**Pakistan: a victim of hybrid warfare**

Lt-Gen (r) Abdul Qayyum

Monday, May 22, 2023

The concept of hybrid warfare encompasses use of all means available to a state to subdue its adversary and achieve strategic goals without the ostensible use of available kinetic force.

It may include subversion, deepfake videos, terror attacks, cyber aggression, economic coercion, exploitation of sectarian, linguistic and ethnic fault lines, disinformation warfare, and financial and diplomatic support to political opposition parties to paralyze a sitting government and break the country from within without any direct foreign physical aggression.

Hybrid wars envisage the use of all elements of national power including foreign electoral interventions through the internet as seen in the 2016 American elections. Besides this, in April 2018, foreign news outlets ‘The Guardian’ and ‘The New York Times’ broke a story of a UK-based political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica which unethically expanded potential voters of some political leaders while illegally using over 87 million Facebook profiles.

Such a negative use of social media to promote or downgrade political leaders through artificial intelligence aims at disrupting the functionality of a state to render it ungovernable without declaring an all-out war, which is being done against Pakistan. It is also worth noting that the concept of hybrid warfare is not new and can be traced back to thousand years ago when the celebrated Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu said in his book ‘The Art of War’: “To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”

The current unfortunate state of Pakistan implies that we as a nation have unfortunately – advertently or inadvertently – become a victim of hybrid warfare. Let us first take a look at external manoeuvres aimed at our economic strangulation. Taking advantage of both our flawed economic policies that remain unchanged for many decades and the resultant economic vulnerabilities, the IMF is further aggravating the situation as an instrument of hybrid war.

This can be explained in the words of Joseph Stieglitz – a Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences – who says, “The IMF and International Financial Institutions (IFIs) are tools for economic coercion against vulnerable states”. To support his argument, he quotes the example of the East Asian financial crisis of 1997.

The FATF is another instrument used for the said purpose. Pakistan was kept in the grey list even when it had worked on 26 out of the 27 observations raised. In 2021, Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar explicitly said that the BJP government led by Narendra Modi ensured that Pakistan remained on the grey list.

Also, Pakistan’s flagship project ‘CPEC’ – which is an essential concept for our economic revival – has been declared a red line by Indo-US lobbies, and all external pressures are being exerted for sabotaging it. Similarly, the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project – the most pivotal for our crucial energy needs – is being resisted tooth and nail. To use terrorism as an instrument of hybrid war, unrelenting TTP attacks are being supported – both financially and politically.

Cyber warfare is yet another dimension of hybrid war, and our adversaries are missing no opportunity to use it against us. In this Information Age, social media is full of disinformation. Extremely venomous propaganda, deepfakes and character assassination of our politico-military and judicial leadership are extremely lethal instruments of hybrid war, which are being used against our national unity and coherence.

The most dangerous dimension of this onslaught is however the dirty propaganda being made against members of our armed forces to pollute public minds. To thwart these evil trends, we must first of all focus on the biggest problem – the current acute political polarization created by some leaders who are hell bent to retain or reach out to power corridors at all cost through hook or crook.

Political differences have been transformed into personal enmities. The police and law-enforcement agencies are being targeted by the ‘misguided cult’. State installations, radio stations, cultural centres, historic forts and commercial show rooms are not only being attacked but also looted with impunity.

The judiciary, unfortunately, became controversial when its decision led to the de-seating of 25 MPs. This verdict, given by our honourable courts, wrote a black chapter in our already polluted judicial history which turned the tables and created political turmoil, which is worsening with every passing day. The situation further compounded when the chief justice of Pakistan took a suo-motu notice on the political issue of holding elections in the country.

And as things began to unfold, parliament was made ineffective and the sacred institution of our defence forces was made controversial. The way forward is political dialogue to conduct general elections across the country on a mutually agreed date according to the spirit of the constitution.

Exemplary punishments should be announced for planners, instigators, abettors and perpetrators who took the law in their hands and attacked state assets. The superior judiciary also needs to look inward and ensure that justice is free from bias.

Political leaders across the board must refrain from using derogatory language against the judicial and military leadership and must abide by parliamentary ethics. The PDM government may ensure that law-enforcement agencies remain professionally potent but not allow the use of excessive force, which brings a bad name to the government and the country.

The writer is former chairman

Senate Standing Committee on

Defence Production.