

RISE OF INVISIBLE BATTLEFIELDS AND HYPERWAR IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A CASE STUDY OF INDIA-PAKISTAN WAR

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Abstract

The emergence of hyperwar has reshaped modern battlefields through the convergence of artificial intelligence, information manipulation, cyber warfare, and autonomous systems. South Asia, already marked by protracted conflicts and regional volatility, is increasingly exhibiting the characteristics of this new mode of warfare. This study examines how AI-driven military technologies are challenging conventional forms of warfare and transforming conflicts into more invisible and digitally mediated confrontations. It specifically analyses shifts in the military strategies of the nuclear-armed rivals, India and Pakistan and explores how technological advancements are reshaping traditional concepts of deterrence in ways that heighten regional security risks. As India and Pakistan have engaged in recurring crises for decades, the rise of AI-enabled hyper war has introduced new layers of ambiguity, accelerated decision-making and increased the risks of miscalculation and unintended escalation. The research has two primary objectives: first, to explore how AI-driven warfare technologies are redefining battle spaces; and second, to assess the evolving defence strategies of regional states within the context of regional and global alliances. This study employs a qualitative research design and draws on interviews with military personnel, policy experts and security practitioners. It argues that hyperwar contributes to strategic instability by blurring the boundaries between war and peace, fostering democratic erosion and amplifying the potential for rapid military escalation. The paper concludes by recommending the development of AI norms in conflict, strengthening regional cybersecurity frameworks, promoting cooperative security mechanisms and enhancing digital resilience to mitigate the destabilising effects of hyperwar in South Asia.

Keywords: Hyperwar, South Asia, AI, Conflicts, War

Introduction

In age of Artificial Intelligence, the warfare dynamics are constantly evolving and reshaping strategic competition between India and Pakistan. Moreover, both states, being nuclear-armed rivals, are navigating the pressure of nuclear rivalry in a digitised security environment.

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AI driven technologies such as data driven decision making, autonomous systems and cyber capabilities to real-time surveillance are altering from traditional to invisible or less visible, technology-mediated domains. On one hand, this shift confounds crisis stability and deterrence and increases the possibilities of unintended escalation and misperception between nuclear powers. Meanwhile, modernised warfare expands multiple channels, including unmanned platforms, cyber operations and information warfare. For Pakistan and India, these developments present both strategic opportunities and serious challenges, as maintaining credible deterrence increasingly depends not only on traditional military strength but also on technological sophistication and resilience in emerging domains of conflict. In contemporary warfare strategies, decision-making is well accomplished by the involvement of AI, autonomous systems and cyber operations. Such developments interpret the big data into military strategies and enable AI for decision-making. Additionally, AI ensures automated responses and invisible war fronts and form of aggressions. These advancements call the traditional interpretation of war and peace into question, particularly in volatile regions such as South Asia.

In regions like South Asia, military revolution offers a double-edged prospect. On one hand, it provides the opportunity, while on the other hand, it gives anxiety. The rise of hyperwar in regions like South Asia offers a few exceptions. At first, it complicates the concept of deterrence as well as deterrence strategies. As hyperwar has introduced new actors, new vulnerabilities, and changed escalation pathways. Secondly, it develops a security dilemma in the region in the digital domain. States have developed and deployed digital weapons with the elimination of human involvement. In order to control these lethal weapons, there is lacking of ethical and regulatory controls. Thirdly, the most thought-provoking is the vague dividing lines between wartime and peacetime. Invisible war fronts in the digital age can cause invisible conflicts without a formal declaration of military mobilisation or war.

Research Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods research design that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative component is based on the analysis of secondary sources, including policy documents, official statements, academic literature, and strategic reports, which are interpreted through qualitative analytical methods.

The quantitative component supports this analysis through the use of numerical data such as conflict trends, defence statistics, and technological indicators. In this study, qualitative data from Pakistan and India are analysed and compared to draw conclusions. The data for this study have been collected from multiple authoritative sources, including official reports and documents, statements and briefings from civil and military spokespersons of Pakistan and India, as well as peer-reviewed research articles and academic journals. The data includes reported fighter jet losses, the destruction of military systems, and the capabilities of cyber, electronic, and conventional arsenals, drawn from official government briefings and verified institutional sources. The impact assessment is supported by verified and neutral international sources, including reputable European and American media outlets. The study also uses semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 15–20 experts, including military professionals, strategic analysts, cybersecurity specialists and policymakers focused on South Asian security.

Secondary sources, such as books and journals, are also consulted. This study uses qualitative documentary analysis of military reports and manuals to examine the digital capabilities shaping invisible battlefields and hyperwar in the India-Pakistan conflict.

Literature Review

Napoleon said that an army walks on its stomach; however, today humans are standing on the verge, where such old traditions are changing with the rise of autonomous weapons. AI works more in the context of facial recognition, voice recognition, as well as for predictive functions. The Russo-Ukraine conflict has provided a battleground laboratory where hyperwar's elements can be tested. At first, in kinetic operations, the Ukrainian military had an upper hand due to the integration of satellite imagery intelligence and object recognition technologies. Secondly, Ukrainian intelligence used neural networks in order to run ground social media content. Additionally, open-source data is used to monitor and translate inputs into military intelligence and target-acquisition information.¹

Ozdemir and Selvi in their article "Hyper War: The Evolution of Conflict in the Digital Age" claim that the chaotic international system gives no other option to states, but ensure resilient and durable defense technologies for their survival. Resultantly, a handsome figure of nation income is allocated for defense.

Writers lay claim that advancement in technology bears lofty objectives, including exploration and improving living standards for humans. However, there is no denying the fact that enhancing the military capabilities of states serves as a catalyst for the rapid advancement of technology, resulting in a fresh advancement in the art of war. In digital era, world witnesses a multi layered structure that has outset traditional means of war and conflicts, including digital field and the latest technology tools.²

Allen and Hussain, in their article, “On Hyper”, highlight the transformative trends in war-waging ways, a few of them including rifled muskets, fast armour, and spontaneous communication in the execution of the blitzkrieg strategy. Such seismic shifts are enabled by technological developments. Moreover, writers claim that another revolution in the battlefield is on its way. Technologies such as computer vision aided by machine learning algorithms, artificial intelligence (AI)-powered autonomous decision making, advanced sensors, miniaturized high-powered computing capacity deployed at the “edge,” high-speed networks, offensive and defensive cyber capabilities, and a host of AI-enabled techniques such as autonomous warning and cognitive analysis of sensor data will be at the heart of this revolution. The major outcome of this revolution is the minimisation of human involvement in war-related decision-making. Writers affirm that in the coming age, hyperwar will rule the battlefields, where human services will be limited to broad, high-level inputs. While machines will do planning, executing, and bearing the burden of decision-making on behalf of humans on battlefields, with the elimination of additional inputs.³

While extensive research exists on hyper-war dynamics in Western and Great Power contexts, however, there is limited empirical research on how these dynamics operate between nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan, where historical tensions and unique strategic cultures influence technological adoption and deterrence. The existing literature on deterrence in South Asia centres on nuclear doctrines and conventional military balances. There is a research gap in understanding how AI-enabled warfare and rapid autonomous decision loops impact traditional deterrence theory and crisis stability in the India–Pakistan crises. There is limited research linking emerging hyperwar technologies to specific policy responses, such as AI norms, regional cybersecurity cooperation, or mechanisms for risk reduction tailored to South Asia.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses neo-realism as a theoretical framework to analyse deterrence and securitisation in South Asia, and the event of a Pakistan-India conflict in May 2025. Realism in the military power context defines the necessity of military strengths and weaknesses of the states. Realism as a theoretical framework analyses the state on a realist basis. Pakistan and India are two nuclear states which are hostile to each other, but the official stance of both states is that their nukes are only for deterrence. India has declared an NFU (No First Use) policy, while Pakistan does not guarantee NFU. The current conflict started from a limited attacks of non-military installations by India where Pakistan declared it as an act of war to attack sovereign state and responded by attacking Indian Military installations that lead to use of ballistic missiles by both the countries and it seemed that both states are determined to use maximum of their strength which made USA to interfered although in the start of the conflict USA officially showed practical indifference to the escalation. Pakistan's policy of deterrence, as well as its no-first-use policy, was clearly manifested in the four-day war.

Pakistan and India had three full conventional wars and a limited war, which happened in 1999 on the Line of Control across Kashmir. This conflict was the first modern clash between two nuclear states since the inception of smart war tools from drones to ballistic missiles to long range air to air missiles to advance Air Defense Systems. In previous wars both countries have got awareness of military strengths of each other but in the age of cyber and electronic defense mechanism it was first clash to realize the strength of the other. This war was a real assessment of the military equipment and capacities of both states, which has not happened since 1999. The realism theory requires that the military powers which are hostile to each other act or do not act on the basis of real assessment of the enemy's war capacities. In the recent conflict, Pakistan and India tried to assess each other's smart war strategies, which included military as well as electronic and cyber-attacks on each other's infrastructures, jamming the electronic signals, etc.

The regional security of South Asia was at a stake in this conflict. The deterrence and assessment of modern warfare by Pakistan and India has a significant impact on regional security. The conventional wars between Pakistan and India stopped for a while when both states realised the strength of each other.

This was the first assessment of modern warfare by both militaries, which showed that the balance of power has not changed to one country's side, but it still hangs in balance, which will threaten regional security.

Hyper War: The Next Evolution of Warfare in the Artificial Intelligence Era

The most important debate in the modern digital era is AI-fueled and machine-waged conflict on the battlefield known as Hyperwar. For many historians, it's not a new term; during World War II, it was applied to many concurrent threats of war. In order to describe the dimensions of future wars, the word "hyper" is used, meaning above or over. As far as in military terms are concerned, hyperwar may be redefined. In military terms, hyperwar is a type of military conflict in which human involvement in decision-making in the observe-orient-decide-act (OODA) loop is nearly absent. Resultantly, it will ensure instantaneous response with an OODA cycle on one hand and game-changing on the battlefield on the other hand. Traditionally, in war, decisions to act depended on human beings. However, in machine-waged war or hyperwar, this will not be the case. An exhausted brain and a lack of glucose in the human body can create the potential for error in decision-making. Nevertheless, in an AI-fueled war, the machine is absolutely free from such cognitive burdens.⁴

Second, the most important feature of hyperwar is "Overpowering the enemy" This phrase has always been used in war-related literature. In military terms, this term claims that the application of force in a finite period of time and space. Such concentration of force with precision of time and space makes the opponent nearly impossible to respond or resist. Such developments are not necessitated that attacking state is more powerful or somehow larger in size than the defending state. This is actually not the distinction in case of hyperwar. The real distinction is made on the basis of perfectly coordinated and concentration of force with the precision of time and space and enemy is unable to respond over the period of hostility, then smaller state will prevail. Repetition of such actions will enable the smaller power to neutralise the larger opponent economically, who will eventually be psychologically dislocated.

To cocoon, it can be affirmed that hyperwar is depended on two key variables time and space. The time, what it takes to execute kinetic action, and the space are where the action is to be executed.⁵

Thirdly, the old aphorism claims that “amateurs talk tactics, and professionals discuss logistics” is line of guidance in war strategies. Since the time memorial, the movement of human armies requires logistical details, as they must be fed, clothed, and protected. While machine soldiers are devoid of such logistical demands. Moreover, loss of these machines will not require instant infiltration of the medical team and transportation facilities, etc. In recent years, unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs), commonly known as drones, are piloted rather than by human pilots and are responsible for crafting and decision-making at a distance. Such a configuration is quite useful, however, not free from downsides.⁶

It is a well said by General Erwin Rommel, “The best form of welfare for the troops is first-rate training.” In the digital era, when hyperwar and AI technologies rule the battlegrounds, for troops’ training, two groundbreaking changes are required. At first, the latest technologies such as natural language-based dialog systems are capable of ingestion of thousands of pages during non-combat situation, that is beyond human capacity. Moreover, such information will ensure remediation and maintenance of equipment, as well as the delivery of information in combat scenarios. Secondly, in the event of a malfunction, the entire set of behaviours and the corpus of acquired knowledge can be easily transferred from one system to another without any loss. Resultantly, states can have the most qualified veteran, having enough potential to transfer the experience and expertise to those AI troops who have never been on a battlefield.⁷

Hyperwar in South Asia: Emerging Dynamics of AI-Driven Conflicts

The twenty-first century’s tech boom has impacted every aspect of life. In south Asia, the change is more evident than other any other region. The technological innovation that promised to provide a better and faster growth in governance also rushed onto the battlefield. At this critical juncture, billions are being invested in next-generation missiles, AI-enabled command systems, and drone swarms. At this point, it is necessary to mention that South Asia is emerging from a new era of diplomacy into a battleground, where high-tech weapons are dominating the battlefield. The region has already witnessed rivalry between India and Pakistan; however, it has also become a battleground for global powers.

Certainly, for global powers, South Asia is not only a competing ground for political influence or hegemonic designs but also to gain an upper hand in high-tech war. The global powers’ tech rivalry is evident in the recent war between India and

Pakistan. South Asia has risen as a new frontline especially in tech war, in which China and US AI-enabled command systems.⁸

Bundles of research papers, experts defence strategists and leading media houses provide evidence of how Chinese and Western technology, such as drones, jammers, jets and radars, competed in South Asia. According to Zarrar Khuhro, in dogfight- fighter planes' air combat and drone warfare, India's air strikes were backfired. A CNN report claims that India-Pakistan confrontation where both states were backed by global powers. World has witnessed how Chinese military technology outplayed Western warfare technologies. Notably military experts, including Mehul Srivastava and Charles Clover, claim that even before the start of India Pakistan's tech war, Chinese Chengdu Aircraft company's stock began to rise on account of Chinese jets (JF-17 Thunder and J-10 Vigorous Dragon). Additionally, western media admitted that after India-Pakistan military face off, Chinese technology gained credibility as Pakistan was using "Beijing-made J-10C Vigorous Dragon" equipped with PL 15 missiles that outplayed India's French-made Rafale jets.⁹

India, being the largest economy in the subcontinent, is the leading state in the region, which is changing the forefront of traditional war into a tech war. Both India and, according to the TRT investigative report, in order to enhance its military capability, India is investing billions in the import of Israeli technology. Such a partnership is not only limited to advanced military weapons but also to reconnaissance operations. Heron UAVs, reconnaissance drones, Barak-8 long-range air-defence, Tavor rifles, ELTA Radars (multitarget tracking), Spice Kits (precision-guided bombs), Python-5 (rockets-Rafael, long-range air-to-air missiles), Derby (long-range air-to-air missiles), MF-Star (El/M-2248 Sea Radar).¹⁰

India joined an elite club in November 2024, followed by the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO). Club was comprised of hypersonic power following (DRDO) test, that test was having the potential to breach any familiar interceptor shield. On 9 May 2025, India's first drone on military assault was launched. It was an assault on Pakistan's air defence sites such as Multan and Lahore. In addition to showcasing, India used Russian-made S-400 missile defence batteries.

Additionally, a few major developments, such as the National Mission on Quantum Technologies and the Defence Artificial Intelligence Council, make it evident that India is more focused on escalation options rather than just deterrence.

Every modern warfare development further moves towards escalation strategies, which can be referred as action-reaction spiral in South Asia.¹¹

Pakistan has always sought to fulfil its desire for deterrence. However, the adoption of tech warfare strategies, military revolution, and AI weapons by both conflicting parties is causing further instability in a region already unstable. South Asia has recently seen a change in the balance of power and estimation of modern warfare in the Pakistan-India conflict in 2025. This modern technological combat over four days has shown the superiority of the Pakistan Air Force, as well as the capacity of Chinese Military equipment, including Long Range Air-to-Air and Air-to-Surface, and Surface-to-Surface Missiles. Chengdu J-10C loaded with PL-15 and aircraft like J-10C and JF-17 of Pakistan Air Force, which managed to kill six Indian aircraft, which included the latest three Rafale (First Time Used in a Combat), SU-30 and Mig-29s and an Israeli-made Heron UAV over India's European Aviation equipment.¹²

This conflict made a surge in Chengdu Aircraft Corporation's stock to go up and a decline in Dassault Aviation's share, which is the manufacturer of Rafale Jets. The old adage goes, "Markets Know", and in this case, it's turned out to be the case in spades. India's the most sophisticated Russian made S-400 air defense system was targeted and killed by Pakistan's JF-17 fighter jets which were armed with CM-400AKG missiles which has capability of hypersonic speed and anti-radiation seekers. Pakistan Air Force claimed by highlighting the "cheeseboard" of S-400's destruction to make the system operative. The claims of PAF were validated through satellite pictures of impacts at Udampur.¹³

Pakistan showed its strength and superiority, proficiency and efficiency in kinetic operations, integration of cyber warfare and electronic warfare, which reflects Pakistan has advanced itself in all aspects of modern warfare. Pakistan also demonstrated its advanced coordinated multi-domain operational attack strength to disturb India's command and control structures. Deployment of Domestically produced Fateh Missiles range with a range of 400 km with their shoot and scoot capability to target Indian installments with high precisions without being intercepted is a demonstration of capabilities of Pakistani ballistic missiles arsenal.¹⁴

Pakistan has a large stock of Fateh and other kinds of ballistic missiles due to their home production; these are guided rockets which have been produced over the past 35 years since Pakistan's first launch of its own missile system production.

During the operations, Fateh units alone had the potential of impact factor strikes, which shows that in a longer war, thousands of such missiles would be deployed through MLR vehicles, which also reflects the massiveness of the inventory. The sustained offensive operations were possible due to the mobility and volume of the ballistic missiles which Pakistan has in its arsenal with multiple variants and launching pads like VLSMLRS.¹⁵

India's situational awareness and response time appear to have been constrained by Pakistan's use of electronic warfare capabilities, particularly the reported jamming of radar and communication systems. According to Indian official statements acknowledging the presence of Pakistani aircraft within contested airspace, air defense systems such as the S-400 deployed at Udhampur did not successfully engage these aircraft despite their long operational range. Pakistan provided the proof of Indian Rafale communication interceptions to show its electronic superiority in a post-operation military briefing. Pakistan while India has not shown any proof of its claims. Pakistan killed and jammed Indian drones and munitions as evidence, and also Indian Brahmos missiles trajectories on radar, and showed a clip of misdirected Brahmos, which landed on the Indian side of Punjab, which was shown by Pakistan's military post-war briefings. The recent superiority of Pakistan's modern warfare is not an isolated event, but it can be seen as a consistent performance, as Pakistan shot down an Indian plane in 2019 and captured the pilot after Indian claims of Balakot Surgical strikes. Disrupting the communications and blinding the aircraft before downing them shows the jamming and electronic capabilities of Pakistan's electronic warfare units. These evidences clearly draw to logical conclusion of Pakistan as a dominating force in electronic warfare between two nuclear states. Indian Military, in its press briefings, has clearly admitted that their aircraft did not violate the airspace of Pakistan and also that their Rafale did not take off after the first night of the war, where they were checked by the Pakistan Air Force.¹⁶

The coordinated military plus cyberattacks by Pakistan caused disruptions in Indian Military networks and complemented the kinetic attacks with an amplifying effect. The cyberattacks by Pakistan were not limited to only military installations, but it was a showcase of Pakistan's abilities as energy sector websites and e-mechanics, the Ministry of Defence's confidential documents and breaches in the ruling BJP party were also targeted, successfully hacked and released. Deployment of own imaging capabilities in the orbit with an access to a vast array Chinese space

capability which can be compared to US, military makes Pakistan in a better position than India. Pakistan leveraged these advanced ISR capabilities, including satellite imagery and real-time data sharing, to monitor Indian movements and coordinate strikes effectively. The effectiveness of coordinated strikes of Pakistan was possible due to real-time data sharing and monitoring of Indian movements due to advanced ISR capabilities to update target data for the use of long-range smart weapons, though S-400 and Rafale shot down undermined Pakistan's orbital ISR effectiveness.¹⁷

The modern BVR is determined by who can see further and shoot from far, as AEW and C are any force's eyes. Pakistani Air Defence system successfully monitored the airspace of Pakistan and facilitated timely responses to Indian air force violations and intercepted Indian operations. PAF operational briefings mentioned that Erieye support was provided to PAF jets and operational advantages were gained by this support. India was unable to see further and shoot further due to the ineffectiveness of its outdated Phalcon AWACS, which is not effective against the latest PL-15 missiles, and these facts turned the tide in Pakistan's favour as far as the air battle of the four-day war is concerned. India's often quoted INS Vikrant left the war zone when Pakistan initiated the military strikes as its flying wing was having only Mig 29 fighters which have been easily shot down by PAF if INS Vikrant would have come in the war theatre and that would have been a fatal blow to India's war planning, delivered the final, existential blow.¹⁸

Recommendations

- Trilateral discussion between India, Pakistan and China should be facilitated in order to discuss and address emerging technological risks. Such Regional Dialogue Initiatives can develop risk reduction strategies.
- AI Safety Protocols, such as data exchange centres, pre-launch notifications and safeguards to ensure safe use of AI-enabled military systems, should be established and implemented.
- International standards through organisations like the SCO and UN to maintain human control over hypersonic and autonomous weapons and ensure checks and balances are promoted and strengthened.

Conclusion

The era of hyperwar has already started. In such a hyper war, ethical concerns are unregulated, unforeseen risks are intact, deepened injustice and many inequalities prevail. There is no denying the fact that the idea of being a powerful state is not limited to economically, politically or militarily, but most importantly to technologically. We see that on account of AI weapons; edges of war are blurring. Surviving in this multifaceted and comprehensive war is a matter of understanding technology, using it effectively, and, of course, producing it. Hyper war has welcomed the risks of new ambiguities, democratic erosions and military escalations in region. The use of Artificial Intelligence, BMD, unmanned vehicles, and ASAT weapons has become a modern warfare strategy in South Asia. These technologies, accompanied by pre-emptive counterforce, have increased the crisis, risks and strategic instability in the region.

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