[Raashid Wali Janjua](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/raashid-wali-janjua)

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**What a waste**

The engine of economic growth in South Asia has sputtered to a halt due to Indian intransigence and lack of vision. A region that was colonized by the British and bilked off a wealth exceeding $45 trillion between 1765 and 1938, as per economist Utsa Patnaik, is still suffering a self-imposed rigor mortis in the fields of trade and economic cooperation.

The thousand pounds guerilla in the room – India – is mostly to be blamed for this waste. According to a Commonwealth International Trade Working Paper, South Asia utilizes only 14 percent of its intra-regional trade potential, with India having the lowest intra-regional trade to total trade percentage of 2.2 percent.

A country that once prided itself on Nehruvian secularism and non-aligned foreign policy has mired itself in the morass of exclusivist politics driven by the RSS. Prime Minister Modi heading the political front of a fascist RSS organization espousing ‘Hindutva’ is the exemplar of a majoritarian polity drawing strength from casteism and xenophobia. The economic fate of South Asia would have been different if regional organizations such as Saarc and the ECO and SCO had functioned as vehicles for economic integration for the benefit of South Asia, which has 24.89 percent of the global population. Instead, we have a regional hegemon privileging divisive geopolitics over geo-economics. The latest manifestation of the above proclivity is the Indian attempts at annexation of its held portion of the disputed State of Jammu and Kashmir and use of laws like the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizen (NRC) to deny citizenship rights to minorities.

A nation that has morphed into a predator bent upon destabilization of a smaller neighbour is an anachronism in this era of global interdependence and regional cooperation. The cerebral and pacific archetype of Indian identity has been overtaken by viscerally misanthropic Hindutva votaries who are slowly digging the country deeper into the pit of communal hatred. Trade connectivity and its economic bonanza is being sacrificed at the altar of confrontational politics and territorial aggrandizement. The evidence of the above destabilizing influence is the epistemic war and a full-fledged attack on Pakistan in the information domain through a sedulously orchestrated disinformation campaign.

The recent disclosures by Brussels-based NGO EU DisinfoLab about a network of fake news sites, web domains, and websites working in concert with India’s largest news agency ANI, targeting Pakistan through vicious propaganda and artifices is a shocking indictment of a country subverting EU and the UN officials’ opinions against Pakistan. The DisinfoLab report is a portrayal of India sponsoring a 15-year-old media campaign against Pakistan through fake news and propaganda. The network operated from Brussels where the EU Disinformation Task Force unearthed the website of a fake magazine for European Parliament called ‘EP Today’.

The magazine was publishing negative stories about Pakistan and was managed by Indian stakeholders linked with a large number of spurious companies, think tanks, and NGOs belonging to Delhi-based Srivastava Group. The group’s IP address also hosted online media – ‘New Delhi Times’ and ‘International Institute of Nonaligned Studies’ (IINS). The IINS also invited 27 EU members of parliament on a private visit to Kashmir to meet PM Modi which was later projected on the media as an official visit. The visit was sponsored by Modi Sharma, an Indian national heading the Women’s Economic and Social Think Tank (WESTT). EP Today and the IINS network were linked with another spurious magazine, ‘Times of Geneva’. Both these magazines in turn were linked to the Srivastava Group in India.

EP Today and Times of Geneva both used content syndication with Voice of America and Russia Today to enhance their reach and credibility. It was also found that both Geneva and Brussels-based disinformation networks were linked with a number of fake websites, think tanks and NGOs that were being managed by the Srivastava Group. The investigations found additional 265 websites in 65 countries named after extinct newspapers or spoof media outlets. These fake websites covered anti Pakistan and pro-India content besides republishing similar content. The techniques used for the insidious purpose varied. There were zombie news sites resurrecting dead newspapers and new inventions. Professor of international law Louis Sohn who had died in 2006 was being projected as Louis Shon, the president of an NGO called CSOP, attending a function in 2011, five years after his death!

And then there were misleading sites that used fake domains. For example, ‘The Albany Democrat’ at albany dailydemocrat.com – whereas the real website was ‘The Albany Democrat Herald’ at democrat herald.com. Out of 261 media outlets, 164 were zombies, 87 new and 10 in misleading categories. Geographically, 66 were in the US, 20 in Canada, 18 in the UK, 12 in Switzerland, 9 in Australia, 8 in China, 6 in India and 5 in Russia.

From the above, it is clear that a network of disinformation was being operated from Geneva and Brussels with global links with NGOs and think tanks and centrally controlled from India. The objective of these fake media outlets was to act as a global echo chamber for anti-Pakistan and pro-Indian themes to influence UN and EU institutions like the EU Parliament and UN Human Rights Council.

That a country like India that presents to the international community an image of pacifism should indulge in such a massive calumny should be a matter of concern. Indian sponsorship of fake news websites and their dissemination network is a veritable crime against the UN Charter that prohibits subversion of peace to destabilize a UN member country. Pakistan reserves the right to use all diplomatic and legal options to counter this hybrid war. A comprehensive lawfare strategy should be employed as some of the violations would fall under humanitarian law while others might be treated as fraud and criminal law offences.

The writer is a PhD scholar at Nust.

Email: rwjanj@hotmail.com