



## Policy Brief

# The Propaganda War: India's Information Campaigns against China and Pakistan

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## **Executive Summary**

### **The Propaganda War: India's Information Campaigns against China and Pakistan**

India has built a complex and far-reaching information warfare apparatus targeting Pakistan and, to a lesser degree, China, with the purpose of discrediting strategic projects such as CPEC and BRI, eroding their legitimacy, and shaping global narratives in India's favour. Investigations by EU DisinfoLab and Oxford Internet Institute reveal extensive use of fake media outlets, fabricated NGOs, and covert influence networks which ran over 750 fake news sites across 116 countries for 15 years and continue to this day. These platforms recycled content, created artificial legitimacy, and lobbied policymakers at the EU and UN with manufactured reports and testimony.

Disinformation campaigns have portrayed CPEC as a "Chinese debt trap," spread fabricated claims of human rights abuses along the corridor, and alleged Chinese military presence in Pakistan. Similarly, during the Pulwama-Balakot crisis and post-Article 370 abrogation period, India disseminated doctored visuals, exaggerated casualty reports, and false narratives to project Pakistan as a sponsor of unrest. Anti-China messaging, while less frequent, often aligns with Western criticism of Xinjiang and BRI, framing Chinese initiatives as destabilising.

### **Recommendations**

**Rapid Response Unit at MOFA and MOI:** The Foreign Ministry should have a cross-agency fact-checking and rapid rebuttal cell that works closely with the Ministry of Information (MOI), Chinese counterparts, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), and certified independent fact checkers. This cell should identify coordinated networks running disinformation campaigns and publish short rebuttals within hours of crises. This cell should also inculcate verified facts and information to raise the signal-to-noise ratio.

**International Legal and Normative Push:** China and Pakistan should work with partners and multilateral institutions to develop rapid-response framework for high-tension periods, and establish norms against creation of fake international NGOs and

media outlets and to operationalise sanctions and remedies for egregious, proven influence operations.

**Narrative Building on Strategic Partnerships:** Pakistan should launch a Unified Proactive Narrative Campaign to highlight CPEC and BRI benefits through data-driven stories, short media explainers, and multilingual outreach to pre-empt Indian propaganda and build international confidence.

## **The Propaganda War: India's Information Campaigns against China and Pakistan**

India has developed an information warfare strategy targeting Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, China, aimed at discrediting strategic projects, undermining their economic and geopolitical legitimacy, and shaping global opinion in its favour; this policy brief examines the scope of these operations and proposes a joint China–Pakistan framework for rapid counter-disinformation, narrative building, and international exposure of Indian influence networks.

### **Issue**

To analyse India's propaganda war and information campaigns against China and Pakistan with a view to offer policy options for countering that propaganda.

### **India's Disinformation Campaigns**

India has carried out high-capacity disinformation and cyber-influence operations that systematically spread false narratives and misleading information about Pakistan and China, particularly targeting flagship projects like China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while occasionally extending to sensitive areas like Xinjiang. India uses formal public diplomacy, opaque influence networks (media outlets, NGOs, think tanks, advocacy groups), social media amplification, and covert/third party information operations to delegitimise Pakistan's stance on terrorism, human rights, Kashmir Issue, and CPEC.

India's disinformation operations against its rivals operate through multifaceted state, para-state and covert networks. The state actors involved are the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Press Information Bureau (PIB), and Indian Army's Public Relations Wing. Various para-state networks in India have been identified by independent research reports like EU DisinfoLab's *India Chronicles* and Oxford Internet Institute's report *Industrialized Disinformation*. According to these reports the para-state networks like the Srivastava Group, Asian News International (ANI) and BJP's IT Cell operate in alignment with Indian state interests but are not part of the government officially. Besides these groups, there are associated NGOs, volunteer groups, and

covert networks that operate as fake media outlets and personas through sock-puppet accounts,<sup>1</sup> bot farms,<sup>2</sup> deepfakes and visual manipulation.

A 2020 report by Oxford Internet Institute (OII), *“Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation”* identifies India as a high-capacity country with cyber-troops<sup>3</sup> activities. India is listed amongst 81 countries where governments, political parties, politicians and private actors manipulate social media content to shape narratives.<sup>4</sup> The report cites evidence of coordinated use of official structures with strong evidence of BJP’s IT Cell and associated volunteer networks carrying out computational propaganda and disinformation campaigns. India is known to contract private communication firms to outsource influence operations so that it does not trace back to India.

India uses a hybrid mix of strategies involving micro-target through political ads, trolling and harassment, coordinated hashtags, and mass circulation using automated and human-run accounts to generate and amplify narratives. Independent research reports by credible institutes confirm that India runs permanent and centralised disinformation operations with institutionalised integration between state actors, political party structures, and digital influencers.

EU DisinfoLab’s multiple research reports provide evidence of India’s sophisticated use of fake media and NGOs to influence EU and UN policy makers on Pakistan and Kashmir. A 2020 report, *Indian Chronicles*, debunked a 15 year old influence network operating since 2005 with a mission to discredit countries that are in conflict with India, focusing mainly on Pakistan but also, to a lesser degree, on China. It revealed that 750+ fake media outlets in 116 countries were linked to India and had connection to

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<sup>1</sup> Fake online profiles run by individuals or groups without revealing their actual identity and affiliation. These accounts pose as journalists, experts or ordinary citizens to attack critics, exaggerate certain narratives and spread disinformation. In case of India, fake accounts post independent opinions about Kashmir and CPEC which are later picked up by organic volunteer groups or larger media outlets.

<sup>2</sup> Bot farms are networks of automated social media accounts that are programmed to like, share or post content. They artificially inflate the popularity of an opinion or narrative, making it seem popular and trending. Coordinated hashtag campaigns during India–Pakistan crises, where thousands of tweets are posted in minutes to dominate online discussions are examples of bot farms.

<sup>3</sup> A high-capacity cyber troop country is the having permanent, centralised teams with significant budget and sophisticated tools to run information operations.

<sup>4</sup> Samantha Bradshaw, Hannah Bailey, and Philip N. Howard. *Industrialized disinformation: 2020 global inventory of organized social media manipulation*. Computational Propaganda Project at the Oxford Internet Institute, 2021.

Srivastava Group and ANI news agency.<sup>5</sup> Over the long term, the Indian strategy seeks to strengthen pro-India and anti-Pakistan (and anti-China) sentiments within India itself. Internationally, the goal is to enhance India's image, undermine the reputation of its rivals, and secure greater support from influential platforms such as the EU and the UN.<sup>6</sup> These reports validate that anti-Pakistan sentiment is not organic but manufactured.

### **India's Information Operations against China and Pakistan**

India has repeatedly claimed that CPEC is a "Chinese debt trap" that would ultimately bankrupt Pakistan. It exaggerated the grievances of local people and presented false reports alleging human rights abuses in regions along the corridor. It also circulated stories that portrayed CPEC as a cover for Chinese military bases and a violation of sovereignty as CPEC passes through Gilgit Baltistan. In the aftermath of Article 370 Abrogation, India flooded social media with posts showing normalcy in IIOJK while spreading false claims of Pakistan instigating unrest. Similarly, during Pulwama-Balakot Crisis, India gave inflated figures for militant casualties that contradicted the satellite evidence. During the most recent May skirmishes, viral social media claims of Pakistan losing multiple fighter jets were circulated by India which were later debunked by international media. Besides these, India gives virality and amplification to anti-China criticism orchestrated by the west. Some Indian outlets and digital networks have echoed Western criticisms of China's policies in Xinjiang. These narratives suggest instability in Xinjiang would threaten the viability of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), indirectly discrediting China's partnership with Pakistan on CPEC.

The EU DisinfoLab's December 2019 report, *Influencing Policymakers with Fake Media Outlets*, exposed how India used fabricated media platforms and sham NGOs to influence opinion in Europe and at the United Nations. One example was EP Today, a website designed to resemble a European Parliament magazine but linked to the Srivastava Group, which regularly published anti-Pakistan articles and pro-India op-eds. Similarly, Times of Geneva produced videos and stories against Pakistan, particularly focused on Kashmir. These outlets recycled content from legitimate sources such as Russia Today (RT) and Voice of America (VoA) but embedded Indian

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<sup>5</sup> Machado et al., *Indian Chronicles*.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Machado et al., *Indian Chronicles* (EU Disinfo Lab, 2020), 07.

geopolitical narratives. Alongside these platforms, bogus NGOs like the European Organisation for Pakistani Minorities and the Pakistani Women's Human Rights Organisation were created to lobby at the UN and EU institutions. Lobbying efforts included orchestrating high-profile visits, such as the 2019 trip of 27 EU MPs to Kashmir, organised by the International Institute for Non-Aligned Studies (IINS), also linked to Srivastava. Altogether, the network comprised of hundreds of fake media outlets designed to mimic local news sources, presenting a manufactured global consensus against Pakistan. This report demonstrates India's sophisticated use of opaque influence networks to legitimise disinformation and shape policymaker perceptions.

The December 2020 report, *Indian Chronicles*, built on the above findings and revealed the full scale of the operation. It exposed over 750 fake media outlets across 116 countries, all linked to the Srivastava Group and amplified by ANI, one of India's largest news agencies. The network relied on fake NGOs with names resembling legitimate organisations, such as the resurrected Commission to Study the Organisation of Peace, a previously defunct UN-accredited body. These groups submitted anti-Pakistan statements at the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), lobbied international forums, and published content that was then laundered through ANI to mainstream outlets, creating the illusion of credible reporting. Defunct newspapers were revived online and used to spread anti-Pakistan narratives, particularly on human rights and Kashmir, while also targeting Chinese projects like CPEC. Social media platforms, including Twitter, were used to amplify this material during major crises such as the Pulwama attack and the abrogation of Article 370. The report provides compelling evidence of industrial-scale disinformation campaigns orchestrated from India, validating Pakistan's longstanding claims and highlighting the methods used to shape global narratives against both Pakistan and China.

These examples provide evidence-based instances of India's information warfare, demonstrating a pattern of using fake media, bots, doctored visuals, and fabricated reports to target Pakistan and China. In the absence of a joint China-Pakistan response framework focused on rapid counter-disinformation, credibility building, and international exposure of Indian influence operations, India would get away with its skewing of global narratives.

**Table: Key Data on India's Disinformation Campaigns against China & Pakistan**

Incident / Report	Tactics Used	Narrative / Claims	Key Evidence / Source
<b>CPEC Disinformation</b>	False reports of human rights abuses Claims of Chinese military bases along CPEC Sovereignty violations (Gilgit Baltistan) Debt-trap narrative	CPEC will bankrupt Pakistan Locals oppose the project China using Pakistan for military expansion	Open-source media analysis
<b>Article 370 Abrogation (2019)</b>	Flooded social media with posts of "normalcy" in IIOJK; false claims of Pakistan instigating unrest	Paint Pakistan as destabilising Kashmir; portray Indian governance as effective	Digital forensic evidence; fact-checking reports
<b>Pulwama-Balakot Crisis (2019)</b>	Inflated militant casualty figures; fake reports of Pakistani jet losses during skirmishes	India successful in strikes; Pakistan humiliated militarily	Satellite imagery reports; international media debunking
<b>Xinjiang / BRI Narratives</b>	Echoed Western criticism; suggested instability in Xinjiang threatens BRI viability	Frame China as a rights violator; discredit BRI and CPEC	Media analysis
<b>EU DisinfoLab Report (2019)</b>	Fake media outlets (EP Today, Times of Geneva); bogus NGOs (EOPM, Pakistani Women's Human Rights Organisation); lobbying via IINS; recycled RT and VoA content with Indian narratives	Influence EU & UN policymakers; create illusion of global consensus against Pakistan	EU DisinfoLab (2019)
<b>Indian Chronicles Report (2020)</b>	750+ fake media outlets in 116 countries; fake NGOs; resurrected defunct UN bodies; content laundered via ANI; revived dead newspapers; social media amplification	Spread anti-Pakistan & anti-China content (CPEC, Kashmir); project India as credible source	EU DisinfoLab (2020)
<b>OII Cyber Troops Report (2021)</b>	Coordinated inauthentic behaviour, bot farms, sock-puppet accounts; hashtag manipulation during crises; cross-platform amplification via volunteer and IT cells	Promote pro-India, anti-Pakistan and anti-China narratives; frame India as responsible power	Oxford Internet Institute (2021)



## Recommendations

To dispel India's information campaigns, China and Pakistan will require to highlight third party, independent research on international fora. This would expose India's violation of information ethics and human rights norms before the world. Media partnerships with global outlets can help Pakistan and China issue evidence-backed responses comprising investigative reports and fact-checked counter-narratives. Besides cooperating with each other, China and Pakistan will have to collaborate with social media platforms to detect coordinated networks and take down fake content and impersonated accounts. Following recommendations are provided to counter disinformation:

**Rapid Response Unit at MOFA and MOI:** The Foreign Ministry should have a cross-agency fact-checking and rapid rebuttal cell that works closely with the Ministry of Information (MOI), Chinese counterparts, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), and certified independent fact checkers. This cell should identify coordinated networks running disinformation campaigns and publish short rebuttals within hours of crises. This cell should also inculcate verified facts and information to raise the signal-to-noise ratio.

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