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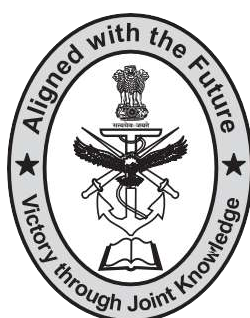
NARRATIVE WARFARE

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ABOUT US

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NARRATIVE WARFARE

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Narrative Warfare



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Introduction

Over the last few decades, the horizon of grey-zone warfare has significantly grown with enhanced technologies in place. Conflicts in the contemporary era have progressively moved away from traditional physical engagement to narrative setting, where the capacity to influence thought processes and mould societal belief systems has taken the centre stage.¹ The threat of grey-zone warfare is truly tested when information is weaponised to set narratives. In today's time, information and data are the new currency, and those who have control over data and can utilise it, control the world. In such conflicts, victory is decided by how well the information ecosystem and public opinion have been established over territorial gain.²

Information has evolved from just a complimentary element of military operations to a powerful instrument of strategic rivalry due to its increased relevance. Information travels instantaneously across borders and reaches millions of people in a matter of

seconds if not minutes owing to digital communication, social media platforms, and artificial intelligence.³ As a result, the barriers to influence have been considerably reduced, enabling both state and non-state actors to sway public opinion, spread misinformation, and control public discourse. Consequently, the scope of conflict that initially focused on territory and resources now also includes legitimacy, credibility, and interpretation of data.

Narrative warfare is a very distinct form of contemporary warfare because, unlike other advanced technical systems that need to be invented, installed, repaired, and improved over time, this one only requires employing persuasive narratives to influence perceptions and opinion. It refers to the purposeful creation, spread, and sustaining of narratives that affect how people and society interpret social, military, and political issues.⁴ Narrative warfare differs from traditional propaganda in its goal. Its purpose is to make people see reality in a certain way, whereas propaganda is about convincing people of a certain message. It's not just the spreading of information but rather the shaping of attitudes, influencing actions, and gaining tactical advantage without physical force.⁵ To put it simply, narrative is information brought together, whether true or false, to convince people what they want them to believe.

As India's geopolitical stature grows and society becomes more digitally connected, narrative warfare emerges as a strategic challenge. Today, India finds itself in a complex information environment driven by foreign influence, cross-border terrorism, social media misinformation, and internal competing narratives. Taken together, these trends point to the fact that protecting national security today is not just about defending borders or raising military power.⁶ It also means protecting the information space, strengthening societal resilience and offering trustworthy narratives in peace as well as during war time.

Understanding Narrative Warfare

Narrative warfare is the systematic creation, spread, and sustaining of narrative that shapes the understanding of individuals and societies on political, military, and social issues. Information alone merely conveys facts. A story, however, does more than that.⁷ It conveys meaning to those facts and places them within a coherent

framework. In contemporary warfare, rival factors are not only trying to control what audiences know; they are trying to control how audiences interpret and react to what is happening. The goal is to shape perceptions, create legitimacy, and direct behaviour in ways that promote strategic interests. As a result, narratives have become an increasingly vital tool of national power and statecraft.⁸

Narrative Warfare is tied to propaganda, psychological operations, strategic communications and public diplomacy, but they are distinct. The scope and purpose of it make it different. Propaganda is generally designed to persuade audiences with selective or biased information, while psychological operations are aimed at the attitudes and behaviour of specific groups. Strategic communication is the synchronisation of a government's official messaging.⁹ Public diplomacy is the triumph of international opinion through direct engagement. Narrative warfare includes all these and more, seeking to create lasting interpretive frameworks that shape how entire societies see reality, legitimacy, and conflict over the long term.

A rising narrative war is a sign of a larger trend. Conflicts are increasingly fought in the cognitive realm, where perceptions, beliefs, and identities are the strategic targets themselves.¹⁰ Winning is no longer a military success, but how that success is perceived by audiences at home and abroad. This means that controlling the narratives can influence political legitimacy, public morale, diplomatic support, and even battlefield decisions. A state can win tactically but lose strategically when it loses the battle of perception and credibility.

Recent conflicts reveal how important narrative warfare has become to international security. Both sides in the Russia-Ukraine War spent heavily on influencing global opinion via digital media, synchronised messaging and live battlefield news.¹¹ For instance, China embedded information campaigns into its larger strategic doctrine through its "Three Warfares" concept, which combines public opinion, psychological, and legal tactics.¹² With external actors increasingly using digital platforms to influence public discourse, fuel societal polarisation and shape beliefs on national security issues, understanding the dynamics of narrative warfare has become all the more important for India. Therefore, defending the information space is now a core element of modern security strategy.

Information as a Weapon

Information has become a strategic tool that can achieve political, military and psychological effects through means other than the use of force. Information is different from traditional material elements of power in that it does not seek to destroy physical objects but rather to influence perceptions, behavioural patterns, and decision-making processes.¹³ Information warfare encompasses a range of functions and techniques aimed at using true, false, and misleading information to influence rival political and military organisations. It includes such concepts as misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, which are used to confuse, deceive, and diminish the credibility of political and military adversaries.

The use of information tools has become strategically essential in recent conflicts. Before Russia invaded Ukraine, the US presented intelligence data on the Russian troop movements and invasion plans, which had been prepared for public release. This allowed the US to deprive Russia of its strategic surprise and reveal the disinformation campaign before it could affect global opinion.¹⁴ Besides, Russia used state media and other instruments for presenting its position and countering the Western narrative. The two sides' informational campaigns showed that managing public opinion had become an integral part of major military actions, not an after-thought.

The rise of digital technologies has increased the vulnerability of information as a weapon. Social media allows content to go viral within minutes, while algorithms amplify sensational content that brings engagement. Artificial intelligence enables fake videos, audio and other media to reach billions of views, making it challenging to differentiate between real and altered material. Such technologies make influence operations cheaper, more accessible and harder to control, presenting new challenges to governments and societies.¹⁵

India too has witnessed the strategic weaponisation of information against its security. After the Galwan clash, there was an attempt by both the sides to project the narrative about what exactly had transpired to public opinion through various traditional and digital media. Thereafter, the number of casualties and who exactly was responsible for the standoff had been the subject of extensive discussion.¹⁶

Likewise, tech firms like Facebook have reported the presence of coordinated inauthentic networks, primarily based out of South Asia, trying to manipulate and distort political discourse in the region. Clearly, there is an increasing amount of strategic competition to assert informational advantage. As such, defending the informational space needs to be treated as critical to protecting the physical security of a nation.

Psychological Operations and Cognitive Warfare

Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) refer to the systematic use of information and communication strategies to influence the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of a target audience. In contrast to narrative warfare, which aims to shape overarching interpretations of events, PSYOPS tend to be more focused and have specific goals.¹⁷ These operations seek to undercut enemy resolve, destabilise foreign governments, weaken political opposition, and deter undesirable behaviours through means other than direct confrontation. Overall, they allow for exerting psychological pressure to accomplish political, military and diplomatic objectives, thereby shaping the cognitive realm in which conflicts unfold.

Recent conflicts have shown how critical psychological warfare has become. During the Russia-Ukraine War, both sides have been leaking footage of battles, drones strikes, and messages about military victories to boost their morale and spread propaganda.¹⁸ The Hamas group has been circulating videos of their captives to intimidate the Israeli government and people and gain international sympathy following the October 2023 attacks.¹⁹ China has been signalling Taiwan with increased military drills, regular aircraft patrols near Taiwan, and media campaigns to deter Taiwan's moves towards declaring independence without direct confrontation.²⁰

For India, psychological operations are inextricably linked with international terrorism and the ongoing crises at the borders. After the Balakot attacks in 2019, India and Pakistan began a conflict with each other in the information space, which has now taken on an even more significant form.²¹ The statements made, the presentations and the images showed the position of both countries and their attempts to control the narrative. In addition, each side tried to present itself as the stronger one and to show the world what happened.

Social Media as the New Battlespace

Social media has created an information space in which communication happens in real time, is fragmented, global, and increasingly detached from traditional hierarchies. Through platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, WhatsApp, and others, social media enables states, governments, journalists, and non-state actors to communicate and interact simultaneously and in equal measure.²² Traditional media are characterised by recognisable hierarchies in the information production chains. In social media, individuals and algorithms, as well as centralised and decentralised systems, compete for influence and control. The informational domain is one of strategic competition, where influence can be gained via virality, repetition, emotional appeal, and other factors, disconnected from any source of information.

The Russia-Ukraine War demonstrated how social media can become an arena in which the conflict occurs. Ukrainian authorities and citizens used the platforms to report on the conflict, show evidence of Russia's alleged wrongdoing, encourage support for Ukraine, and engage in informational combat.²³ Russian state media countered with its own takes on the war, using the platforms to promote its official position. Due to the easy virality of the posts and their images and videos, the battles in social media often determined the perception of the conflict both domestically and internationally. As such, social media created a space where the combatants could directly engage in opinion and perception warfare, encouraging international support and recognition of their positions.

India's experiences with social media and national security challenges are closely linked to its experience with the China-Pakistan nexus. Following the Balakot strike and the Pulwama attack, Indian and Pakistani governments and media outlets used social media to voice their official positions and counter each other's narratives.²⁴ In the years that followed, during the Galwan clash with China in 2020 and its aftermath, images and reports about the Galwan Valley clash circulated on social media. In many cases, unverified reports and old images were used to fuel the campaigns and promote conspiracies.²⁵ Similar security challenges fuelled the confrontations in social media, with both sides presenting their position and attempting to gain popularity and support.

The role played by social media in national security matters is undeniably colossal. The platforms have become an integral part of everyday life, making it almost impossible to avoid them. In addition, the platforms have proven to be potent tools in informational warfare due to their ability to direct traffic towards specific topics. They have also made it possible to share and receive information from many people, thus becoming significant opinion markers. The ease with which information and opinions can be shared has also attracted malicious actors, including fake accounts, bots, media outlets, and ordinary citizens. It has become extremely easy to manipulate the informational landscape using such actors. As a result, the Indian government faces the dual challenge of protecting the public from misinformation while at the same time allowing free expression of speech as a guarantee of democracy. Clearly, the Indian government and social media companies must recognise the importance of social media as a battleground.

Domestic versus International Narratives

Modern conflicts are characterised by a dual narrative of discourse, which is primarily aimed at domestic and international audiences. The former refers to maintaining internal popularity, authority, public morale, and general political support, whereas the latter denotes the need to gain diplomatic legitimacy and external approval of the action taken or to be taken. Therefore, for international audiences, the domestic and foreign messages may have different contexts and meanings. Such a nuance is essential, given that foreign and domestic narratives may intertwine, being used for the purpose of legitimacy building by the governments.

In particular, the example of India's response to the 2019 Balakot incident demonstrates the importance of using separate messages for domestic and international audiences, as well as their purpose and effectiveness. While the narrative aimed at the Indian audiences was focused on demonstrating strength and resolve, responding to the Pulwama terrorist attack with appropriate measures, and sending a clear message to Pakistan and the international community, the foreign message emphasised the responsibility and moderate intentions of India.²⁶ This is especially evident from the way India was quick to condemn the attack and reassure its allies and partners, empathising with the surgical nature of the response to the attack and targeting only terrorist infrastructure to avoid regional escalation.

In addition to military responses and messages of deterrence, the examples of India's diplomatic outreach demonstrate the importance of strategic communication to achieve international recognition and legitimacy. In particular, while fulfilling the role of a G20 President, India pledged to promote G20 interests and advance global governance ideas, emphasising the country's role as a responsible and reliable leader.²⁷ At the same time, by promoting digital public infrastructure and global development policy, India once again demonstrated its position as a country that understands its role in international relations. Therefore, it may be said that state narratives and their strategic use in international relations are essential for achieving strategic goals such as legitimacy building, gaining recognition, and building diplomatic capital.

Finally, the importance of strategic communication in international relations and the ability to maintain different messages for different audiences, albeit within the framework of a unified concept, is difficult to overestimate. For states, it is essential to emphasise different aspects of their messages to appeal to domestic constituents and maintain stability at home while reassuring allies and partners and advancing national interests abroad. However, the failure to comply with these messages or their lack of coherence may lead to reduced legitimacy and credibility both domestically and internationally. Thus, the strategy of states is a complex and multifaceted task, requiring careful consideration of factors such as audiences, context, and messages' content. In particular, the most difficult aspect of communication for states is the need to operate with different audiences, each of which has its own expectations and requirements. Therefore, the competition for legitimacy and recognition is an integral part of the discourse of states' domestic and foreign policy activities.

India's Narrative Security Challenges

India's narrative security is influenced by diverse factors, including the country's significant digital population, diverse society, and complex geopolitical environment. India's democratic ethos encompasses its social, cultural, regional, and political pluralism, but the same facets offer fertile ground for exploiting the narrative space.²⁸ The rise of social media and other participatory digital platforms has made the distinction between internal and external narratives more complicated. A particular

challenge emerges when foreign narrative space intersects with domestic controversies, as both spheres are highly connected today. Therefore, India's narrative security requires addressing both the vulnerability to external information manipulation and the challenges stemming from internal information security issues.

One of the primary concerns with India's narrative security is the threat posed by disinformation and influence operations originating from outside the country. Pakistan and China are reported to have stepped up their digital capabilities as part of their strategic messaging campaigns targeting India. For instance, during Operation Sindoor (2025), Indian military officials received numerous false and misleading reports, and there are concerns that similar information operations occurred against India's government.²⁹ Researchers have identified coordinated anti-India narratives disseminated between disinformation and propaganda. In this sense, physical attacks and digital disinformation campaigns are deeply intertwined. Notably, the issue of misleading information has been exacerbated by the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), deepfakes, and other manipulative technologies.

Narrative security is a critical aspect of information security, and India must adopt a multi-faceted approach to address the various challenges it encounters. In many ways, India's experience with disinformation illustrates domestic and systematic vulnerabilities that require institutional responses. The government has taken some measures to counter disinformation, including launching the PIB Fact Check Unit in 2019 and establishing a unified information management system in 2025 during Operation Sindoor.³⁰ The latter system enabled different governmental agencies and the armed forces to share information and take collective action against misinformation. In April 2026, the PIB Fact Check Unit announced that it responded to more than 2,900 false claims and removed 1,400+ URLs from social media during Operation Sindoor.³¹ Overall, India's growing awareness of the security implications of disinformation is reflected in its improved institutional capacity to address the issue.

However, it is essential to recognise that countering disinformation requires more than the government's reactive measures and removing false information from digital platforms. To bolster the narrative security of the country, it is vital to empower society with credible strategic communication, media literacy, independent

verification platforms, and advanced digital infrastructure. In the long term, narrative security will be enhanced by promoting public understanding of manipulative practices and fostering the domestic digital ecosystem's resiliency. India's democratic principles should guide its narrative security strategy, ensuring that its information space remains an open platform for public debate, where correct information triumphs over misleading data. In the era of information warfare, societal empowerment, institutional reputation, and strategic communication will be India's most powerful security assets.

Conclusion

The emergence of narrative warfare reflects a fundamental change in contemporary conflicts. Information has become more than an essential element of national power; it has become an instrument by which political power and influence are obtained and by which adversaries are degraded. The increased use by states and non-state actors of psychological operations, disinformation, strategic communications, and other forms of social engineering confirms that cognitive life is a domain of growing strategic importance. Information, and, more specifically, its ability to shape perceptions, has profound security implications for a country. Contests for informational and cognitive influence may well go beyond their immediate, tactical impact and produce strategic effects. This is especially the case for democracies that possess a multiplicity of information sources and whose citizens wield considerable power in interpreting and acting upon them.

India's complex geopolitical circumstances, as well as its large population and its expanding information and digital footprint, make it particularly vulnerable to adversarial narratives. The incidents of Pulwama, Balakot, Galwan, and Sindoor have demonstrated how easily military actions could trigger a confrontation not only between nations but also between competing narratives. At the same time, events on the diplomatic front reveal how India's ability to advance its national interests and strategic ideas is inextricably linked to its success in the information realm. As India seeks to bolster its global presence and profile, the boundaries between domestic and external audience are becoming increasingly blurred.

A country's security is no longer confined to its territorial and institutional integrity; its strategic and informational credibility as a nation must also be guarded. In India's case, this entails the development of narrative competence and strategic confidence based upon institutional, societal, and technological capabilities for effective messaging and information security. In this emerging strategic environment, national power and influence are measured not only in conventional terms but also in terms of informational reach and impact. Thus, the contest for power and influence in the information sphere has become one of the most critical arenas in which nations now compete. In effect, the ability to shape the perceptions of other-friend and foe alike has become arguably as important as the military might that projects power into the physical realm.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

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