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1. Is Russia engaging in 'hybrid warfare'?

Overview



In the span of one week, a cargo plane belonging to German logistics company DHL crashed in Lithuania, two underwater data cables were damaged in the Baltic Sea, and pro-Russian right-wing extremist Calin Georgescu surprisingly won the first round of Romania's presidential election.

Several Western politicians and intelligence agencies suspect that Russia was the driving force behind all three incidents, although nothing has been

proven and no evidence backing the suspicions has so far been made public. While Kremlin-orchestrated hybrid warfare has always posed a danger, experts now warn that this danger has grown dramatically since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Hybrid warfare means broadening military operations to include espionage, sabotage and cyberattacks, as well as engaging in election interference, propaganda or disinformation campaigns to weaken and destabilise the enemy from within. Experts say Russia has continuously expanded its hybrid warfare arsenal in recent years. Here is what hybrid warfare consists of.

1. Espionage

European countries have expelled around 500 Russian diplomats since early 2022. Britain's MI5 secret service said at least 400 of them are spies. Many Russian embassies and consulates are reported to be equipped with state-of-the-art communications and espionage technology. If any of this can be definitively proven, Western intelligence agencies have chosen not to make public the information they may have gathered. After all, the embassy and consulate buildings are considered Russian territory and cannot be entered by host states without Russian permission.

The Dutch secret service has warned that Russia is equipping its spies with false papers and smuggling them into Western institutions disguised as business people.

Reports of suspected Russian espionage emerge regularly. Some drew attention to a hacked conversation between German army officials discussing the country's Taurus missile system. Others have dealt with suspected Russian drones spying on European air bases and industrial zones. Some reports have also focused on suspected spy ships, officially classed as research vessels, cruising the seas of northern Europe and mapping critical seabed infrastructure for possible acts of sabotage.

2. Sabotage

Last week, a Russian-captained Chinese freighter reportedly damaged two undersea cables by dragging an anchor over the seabed. The incident is similar to one that occurred in October 2023. Last month, a London warehouse used for storing aid for Ukraine was hit by an arson attack. In July, a parcel that should have been sent by air freight went up in flames at a DHL logistics center in Leipzig, Germany. It is thought Russian sabotage could have been at play in these and numerous other cases. Yet nothing has been proven so far.

European intelligence services warn that the number of acts of sabotage and arson have increased dramatically over the past year in the EU and UK.

3. Cyberattacks

Germany's Federal Office for Information Security (BSI) warns that the risk of malicious cyberspace activity is "higher than ever." Online espionage and sabotage are ever-present. "Before Russia's attack on Ukraine, Russian-linked groups were very active in Germany engaging in cyberespionage and financially motivated ransomware attacks," the BSI said. "The scope of threats has expanded since Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine."

The agency said "the number of DDoS attacks by pro-Russian hackers" has risen sharply. DDoS attacks involve flooding websites or servers with traffic until they crash due to overload. Hacks aimed at penetrating company and institutional networks are also on the rise.

4. Disinformation and propaganda

Another objective of hybrid warfare is trying to influence public opinion in a given target country. Falsehoods and pro-Russian or anti-Ukrainian narratives are disseminated to this end, whether on social media platforms through troll factories, or via Russian foreign media outlets. In early 2024, Germany's Foreign Ministry uncovered a Russian "Doppelganger" disinformation campaign. It involved 50,000 fake social media user accounts spreading falsehoods and pro-Russian opinions on social networks while linking to fake news outlets spreading Russian propaganda. Some of the sites appeared deceptively similar to well-known news sites.

5. Election interference, meddling in the political process

One of the aims of these disinformation campaigns is to undermine public support for Ukraine. Another objective consists of politically destabilizing a democratic target country by strengthening extreme parties and candidates, for example by providing financial support to them.

In April, the Czech secret service uncovered a propaganda website called Voice of Europe, believed to be financed by Moscow. The site is suspected of paying bribes to some members of European Parliament.

One of the individuals suspected of having received such payments is Petr Bystron, an MEP with the far-right populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. He has denied the accusations. Western intelligence agencies also accused Russia of directly or indirectly influencing dozens of elections across Europe, North America and South America. Russian international broadcaster RT is said to have produced videos on controversial topics such as aid for Ukraine, migration and the economy during the US presidential election campaign. Right-wing US bloggers then spread some of the videos.

Hack-and-leak attacks are also part of the hybrid warfare repertoire. They involve hacking politicians, political parties or other institutions to steal and publish confidential information, sometimes alongside falsified documents, before elections. This happened, for example, in the run-up to the 2016 US election and the 2017 French presidential election.

6. Targeted killings

Assassinating influential figures is another facet of hybrid warfare. Russian President Vladimir Putin has not shied away from attacking individuals abroad. This is clear from the killing of a Chechen ex-commander in Berlin's Tiergarten park, who allegedly fought against Russia during the Second Chechen War. This is also evident from the 2006 attack on Kremlin critic Alexander Litvinenko and the assassination attempt against Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in 2018. All were carried out on British soil.

It's mainly Russian citizens who have fallen victim to such attacks so far. In July 2024, however, news leaked that Russia was planning to assassinate Armin Papperger, CEO of the German armaments group Rheinmetall, which manufactures the Leopard II tanks and other munitions supplied to Ukraine. The Kremlin has denied all the accusations.

How to deal with hybrid warfare?

Russia is conducting many different hybrid warfare pinpricks across Europe, according to Sönke Marahrens, a German army officer and hybrid security expert.

"Russian operators are trying out different things in many European states, which are individually tailored to the respective state," Marahrens told German public news outlet tagesschau.de. "Hybrid measures that work in Poland don't work in Germany; what works in Germany wouldn't work in Finland."

That is why, he said, one must expect "a very broad spectrum of attacks in the future." Likewise, one should show flexibility in reacting to such attacks, he added.

Relevance: GS Prelims; International Issues

Source: Indian Express

2. Cyclone Fengal makes landfall over Puducherry: What are tropical cyclones?

Introduction

Cyclone Fengal made landfall over Puducherry, with strong winds and heavy rains witnessed in parts of Tamil Nadu in recent days. Cyclone Fengal is a tropical storm. The National Disaster

Management Authority classifies cyclones broadly into two categories: extratropical cyclones and tropical cyclones.



First, what is a cyclone?

A cyclone is a large-scale system of air that rotates around the centre of a low-pressure area. It is usually accompanied by violent storms and bad weather. As per NDMA, a cyclone is characterised by inward spiralling winds that rotate anticlockwise in the Northern Hemisphere and clockwise in the Southern Hemisphere.

What are extratropical cyclones?

Also known as mid-latitude cyclones, extratropical cyclones occur outside of the tropic. They have "cold air at their core, and derive their energy from the release of potential energy when cold and warm air masses interact", according to the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). It added that such cyclones always have one or more fronts — a weather system that is the boundary between two different types of air masses. One is represented by warm air and the other by cold air — connected to them, and can occur over land or ocean.

What are tropical cyclones?

Tropical cyclones are those which develop in the regions between the Tropics of Capricorn and Cancer. They are the most devastating storms on Earth. Such cyclones develop when "thunderstorm activity starts building close to the centre of circulation, and the strongest winds and rain are no longer in a band far from the centre," NOAA noted.

The core of the storm turns warm, and the cyclone gets most of its energy from the "latent heat" released when water vapour that has evaporated from warm ocean waters condenses into liquid water, the agency added. Moreover, warm fronts or cold fronts aren't associated with tropical cyclones.

Tropical cyclones have different names depending on their location and strength. For instance, they are known as hurricanes in the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, the North Atlantic Ocean and the eastern and central North Pacific Ocean. In the western North Pacific, they are called typhoons.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Disaster Management

Source: Indian Express

3. How will bribery charges impact Adani?

Overview

Last week, the U.S. Department of Justice charged two officials of a renewable energy company listed in the U.S. in connection with a bribery scheme allegedly perpetrated by Gautam Adani, chairman of the Adani Group, and his associates including his nephew Sagar Adani. Several officials of an Adani Group company have been accused of bribing government officials in various Indian States to receive business favours.

What followed the revelations?

Shares of various Adani Group companies dropped sharply; they have recovered most of their losses in the last week after Adani Green Energy Ltd. (AGEL) filed its first response to stock exchanges, denying the bribery charges pressed by the American market regulator. The Adani Group has claimed that the allegations of bribery cost the group's listed companies a loss of \$55 billion in market value. The conglomerate had notably lost more than \$150 billion in market value last year after fraud allegations made by U.S. short-seller Hindenburg Research.

Are lenders likely to review plans?

The latest bribery allegations are likely to make it harder for the Adani Group to raise funds from overseas investors, which means the company may have to rely more on domestic investors for its financing needs. Local lenders, including Indian banks that currently lend to the Adani Group, too may review their exposure to the group. The State Bank of India, which is the largest lender to the Adani Group among Indian banks, is exposed with loans worth ₹33,800 crore. While this represents less than 1% of the bank's total loan book, a Reuters report on Thursday contended that SBI has said it will be cautious about disbursements to the Adani Group.

How have rating agencies responded?

Fitch Ratings, Moody's and S&P Global took negative rating actions on Adani firms this week. As The Hindu reported, citing governance risks for its rating action, Moody's said there could be a broader credit impact from AGEL's crisis on group firms "given Gautam Adani's prominent role as chairman of each of the rated entities or their parent companies as well as the controlling shareholder." Fitch Ratings also took negative rating actions on the Adani Group's infrastructure entities. S&P Global Ratings lowered its outlook on three Adani Group entities to negative, pointing at risks to funding access following the U.S. indictment.

What are the allegations?

The U.S. DOJ alleges that the AGEL promoter and senior officials paid bribes worth \$265 million to officials in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, and Jammu and Kashmir for

the sale of renewable energy produced by AGEL. It is alleged that these bribes were paid so that State power distribution companies (DISCOMS) would purchase eight gigawatts worth of energy from AGEL's renewable energy project. AGEL had won the right to sell renewable energy to interested buyers through the Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI), a public sector unit owned by the Centre. It is alleged that DISCOMS were unwilling to purchase power from AGEL due to the high price quoted, and hence bribes were paid by Adani Group officials to prod State government officials to purchase power at prices favourable to the Adani Group. Azure Power Energy Ltd., a New Delhi-headquartered energy company that is listed in the U.S. and whose officials have been indicted for bribery by the DOJ, is also alleged to have colluded with AGEL officials to bribe State officials.

What are the implications?

Allegations against AGEL officials could lead to higher cost of capital for the Group and also affect its profitability. However, the allegations may have no impact if lenders were already implicitly aware of potential corrupt practices and factored this in while making their lending decisions. The charges against AGEL have also raised doubts about the Centre's policy goal of boosting the nation's renewable energy capacity to 500 gigawatts by 2030. The Centre has been prodding State governments to increase renewable energy adoption through Renewable Purchase Obligations which obligate States to purchase a certain minimum amount of their power from renewable energy sources. But State DISCOMS have been reluctant to follow the mandate as they are already financially burdened and lack the infrastructure to source and distribute renewable energy. Some analysts also note that governments often renege on their guarantee to purchase energy from renewable energy companies. Some of the companies resort to illegal means, including bribery, to sell power.

Relevance: GS Prelims; Economics

Source: The Hindu