the positive aspects of CPEC for developing countries. India spread the narrative that CPEC passes through parts of the disputed territory which impinge on Indian sovereignty.<sup>76</sup> The premise of such a narrative can perhaps be to question the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the CPEC project and also to justify its hardening position on the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan. Such narratives also serve the Indian government's purpose to divert the Indian public's attention from the prospects of the economic development of Pakistan through CPEC. Indian newspapers particularly highlight the chances of a debt trap crisis for Pakistan and the problems of slowdown of some projects in CPEC or the delays in the funds' release from China for a particular project.<sup>77</sup> Overall, these highlights are aimed to build a negative narrative against Pakistan's strategic partnership with China.

### **Moral and Ethical Dimensions of Fake News in Modern Statecraft**

According to realist thinkers, it is essential to have a framework for bringing ethical questions into contact with the real situation. The debate between moral reasoning and politics is complicated. It is

believed that leaders exercise little control over large events of world history and politics. According to Robert H. Jackson, the situational understanding of international ethics becomes the moral equivalent of Bismarck's definition of politics as the "art of the possible".<sup>78</sup> Bismarck within the classical school was a situational ethicist who, like the classical school of European diplomacy itself, joined idealism and realism in a 'nervous and tentative embrace'.<sup>79</sup>

Cathal J. Nolan argues that lying is, at times, a requisite of diplomacy even for democracy. He supports this assertion with the example of Franklin D. Roosevelt's defensible deceit of its public during World War II. He further contends that there are occasions in state affairs that render a national leader morally obligated to lie to its public beyond justification.<sup>80</sup> According to Darwinian struggle, nations could expect to cling to existence only by embracing Realpolitik.<sup>81</sup>

John Mearsheimer believed that lying within a state is different from the lies a state uses for its national interests. The international system does not have any sovereign authority to protect one state against another. Therefore, lies in inter-state relations are different from what occurs within a state. Unlike the international system, the higher authority is the state itself to which individuals can turn for protection.<sup>82</sup>

It is noteworthy that international disinformation campaigns are mostly intended against the adversary than the friendly countries. However, international anarchy does not mean that disinformation can and will only harm the targeted state. That said, disinformation does have the potential to shake up the norms and damage the trust for cooperation on certain matters. Although the gains from the distortion of facts through waging disinformation campaigns can be different in domestic politics. But in international relations, the objective of such disinformation campaigns against the enemy country is mostly to induce favourable changes or prevent unfavourable changes in the behaviour of the others.

The incident of the Pulwama attack serves as a classic instance of the lies for domestic political gains. The incident is believed to have turned the election results in favour of Narendra Modi who seemed vulnerable after failing on the economic progress in the first term and losing three state elections to the Congress party just before the national elections.<sup>83</sup> Through fake claims against Pakistan Modi constructed a national security reason and projected the impression that only his party dares to evade any future threats to India, particularly from Pakistan. During the Ladakh military standoff with China, even after losing a territory, Indian leadership used lies to avoid public criticism and began referring to the stalemate in dialogue as an achievement.<sup>84</sup> By aptly manipulating the media and state resources, India managed to portray its significant loss as a meaningful and strategically beneficial win.

However, India's disinformation campaign uncovered by the EU DisinfoLab comes under the domain of international disinformation campaign and it reveals India's attempt to induce favourable gains in its objective against Pakistan in international forums over the issue of Kashmir by maligning its image.

Although international disinformation campaigns undermine international trust and cooperation, the realist approach justifies the acts of states under the given circumstances. The questions of ethics and morality are overlooked by the state under the compulsions of survival and the quest for preserving national interests. The given circumstances provide the leaders with reasons to employ lies in the statecraft to achieve the set national interests. According to the realist approach, wartime statecraft entails that leaders may be morally obliged to lie. Propaganda and disinformation as a military strategy are used to deceive the enemy. "Releasing misleading or false information, maintain extreme secrecy and other such wartime deceptions are generally accepted by the vast majority of its citizens."<sup>85</sup>

The ethical question for disinformation in the national interest of the state is understandable in those countries where it is easier to separate the national interest from the politician's political interests.

Given the above theoretical explanations from the realist school of thought, Modi's war hysteria and then the hype over retaliation enabled him to avoid an all-out war with Pakistan and also to earn praises for his heroic acts or to bag more votes. Needless to say that it was not in the national interest of India because of its status as a nuclear state. This was the realpolitik in which the means for achieving the desired objective were fake claims and media propaganda.

### **Conclusion**

Statecraft has its requisites in this postmodernist age. The utilisation of modern communication platforms for conducting state affairs is one of them. The scholarly debate over fake news and disinformation in the context of statecraft is evolving. However, the role of disinformation in state affairs sheds light on the deliberate usage of lies by leaders for internal political gains and in the conduct of foreign relations. Disinformation or lies in favour of the state's national interests are an accepted norm according to the realist approach. The situational analysis of statecraft also adheres to this fact.

Research proves that media plays a crucial role in international politics. In this age of digital diplomacy, states are not the only influencers. Social media networks have revolutionised the conduct of state affairs. The rise of new forms of journalistic practices and the involvement of many actors in interpreting the daily developments is also causing a rapid decline in public trust in traditional journalism.<sup>86</sup>

Shaping and reshaping opinions and interpretation of developments through widespread tools of communication are posing new security challenges to states. In the US and Europe, fake news and disinformation is attributed to their rivalry with Russia. However, media in South Asia has highlighted more localised consequences of fake news such as communal violence, etc. However,

the state-sponsored lies and disinformation can be associated with modern statecraft in South Asia as well.

In South Asia, the issue of fake news predominantly exists in internal politics. However, in the case of India and Pakistan, the issue encompasses both, domestic politics and interstate relations between the two countries. Blaming Pakistan for the terrorist attacks without credible evidence to exert pressure on Pakistan can also be cited as an instance of statecraft lies. The strategic objective of India behind such an attitude is to change the narrative over Kashmir and also to discredit international support and perception over the resolution of the Kashmir dispute. In this regard, the EU DisinfoLab's report on India's disinformation network is a case in point.

Although the results of staging fake surgical strikes with Pakistan might have helped India in achieving domestic political gains, the issue of 'Deep fake'(audio and video manipulation) can have lethal consequences for the two nuclear-armed countries. The study proves that leaders while using lies for their selfish political gains can be dangerous in the long run. In such conditions, to avoid any misunderstanding both India and Pakistan need to work on media CBMs.

According to Gill Bennett, all countries need to be on the lookout to mitigate the negative effects of misinformation. Bennet suggests that "defence against disinformation means understanding what might happen if information is compromised, collaborating with others to identify the risk and working together to mitigate it."<sup>87</sup> Although the realist perspective justifies the act of lying for the sake of the state's national interests, as Bennet pointed out, the relentlessness in the creation and consumption of disinformation would have dire consequences for the individual and collective security of the world. Such as the spread of nuclear technology for defence purposes has been banned because of its consequences for the entire world, similarly, compromising on the truth can lead to gruesome

consequences. Therefore, there must be internationally binding principles on discouraging all forms of disinformation in domestic and international affairs.



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