Event Transcript
Disinformation and Crisis Escalation in South Asia

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The Stimson Center

Featuring:

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Event Description

Disinformation, especially spread through the proliferation of new media technologies, has played an increasingly important role in crisis dynamics within South Asia. In this South Asian Voices webinar, experts in Washington D.C. and the subcontinent will discuss how disinformation and social media have contributed to the rise of fake news and political polarization in the region and its implications for domestic and interregional crisis escalation in the future.

More information and the event video are available at:
https://www.stimson.org/event/disinformation-and-crisis-escalation-in-south-asia/

Brigitta Schuchert:

Welcome and thank you to all joining us today. My name is Brigitta Schuchert, and I am a Research Associate with the Stimson Center South Asia Program and the Managing Editor of South Asian Voices, an online policy platform that features analysis on the security, politics, and economics of the subcontinent. I am delighted to be joined this morning by a fantastic panel to discuss the multifaceted and complicated subject of the role disinformation in global affairs and crisis escalation.

Perhaps the most pivotal global change of the past decade is the sheer speed at which information travels in a world that is increasingly online and increasingly on social media. While this in many ways presents exciting opportunities across a variety of sectors, the risks of manipulated information, misinformation, and disinformation have only become more abundantly clear in recent years. From the role of disinformation and misinformation in domestic polarization in the United States to Vladimir Putin's recent baseless claims of a denazification campaign prior to the invasion of Ukraine, it has become increasingly clear that disinformation will be a challenge that states, media, and civil society will have to contend with for years to come.

This is a topic that we could discuss all day, although we just have an hour this morning. I am thrilled to be joined by a fantastic panel who I'm sure will have a fascinating conversation on the ways that disinformation may impact potential crisis escalation in South Asia. Joining me this morning, we have independent academic analyst, Dr. Salma Shaheen, whose recent piece on disinformation and vulnerabilities for Pakistan can be read on South Asian Voices. We also have with us this morning, Sylvia Mishra, a non-resident fellow with the Stimson Center South Asia program as well as the Janne Nolan Nuclear Security fellow at the Truman Center and a New Tech Nuclear Officer at the European Leadership Network. Finally, we also have Michael Kugelman, Deputy Director of the Asia program and Senior Associate for South Asia at the Wilson Center. You can read his analysis on disinformation and misinformation following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, also on South Asian Voices.

For our audience, we will be integrating questions throughout the discussion this morning. So please do use the Q&A box if any questions arise, and I will try to get to as many as we can in the hour that we have this morning. This will also be live streamed and available on the Stimson website as well as South Asian Voices later today if you want to look back on the conversation. Handing it over now to our panelists, to ground the themes of disinformation and ways that it might impact a crisis, I would like to ask each of our panelists to start by imagining a crisis scenario in South Asia where disinformation might matter. I will begin with Salma, and then I'll hand it over to Michael, followed by Sylvia.

Salma Shaheen:

Hi and thank you Brigitta and to the Stimson Center for this opportunity. With regards to your question, if I read through the history of South Asian crisis between India and Pakistan, after nuclearization, there has always been an event by non-state actor triggering an interstate crisis between the two nuclear arm states. That has been the pattern so far.

There is also a pattern of false flag operations, either conducted by a state, and just building on upon that operation and building into a crisis. Thinking out loud here, a false flag military operation is a disinformation campaign, with a militarized character.

So, you are orchestrating a campaign, a military action, and with a false flag, you are hiding your own identity in a way that the accountability or the responsibility should be put on another, or the blame should be put on another. In a way it is, it is a kind of a disinformation that a state could be doing.

There has been an accusation of India carrying out false flag operations in the past, so that could be one scenario for the future as well, where any non-state actor event could be used as either as a false flag operation or be a genuine crisis that can trigger a crisis between two states. So within this crisis, where will disinformation coming in? Learning from history, disinformation could be about the strikes or the military reprisals we have seen in the past after the Uri attack in 2016.

We need to see what the aims are and how disinformation actually works for both countries—for India and Pakistan. For India, disinformation works, or maybe is required to an extent to satisfy the domestic outrage at the government's numbness towards Pakistan. India has to satisfy its domestic public. For Pakistan, disinformation or a lack of providing information about any event, or for example a surgical strike that has happened or not happened.

So you are restricting the information in the public domain that is required to build one [Pakistan's] reputation at regional and international level of being a mature crisis handler and a mature nuclear armed state. This is seen as a condition on Pakistan that they have to show themselves in this way. There has been a lack of information for Pakistan, not to give the public an opinion or face any public reaction that it has to take certain action against India.

The aims for both countries are different to use disinformation in that context. For me, it could be another non-state actor, even in general form, or it could be a false flag operation, itself as a disinformation campaign between Indian and Pakistan. Thank you.

Brigitta Schuchert:

Thank you. Salma, I think you raised a number of themes that we will hopefully be able to return to throughout the discussion. I'll hand it over Michael now, and then at the end, we can open it back up for further discussion as well.

Michael Kugelman:

Thanks, Brigitta. One scenario that comes to mind right away involves an internal crisis in a South Asian country where there are serious communal tensions. And someone posts a message on Twitter or Facebook or WhatsApp claiming falsely that a certain group has carried out some type of atrocity, burning down homes, attacking a religious facility, carrying out a lynching.

And then, this fake news goes viral on social media, and it prompts angry people to take to the streets and attack those belonging to the group falsely accused of the initial provocation. And this is of course, something that, has happened, this is not hypothetical. It has happened certainly in India with fake allegations against Indian Muslims. It has also happened in Sri Lanka in recent years to varying degrees. Just one more potential scenario to highlight—this one being an interstate one—I think that I agree with Dr. Salma, that thinking about the India-Pakistan context is critical. But imagine that India-Pakistan relations are in a state of high tension at a moment when there's a high risk of a military conflict. Let's say that Pakistani terrorists have carried out a major attack in India, India has retaliated with limited cross-border airstrikes to take out terrorist targets, and then there's unease about the possibilities of escalation to conflict. And then at that point, a fake story emerges about a provocation by one of the countries against the other, a provocation that could risk escalation to the point of conflict.

Now, again, there's a precedent here. I'm sure everyone in this audience would remember the Balakot crisis in 2019. What happened at one point is that a prominent Pakistani TV journalist with about half a million followers on Twitter posted on Twitter that there were reports of Indian submarine movement toward Karachi and that the Pakistani Air Force was performing surveillance. Now, this may have been misinformation, this may have been a case of the person not knowing whether the reports were true or not. At any rate, it went viral on social media. And fortunately, as I recall, the Pakistani military issued a statement at some point saying that there was no such movement, and so problems were averted, fortunately. I'll end there.

Brigitta Schuchert:

Thank you, Michael. And, and finally, over to Sylvia.

Sylvia Mishra:

Thanks, Brigitta. I think it's really wonderful that the Stimson Center is hosting this conversation. This is clearly a topic that has gained a lot of attention and traction, but very concerted efforts to do a serious study on the aspects of disinformation and the ramifications of its impact on decision making is something that is entirely understudied. It is great that the Stimson Center is creating this conversation around these very significant topics.

I just wanted to take a step back and really appreciate all the points that both Salma and Michael brought to the table. I also think it's important to just first acknowledge and appreciate the challenge that this entire issue of disinformation really creates and especially amongst nuclear armed states during a crisis moment.

That is something for us to really think about. Even though disinformation and aspects of information manipulation has always been part of a statecraft since the height of the Cold War that we know of. But what has really made a difference in the past couple of years is the emergence of social media.

And because different social media platforms do not have a uniform effect in terms of relaying the information that is being consumed by a wide and large audience. I think the effects for different crisis is very different. And that's why it really becomes difficult for governments to have a more cogent and coherent one strategy or a kind of whole of government approach towards addressing this challenge of disinformation.

And which really now brings me to this point that you asked us about for envisioning a scenario. Now so many of the emerging and disruptive technologies are mutating and evolving at such a rapid pace. I'm fascinated by the generative adversarial networks or machine learning technology, and the fact that a deep fake video of, for example, a South Asian leader resorting to using, for example, nuclear weapons really might inject a lot of crisis escalation and deliberate crisis escalation in a scenario.

So, I'm fascinated by some of these technologies that are still evolving. We do not know the full effect of such technologies, but really understanding the ramifications of such technologies would have a lot of bearing on national security policies and posturing in the South Asian context. And I just wanted to specifically highlight two points on the impact that such technologies might have on decision making. It really begs the question about how the volume of information and the pace and velocity of the spread of information really creates a sense of ambiguity and thickens the fog of war. In a crisis, I think that is something that might really undermine trust between adversaries who are already interlocked in years of conflict and really increasing and thickening the fog of war.

I think the other point of concern, especially in the South Asian context, is how political leaders manage crises and especially what happens when nuclear deterrents are breached. That is where I think the role of social media, especially since 2006, when South Asian countries were introduced to platforms like Facebook and Twitter, really has been grappling with this entire idea of one, how do you demystify factual information and really not get caught in the thickening and fog of war.

And second is how do you manage crisis, especially to prevent to prevent a breakdown of nuclear deterrents. I'll stop there and I'll look forward to more discussion on this.

Brigitta Schuchert

Thank you to all of you. I think each of these responses really hit on some of the reasons that this is such a complex topic and could see just the scope of different scenarios and kind of possible instances where disinformation, as well as misinformation—so information that doesn't necessarily have the purpose to be deceptive, but is perhaps incorrectly picked up, as well as on the variety of actors or sources that this could potentially come from.

Before moving onto some individual questions for each of you, I just wanted to see if any of you had a response or wanted to add any further thoughts to factors that perhaps make disinformation or misinformation most salient and most dangerous. Certainly a theme, I think, in the scenarios was decision making in times of crisis and how that shapes how false reports are received or picked up whether on social media or elsewhere. I wanted to just open it for any further thoughts and then we'll move on to additional questions.

Sylvia Mishra:

Brigitta, I just quickly wanted to take a step back and talk a little bit about the difference between misinformation and disinformation. We often use it in one sentence, but I think like it is important to flag and underscore the difference as in misinformation is information that is incorrect. But disinformation, which really poses a challenge in terms of interstate crisis, because disinformation is the act—the deliberate act—of pushing incorrect information. And it very well could be state actors, governments themselves pushing out this incorrect information so as to maneuver and gain certain political objectives.

So, when it comes to the challenge of how to address misinformation or for that matter disinformation, I think the process is very different and especially so in times of crisis. How governments engage with the aspect and challenge of disinformation is probably going to be very different from handling of a misinformation scenario.

Brigitta Schuchert

And Michael, I'll hand it over to you and thank you, Sylvia. I think that's an important delineation to make as these terms are often grouped together and used side-by-side, so thank you.

Michael Kugelman:

Just two quick points. One is that I think that there is a particularly concerning type of information that I would describe as content that appears just a bit suspicious, but it has not, or cannot be conclusively confirmed as false or at least not quickly. So, it sort of falls somewhere in the continuum of true information, misinformation, disinformation, it is sort of a gray area.

And this can be very tricky. In other words, something that you may think is false, but you can't confirm that quickly. I'm thinking about another scenario here, if you want to broaden the scope and definitions of security. Let's say Pakistan's experiencing serious water shortages, crippling water shortages, and then someone claims that India is engaging in serious cases of water theft where it's preventing water from flowing downstream. It's hard to prove, right? It's hard to know right away if that's happening, it's hard to know if something is happening, [or] if it's in line with the Indus Water Treaty, if India is allowed to do that, so to speak. That uncertainty can add to tensions between the two.

The other point I would make is that I think that Sylvia made this point just earlier, but I will foot stomp it. In South Asia, the conditions provide a perfect storm for disinformation being so tough to combat, because you have on the one hand deep internet and broader technological penetration throughout the region, the upsurge in social media use in recent years, but that's combined with a lack of media literacy. And I think Dr. Salma addresses this in her essay and that means an inability to critically examine information online and know whether what's being seen on social media is true or not, and not being able to make that decision right away or make that case, that could make things more difficult as well.

Brigitta Schuchert

Thank you very much, Michael, I think all excellent points and Dr. Shaheen, you certainly do address this in your essay, that is the multiple ways that South Asia presents a challenging environment for addressing misinformation and disinformation. But I'll hand it over to you next for comments.

Salma Shaheen

I wanted to highlight that obviously we are talking about the disinformation, so there's a lot of talk about here, but I also want to point out that instance when you are actually holding onto information about a specific crisis or event. I would just refer to this recent Indian accidental

missile launch into Pakistan. It occurred as far as the media reported, it occurred on 9th of March, but it became public that even became public on the 11th of March.

So, within these two days, what happened and why the information not made in public, why was the information even not shared among the states? Such kind of events can happen in future and when you are holding information to yourself, you are actually creating a vacuum where a lot of disinformation can come and fill that gap.

For states, I guess there's a need to come up with a clear [narrative of] what happened. And we have seen this in cases of surgical strikes. In 2016, India claimed that it carried out a surgical strike, although the information was not clearly given on what kind of military operation had been taken, or what kind of weapons have been used whereas Pakistan completely denied it. In 2019, we saw that, India claimed that, "we carried out a surgical attack on the biggest terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan." Whereas on the Pakistani side, they said that the strike just killed two or three trees, maybe.

So this kind of information that comes in, there is misinformation but the real concern that happened in this missile launch is that holding onto key information and creating a lot of room for disinformation, for misinformation, and for fake news to come in. Thank you.

Brigitta Schuchert

I wanted to take a moment to also raise an audience question from Dr. Fizza Batool, one of our former visiting fellows. The question that Fizza raised was exploring the ways that governments have sought to address disinformation. Dr. Shaheen, I know this comes up as well in your piece, but thinking through the ways that while on the one hand, there is a challenge and a vulnerability to disinformation and crisis escalation and then there is also the question of what measures governments may take to reportedly crack down on fake news disinformation or misinformation that can come forward as laws that are restrictive on civil society, press freedoms, etcetera.

I would just open this kind of question up to our panel of exploring the other side of where the role of state regulation and involvement comes into play, particularly looking at South Asia? Salma, I am not sure if you'd like to take this question first, since this is something that you've also discussed in your piece, but also we will open it up to everyone on the panel.

Salma Shaheen

That is an interesting point. For example, if I go from the constitutional point of view, there is Article 19 of the constitution that clearly says that you have a freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of press and everything. But within that clause, there is "reasonable restrictions" as well, that you are allowed to have certain freedom of expression, but state has a right to put on certain reasonable restrictions.

And I'll read that out clearly that "Freedom of press or expression subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law, in the interest of the glory of Islam or integrity, security, or defense of Pakistan, or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to the content of quote or incitement to an offense." Now having these reasonable restrictions in a law is fine because they're in the Indian constitution as well. They are in other countries' constitutions as well. So, the point is not with putting reasonable restrictions in it.

The point is that, how do you interpret that? Because while you are not interpreting it that models the whole freedom of expression and national interest so deeply that it is very difficult for governments to draw a line, or at least create a balance between the two, between the freedom of expression and to counter disinformation. So, what, the International Covenant On Civil and

Political Rights and European conventions says that these reasonable restrictions are fine to be in your law, but they have to comply, or they have to meet three requirements.

First, the restrictions must be clearly set out in law, which most of the time they are not actually. And restrictions must genuinely be for the purpose of protecting national security and must have the demonstrable effect of protecting that aim. Third, the restrictions must be necessary. And there is another thing, that whatever the punishment you are including in your law against these, if these restrictions or if these laws are broken, the [punishment] should be proportionate.

So, what happened in Pakistan is that there have been certain laws and certain rules or laws that are enacted. But in a way those laws have given a lot of unchecked powers to government to control or to curb any dissenting voice, to control or curb political opposition. So that's the major criticism that is coming on the government of Pakistan.

Now this recent government, that is the coalition government, has actually promised to review these laws and ensure that they will, "be ensuring the freedom of speech." But the point is that one of the laws, which is the PECA law, was enacted in 2016 when the PML-N government was in the power. So, we have to see how they are going to review all this.

But this is a challenge that I suppose every other state is facing—that you have to enact the laws. You have to keep reasonable restrictions as well, and you have to ensure the freedom of expression as well. I will be pointing out here that if we go through the freedom indices of past three or four years, Pakistan's score or ranking has [fallen consistently](#) from 2018 onwards, and so has India's. Pakistan's rank in in 2018 was 139 in the Freedom of the Press Index, and in 2022 it is 157 out 180 countries. So that shows how stifling these laws have been in the country. I will end here.

Brigitta Schuchert:

Thank you. And I will hand it over to Sylvia next.

Sylvia Mishra

I thought it was a very interesting question from Fizza. I think Salma really brought to the table very interesting points. And both Michael and Salma have mentioned the importance of media literacy. I think it would be important to underscore that information and media literacy is not just an educational issue right now, but I think it has really assumed the importance and become a national security imperative.

And, really a whole of government approach should be adopted in terms of advancing a greater media literacy, and really starting out from young children too, for them to become more responsible netizens. That is one point. Second, to this entire question about what some of the policies are that national governments can adopt in terms of preventing disinformation, I think we definitely need that, and that is an idea that needs to be tailored to different countries. But it is also important to situate it in the broader debate of really discussing whether governments should really regulate social media, or if there should be some kind of balancing between social media corporations making those companies more transparent.

And I think the point is not lost on us about the fact that government regulation of social media corporation might not be desirable or feasible. But for that matter to what degree and extent can social media corporations be more transparent is an ongoing debate that clearly requires more attention and education. There is the Aspen Institute Commission of Information Disorder, which really underscores a lot of efforts that are being suggested to governments and social media companies to incorporate greater transparency in terms of social media corporations, especially during crisis. I think that is one important way to advance and prevent disinformation.

Second, especially in the context of South Asian countries, it is important for China, India, and Pakistan—but especially India and Pakistan, because China has a very different approach to this—to adopt and learn lessons from countries like Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania. Some of these countries that I mentioned have been really on frontlines in terms of Russian disinformation campaigns. And each country has really tailored their disinformation prevention strategies according to their own national goals and objectives and needs. I think adopting some of the lessons learned and best practices from these countries is a useful example.

I am also reminded of the Active Measures Working Group that the United States advanced during the height of the Cold War, especially in the 1970s and eighties, which really rallied diplomat spies and a whole network of different agencies to combat the KGB's false information. We don't have something like that or to an extent, but clearly India the Indian government has been taking several proactive measures. There is a recently a newly created Director General of Information Warfare, which goes to show that the Indian government is taking some of these challenges seriously. But I think there is room and scope to do much more in order to mitigate some of the challenges of disinformation.

Brigitta Schuchert:

Thank you, Sylvia. And now over to Michael.

Michael Kugelman:

I don't have that much to add to that, I agree with those two points. Now clearly conversations around disinformation are global conversations, they are happening far beyond South Asia. The issue of government regulation of information is a very politicized and sensitive issue because there will always be a concern that well-intentioned efforts to remove disinformation will inevitably be used to crack down on dissent and to police speech more broadly.

Just here in the United States, a few weeks ago, the Homeland Security department established a new disinformation governance board. It was meant to coordinate efforts by different agencies to combat disinformation, but it was suspended recently after just about three weeks of being in operation. The director of it was getting death threats, and it wasn't going very well. That's because a lot of people thought it was meant to police speech. So, it is very difficult, even in a country like the United States, very difficult to deal with these with these very, very sensitive issues.

Brigitta Schuchert

Thank you all and, and certainly something that has been difficult to grapple with globally. The next question also from audience and, and similar to a question from the team as well, that is in on a similar focus area. And I think Michael also gets back to your initial scenario in the beginning that thought through internal crisis dynamics. We have recently seen in times of crisis governments, for instance, Sri Lanka restricting social media during periods of social unrest. How effective are those restrictions at curbing misinformation as they are intended to do? And what are the implications of actions like this in the future? I'll open it up to anyone that has any initial comments, and I think some of our earlier discussion hinted at some of this,.

Salma Shaheen:

I wanted to highlight this breakdown or restricting the internet services or mobile services during certain events. In Pakistan, we have seen this especially during the protests, for example, the TLP protests or even and during the religious events. So, there has always been a security risk in Pakistan.

Based on that, the government actually as a policy, restricts mobile services or controls mobile services in some areas, maybe internet services as well to ensure security. We need to see this in a context of Pakistan being under the Global War on Terror, and fighting the Global War on Terror. Where it's deemed reasonable to at least, because when they, whenever there is a larger gathering, either it is a protest or a political or a religious protest or a religious festival or a celebration or an event going on. So, they deemed it feasible to have a restriction to a certain extent in that context.

Brigitta Schuchert

Thank you very much, Dr. Shaheen. If there are no further comments on this question, I wanted to highlight another audience question that we received, and that is: "What is the role of regional language content and spreading disinformation or misinformation, and what are potential response options or different challenges that this presents?"

Salma Shaheen:

If I got it correctly, the question is about regional languages?

Brigitta Schuchert:

Yes, so I believe languages, other than English. Recent reports that have come out recently, for example, about the lack of resources dedicated by social media outlets to curbing disinformation or misinformation in languages other than English and potential different challenges that the spread of misinformation or disinformation in other languages.

Salma Shaheen:

I can give an anecdotal reference to this from my personal experience. During the 2019 Balakot crisis, I actually analyzed the tweets on both sides of Indian and Pakistani parliamentarian tweets and I wrote about that as well. I analyzed that, and the benefit obviously is that Hindu and Urdu are similar whenever we write in Roman English.

Some of the tweets I did find, which were written in Hindi I translated into English using the web feature to get the message. And you can also relate it depending on what hashtags are used. While the translation will not be 100 percent correct it gave the gist and the idea of what the tweet was about.

Having said that for example, if I am using Twitter, I use Roman English sometimes and I use Urdu as well. So, it depends on who you are communicating to. For obvious reasons, you don't understand all the languages of the region, even I don't understand all the Pakistani languages, so that could be a barrier. But if I'm writing in, for example, my vernacular language, in Punjabi, obviously I know who the audience is, who is my audience. So, you are definitely targeting it then. Thank you.

Sylvia Mishra

I just wanted to take a moment and appreciate a great audience question. I think the role of vernaculars in really perpetuating disinformation is something that is just adds another layer of challenge. And I think over here the NGOs and regional NGOs and fact checking organizations have a very important role to play. And I think especially during peace times and ahead of crises, I think it's important for the central government and also state governments to really create a body and a network of groups of fact checkers peer review NGOs that can play a vital role in terms of really translating and fact checking tweets in different vernaculars. I think, especially for a country like India, that is an important and a big challenge because of the diverse languages.

But I think a closer coordination amongst the central state government, NGOs, and also social media corporation is very important to address this issue. But clearly this makes this entire challenge of disinformation and adds more complexity really as in how one is trying to prevent and curb disinformation.

Brigitta Schuchert:

Thank you both. Michael, did you have a thought to add as well?

Michael Kugelman:

Yeah, I mean, on the issue of regional languages, this goes directly to the issue of disinformation. But you know, clearly you have some groups political leaders, as well as civil society organizations like the, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement in Pakistan that will have different messages depending on what language they're using. You notice that in many cases where English is used, I'm referring here specifically to the PTM in Pakistan, the language is not as harsh it's not as sharp when in English. And then when they are speaking in Pashto there tends to be much sharper language directed at opponents and so forth.

I'm not saying there is disinformation here or there, but clearly, you know, languages are used strategically to target a particular audience. And I would argue, you could say that with the Taliban, you have similar cases in effect here. For the Taliban in Afghanistan, every statement they issue in English sounds great, sounds like they're the most peaceful, fun loving, responsible entity in the world. But then in their interviews they have with local press they have Pashto languages, other languages, it could be a very different story.

The Taliban likes to project itself to the world e.g., in English as this remarkably different group from how it was previously in the 1990s, and it does that in English. But again, that's in English, the context can be very different when, when local vernacular languages are used by the group.

Sylvia Mishra:

I just quickly wanted to respond, while listening to Michael, it also occurred to me, especially because there can also be existing tensions between state governments and the central government. I just wanted to reflect on a [scenario] where in a certain crisis, the political objectives and end goals are not seen as unified. Even state government leaders can exploit that. Once again, I think there is something to be to be discussed probably further studied on what disinformation can also create in terms of accentuating like lack of internal cohesion.

I think that is something that just occurred to me when Michael was speaking. What is really interpreted in the English language can sound very different. For example, in, in Bengal where I come from and the fact that there are different state governments and their objectives can be extremely different from the central government, it can also be a potential cause of perpetuating disinformation.

Brigitta Schuchert:

Salma, did you have a note as well?

Salma Shaheen:

Just a quick point to make. To the point that Michael made on the Taliban are giving an interview in English that takes a completely different tone. It also depends on the domestic constituency, when they are saying something to their domestic constituency then it depends on who the audience is.

And obviously for domestic consumption, you may be using certain rhetoric, certain messages, or certain phrases to communicate to your audience. An example that comes to my mind is due to the political opposition that is in Pakistan right now and when Imran Khan's government was ousted in March. Before [he was ousted] there was a lot of rhetoric going on in the public domain, in speeches between the different political opposition parties. One of the words, that I'm not actually using that word here, but one of the words was used by a minister at that time, which has dual meanings. If you say it in Urdu, that means a widow, but if you say it in Punjabi, that means an abuse, so that's how these languages work.

And he was so confident that he came on the television and he justified his use of that word, even in an abusive way, but he justified that. So that's how the languages work, and that's how you can, you know, manipulate words and phrases to convey your message. Thank you.

Brigitta Schuchert:

Thank you all. And thank you for the fantastic audience question that opened up a really interesting discussion. Switching gears a little bit in the time we have left, one thing that has come up in our discussion is the Balakot crisis as a case study for looking at the ways that social media may play a role in crisis escalation. Whether that's in misinformation or disinformation, or simply by a lot of information traveling very quickly in new forms.

So I wanted to ask the panel, since Balakot is frequently referenced as the case study to examine these aspects, what has changed in the past three years that are new things that observers should be watching? Whether that's emerging technologies or changes in the media space that observers should be paying attention to. I may call on Sylvia first as I know that you have done a fair amount of work on emerging technologies in escalation and decision making.

Sylvia Mishra:

Thanks, I think that's a good question. One of the things, especially in the South Asian context, we should be mindful about is the fact that after almost two decades, both India and Pakistan are really moving away from a state of recessed deterrence. Which means their strategic weapons are increasingly going to be more operational, such as putting nuclear weapons at sea for both the countries.

Because there has been a sense of crisis stability over the last two decades, and the fact that the questions on operational readiness is something that one should be mindful of, it is important to think about off ramps. And disinformation can really cause major challenges and obstacles and frustrate off ramp efforts because with the spread of disinformation, I think what it really does is undermines government's trust in trust in each other.

Therefore, I think the challenge of off ramps during the crisis is something that one should be more mindful of and both India and Pakistan should tailor strategies in terms of crisis communications. That is one point. Second, I think both the countries should really be careful about the advancements in the generative adversarial networks, machine learning, and deep fakes. Being responsive in terms of looking at some of the vulnerabilities in cyberspace is something that both the countries should be paying attention to.

And then the third point is that the idea of a disinformation, one can argue, is to essentially create uncertainties. And as we know, famously Schelling notes, that deterrence also requires bolstering ambiguity. But in terms of like countries like India and Pakistan, which have such shorter flight times, there could be really chances of inadvertent escalation miscalculation and accidental warfare. And that is something that both the countries should be really mindful of.

Ahead of crisis, I think it is imperative for both the countries to prepare for such contingencies, which really reduces the chances of any kind of inadvertent escalation due to a propagation of disinformation and also minimize nuclear risk in the region, which is so susceptible to some of the greatest nuclear dangers.

Michael Kugelman

I can quickly weigh in on that if we are trying to look for a good news story here, because this is a pretty depressing discussion as it has to be. If you look at what's changed since the Balakot crisis in the India and Pakistan context—and I think that there was last year—a truce, a border truce that was signed by the two countries, which has reduced tensions to a degree. So, the relationship is nowhere near as tense as it was in 2019. I think that does mean perhaps that the risks of disinformation leading to escalation or greater tensions between the two are less great, just because the broader relationship is in a better place than it had been back in 2019.

Salma Shaheen:

I just want to go back to my point that I made earlier that on the indicators analyzing the role of media in both India and Pakistan. We need to see how much freedom of the media there is. If we go back to the Freedom of Media index, both India and Pakistan have dropped in their score and their ranking. From 2018 to 2022, both have worsened, both India and Pakistan.

India was at a 138 in 2018, in 2022, it was 150. Pakistan was ranked 139 in 2018 and in 2022 Pakistan was at 157 out of 180. So that [raises the question] of what is the state of affairs for both countries?

There was also one study that was published by the Atlantic Council. That study observed the evolving landscape of media in both India and Pakistan from 2018 to 2020 and they conducted some field interviews of journalists as well.

One of the Pakistani journalists that they quoted, and I am just paraphrasing from what I am remembering of what was quoted. The journalist said that, with regards to the role of media and diplomacy, they said: "We are not open, we are not allowed to cover the events as it is." So, diplomacy is being prioritized over the technique of journalism.

So, the lines are being fed to the journalists and based on this line, you have to write a new story. Because obviously there is an economic stifling as well and socio-political stifling as well. Based on that, the government is stifling reality to fit a favorite context. That is happening in in Pakistan, and the same in India.

Another international index, that is Freedom of Net, which is run through Freedom House, where they conduct an annual survey and analyzes internet freedom across different countries. So according to the latest survey, Pakistan was categorized as not free. And Pakistan was categorized among the 56 countries where government authorities investigated, arrested, or even convicted people for their social media content post.

So, these are the state of affairs from 2019 to today. I do agree with Michael's viewpoint that there has been a ceasefire truce last year, which is a good positive indication. But as far as the disinformation or from the information point of view, both countries need to have a certain level of freedom of media to at least report on what's happening. And this is not just happening in 2022.

I did study the Kargil crisis as well in 1999. During that crisis there was a regular Indian military briefing to journalists on daily basis. That was the briefing given to journalists to then take out and report on. I am not seeing any change since then in the way the things are there. Journalists have been arrested, journalists have been convicted, journalists have been picked up by I don't

know who, by different agencies. [As long as] the media is not free, then we are not getting a good picture, if not a true picture, but at least not a good picture of what is happening.

Brigitta Schuchert:

Thank you. Open for any final thoughts on that question before our last question to, to wrap up. Thinking back to scenarios in the beginning and the conversation that we've had over this past hour, are there any possible confidence building measures or CBMs that could be used ahead of future crisis scenarios in South Asia that might be related to disinformation or misinformation to think forward towards the future as we wrap up this conversation?

Michael Kugelman:

The best way to reduce the chances of a crisis fueled by disinformation is to reduce disinformation itself, and we've discussed how difficult that is. Clearly the issue of media literacy has to be addressed. I think that ideally there would be better quality control in the traditional media as well to ensure that fake stories are not aired, and this does happen particularly in some of the major Indian TV channels. I think in the case of Afghanistan, which I covered in my essay, it is really important to diversify information sources beyond social media, because of the state of the media environment in Afghanistan, post-Taliban takeover, there's not enough on the ground reportage, too much content is popping up on social media, a lot of it is fake.

So, what I suggest in the essay is to put together a list of organizations that focus on media issues in Afghanistan and are willing to privately share access to their sources on the ground who are willing to provide information anonymously. Of course, there's still plenty of journalists in Afghanistan, foreign, as well as Afghan, but not as much as you'd like, not as much as necessary.

In terms of CBMs very briefly, to state the obvious, it is important that channels and hotlines between governments and ideally militaries and rival states i.e. India and Pakistan be kept open, so that they can trade notes about relevant cases of misinformation and disinformation and aim to dispel them before the risk of escalation sets in. This would also be important quite frankly with Pakistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan, given that we have had a few cases in recent weeks of Pakistan launching airstrikes in Afghanistan to target Pakistani Taliban militants, which has not gone down well with the Taliban. And yet there's also been a lot of misinformation and disinformation online since the Taliban takeover with claims that Pakistani drones have been flying over Panjshir and other cases of Pakistani military operations that have been proven wrong. Islamabad and the Taliban regime don't have formal relations but given their history their ties are clearly good enough for them to set up these channels to try to ensure that disinformation doesn't spark greater tensions. I'll end there.

Brigitta Schuchert:

Thank you, Michael. Go ahead, Sylvia

Sylvia Mishra:

Given the fact that the Stimson Center is always a great place and a harbinger of really advancing creative and good ideas, which are also actionable for both the Indian and the Pakistani governments to advance in terms of confidence building measure. Here's one added to the list.

I think it, it might be possible for both the Indian and the Pakistani government to establish a high level joint study about the role and impact of media, both traditional and social media, in terms of crisis escalation. Which can really dovetail into a training, program/platform for leading journalists from both the countries who can also advance people-to-people connection, but also I

really understand what some of the key vulnerabilities that both countries envision when it comes to the impact and role of media in in crisis escalation.

Salma Shaheen:

I broadly agree with what Michael and Sylvia said. One thing we need to keep in mind is that disinformation is a part of hybrid warfare, which both India and Pakistan are actually embarking on, so they have their own strategies. Any CBM on disinformation would be related to the cyber domain, and there's a lot of other things that come in the cyber domain as well.

For any CBM, there is a need to resume the dialogue process between India and Pakistan. I agree with the suggestion from Sylvia to conduct a joint study. That is a good idea. At the same time, both states need to build their society to be resilient enough to disinformation, and that can be done through education.

One suggestion that I made in my article is to make the fact checking exercises more available to even to younger students in schools and colleges. They have their computer sciences subjects, so within that there are different games which they can play which can be included in their syllabus, which they can actually operate to see how to get into the real facts.

We are in an age where misinformation and disinformation are not going anywhere. And we cannot put controls on technology because technological progression will continue. So, we have to adjust ourselves to these new trends.

First, build societal resilience through education and at bilateral level, I guess, resume the dialogue process. And, we had a people exchange earlier, for example, one of the program that media on both sides started in the early 2000s is for Aman ki Asha program where media outlets initiated that program. Such kind of programs should be resumed or new programs should come in. But the point is that there should be more and more people exchange because then even if there is a fake news story that can actually be checked.

Before going there, I will just also highlight two more points that both countries need to address their unresolved disputes first, and they also need to work on to address the deeper divisions that are that are within the societies in both India and Pakistan. India is facing this issue and Pakistan is facing the issue of polarization as well, so they need to address that. Thank you.

Brigitta Schuchert:

Thank you and thank you all in the audience for joining. We have come to the end of the hour, although as noted in the beginning, these are topics that I think we could sit around all day discussing. This is also a topic that can seem insurmountable at times as it is a challenge that continues to be pressing, and I really just want to thank our entire panel for thinking creatively through these issues and posing some important recommendations for ways to address these future challenges. So, thank you all, and many thanks to our audience for joining this morning. I also wanted to say thank you to the South Asia Program and South Asian Voices team, Isha Gupta, Dylan Junkin, Uzair Sattar, and Akriti Vasudeva for helping to bring this all together.

You can continue this conversation as it will be ongoing on South Asian Voices by reading the analysis on the website at southasianvoices.org or following us on Twitter at @SAVoices. The video of this webinar will also be posted later today. So many thanks and have a wonderful rest of your day or good evening for wherever you are joining us from today.