



Strategic Communication and Narrative Warfare: Pakistan's Public Diplomacy Response to Indian Hybrid Tactics

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ABSTRACT

In the evolving strategic landscape of South Asia, hybrid warfare has emerged as a dominant tool of statecraft, blurring the lines between traditional military engagement and non-kinetic instruments such as disinformation, cyber operations, and psychological influence. Within this context, India has increasingly employed a range of hybrid tactics aimed at shaping international opinion, undermining Pakistan's global standing, and influencing internal stability. Central to this strategy is the use of narrative warfare deliberate efforts to craft, disseminate, and reinforce persuasive stories that serve strategic interests both domestically and abroad. This article examines Pakistan's public diplomacy response to India's hybrid operations, focusing particularly on its efforts to counter hostile narratives and project its own image through strategic communication. Utilizing a discourse-oriented analytical approach, this study draws upon official statements, media content, international reports, and case studies to explore the dynamics of this narrative contestation. The Pulwama-Balakot crisis, the revocation of Article 370, and revelations such as the EU DisinfoLab findings offer critical insights into the unfolding information battleground. The analysis reveals that while Pakistan has made notable advances in real-time media engagement and diplomatic outreach, significant challenges remain in terms of strategic coherence, media capacity, and global narrative penetration. The study concludes with policy recommendations for strengthening Pakistan's public diplomacy architecture, including investment in institutional coordination, international scholarly engagement, and the development of long-term, values-based narrative frameworks capable of competing in a complex information environment.

Keywords: Hybrid Warfare, Strategic Communication, Narrative Conflict, Public Diplomacy, Pakistan, India, Information Operations, Media Strategy.

1. Introduction

The strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan has traditionally revolved around conventional military threats, border skirmishes, and diplomatic hostilities. However, the nature of this rivalry has evolved dramatically in the past two decades with the emergence of hybrid warfare a multidimensional strategy that blends military pressure with non-kinetic tools such as disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic coercion, lawfare, and psychological operations. This transformation reflects a broader shift in global geopolitics, where conventional warfare has become less frequent and strategic influence is increasingly asserted through informational and narrative dominance (Hoffman, 2007). In the context of South Asia, this shift is particularly pronounced. India has increasingly employed hybrid tactics to undermine Pakistan's national narrative, question its legitimacy in international forums, and damage its credibility on issues such as terrorism, Kashmir, and regional security. These tactics often involve targeted information operations, coordinated media campaigns, and sophisticated digital propaganda efforts aimed at shaping global perceptions. Notably, the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot episode

revealed a coordinated attempt by Indian authorities and media to frame a compelling nationalistic narrative, positioning Pakistan as a perpetual sponsor of terrorism despite limited evidence to support the claims at the time (Fair, 2020).

Narrative warfare, in this context, has become a cornerstone of hybrid operations. It refers to the construction and dissemination of strategically crafted stories that frame the perceptions of both domestic and international audiences. These narratives are not merely rhetorical tools but are embedded within a broader communication ecosystem, including traditional media, social media, think tanks, and diplomatic channels. In India's case, the systematic use of disinformation was uncovered by the EU DisinfoLab, which revealed a network of fake NGOs, media outlets, and think tanks that were disseminating anti-Pakistan narratives in Europe and at the United Nations (Cheema et al., 2024). In response to these developments, Pakistan has begun recalibrating its public diplomacy strategy to confront the growing threat of hybrid and narrative warfare. Public diplomacy, defined as the practice by which a state communicates with foreign publics to inform and influence, has become central to Pakistan's strategic communication efforts. Key institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), and select media outlets have engaged in initiatives designed to counter hostile narratives, defend Pakistan's geopolitical stance, and promote its perspective on critical issues such as Kashmir and regional peace. Efforts include real-time rebuttals to misinformation, diplomatic engagement with key international actors, digital diplomacy via platforms like Twitter, and the use of documentaries, briefings, and international conferences to tell Pakistan's story from its own vantage point.

Despite these measures, Pakistan faces significant challenges. The narrative space is often dominated by India's more expansive and better-resourced media and diplomatic machinery. Moreover, the lack of coordination between state institutions, insufficient investment in digital platforms, and an absence of a coherent long-term narrative strategy limit Pakistan's ability to effectively compete in the global information arena. This research undertakes a discourse-oriented analytical approach, focusing on qualitative analysis of media content, official statements, international reports, and case studies to examine the strategic communication contest between India and Pakistan. The article investigates how Pakistan's public diplomacy apparatus attempts to respond to India's hybrid threats and evaluates the efficacy of its narrative-building efforts. Case studies such as the Pulwama-Balakot standoff, the revocation of Article 370 in Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir, and the exposure of disinformation networks offer important insights into the structure and implications of this ongoing narrative conflict.

The primary objectives of this study are to first provide a clear understanding of hybrid warfare and narrative conflict within the broader context of the longstanding India-Pakistan rivalry. It aims to analyze how India strategically employs narrative as a key component of its hybrid warfare tactics to influence perceptions and advance its interests. The study also seeks to critically assess Pakistan's public diplomacy efforts and initiatives designed to counteract these hostile narratives. Finally, it intends to offer practical recommendations for enhancing Pakistan's strategic communication capabilities, recognizing the importance of building a robust infrastructure to effectively operate in today's highly contested information environment. The article proceeds by first defining key concepts of hybrid warfare and narrative conflict, then analyzing India's narrative strategy and its operational mechanisms. This is followed by a detailed discussion of Pakistan's public diplomacy response and an evaluation of its

strengths and weaknesses. The article concludes with practical policy suggestions to enhance Pakistan's narrative resilience and international credibility.

2. Understanding Hybrid Warfare and Narrative Conflict

Hybrid warfare represents a strategic paradigm shift in the conduct of modern conflicts. Unlike conventional warfare, which relies on direct military engagement, hybrid warfare integrates multiple instruments of power military, economic, cyber, psychological, and informational to achieve political objectives while operating below the threshold of formal war. This approach allows state and non-state actors to exert influence, destabilize adversaries, and shape strategic outcomes without invoking a full-scale military response (Otaiku, 2018). At the core of hybrid warfare lies narrative conflict the struggle to control perceptions, legitimacy, and the framing of events. In this domain, narrative warfare functions as a deliberate and sustained attempt to shape public consciousness through storytelling, symbolism, and selective framing. It involves the construction of persuasive messages that appeal to identities, emotions, and worldviews, often using historical references, moral claims, and ideological positioning. These narratives serve to justify state behavior, discredit adversaries, and mobilize both domestic and international audiences (Roselle et al., 2014). Strategic communication theory emphasizes that in today's complex media ecosystem, messages must be consistent, credible, and targeted to specific audiences. Joseph Nye's concept of soft power the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion aligns closely with the idea of narrative power. In conflict studies, scholars have argued that legitimacy, shaped through narratives, is often as critical as territorial control. Winning the "battle of narratives" is now considered essential for success in both domestic politics and international diplomacy (Miskimmon et al., 2015).

The expansion of digital and transnational media has amplified the reach and impact of narrative warfare. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube enable states to bypass traditional gatekeepers and speak directly to global audiences. These platforms serve as both battlefields and weapons disseminating messages rapidly, reinforcing echo chambers, and enabling psychological influence at scale. Moreover, transnational media networks, including international broadcasting services like Al Jazeera, BBC, and RT, as well as diaspora-led digital outlets, play a key role in shaping global opinion. These platforms often reflect ideological or geopolitical biases and can be instrumentalized as tools of statecraft. States with well-developed media infrastructures and strategic outreach capacities can dominate the narrative space, while weaker states struggle to have their perspectives heard or taken seriously.

In the context of South Asia, India has utilized hybrid warfare to not only achieve tactical and strategic goals but also to delegitimize Pakistan's international image through a sustained narrative strategy. This includes framing Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism, portraying India as a victim of cross-border aggression, and mobilizing international opinion in favor of its actions in Kashmir and beyond. These narratives are carefully curated and reinforced through diplomatic messaging, media campaigns, and disinformation networks. In contrast, Pakistan's ability to counter these efforts has been limited by structural challenges, resource constraints, and a historically reactive posture in the information domain. Understanding the mechanics of hybrid warfare and narrative conflict is therefore essential to analyzing the effectiveness of Pakistan's public diplomacy and the broader information struggle between the two states.

3. India's Hybrid Tactics: Targeting Pakistan's Global Image and Internal Stability

India's strategic posture toward Pakistan has evolved to include a sophisticated hybrid warfare strategy that extends beyond conventional military capabilities. This multi-domain strategy seeks to shape international perceptions, isolate Pakistan diplomatically, destabilize it internally, and delegitimize its regional and global standing. India's hybrid tactics are

characterized by coordinated disinformation campaigns, cyber operations, diplomatic lobbying, and the strategic use of cultural and diaspora networks. These efforts are part of a broader attempt to dominate the narrative space and frame Pakistan as a pariah state. One of the most prominent tools in India's hybrid toolkit is media disinformation. Indian mainstream and digital media have increasingly become active agents in constructing adversarial narratives about Pakistan, particularly in the wake of crises. For instance, during the Pulwama-Balakot crisis of 2019, Indian media outlets amplified government narratives without scrutiny, disseminating unverified claims about the airstrikes' success and Pakistan's alleged support for militant networks. International media later raised questions about the credibility of these claims, highlighting the performative and symbolic nature of India's response (Zubair et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the media spectacle served to galvanize domestic support and reinforce Pakistan's negative portrayal globally.

A more systematic campaign was revealed in 2020 through the EU DisinfoLab's "Indian Chronicles" report, which exposed a network of over 750 fake media outlets, NGOs, and think tanks operating across 119 countries. These entities, many of which falsely claimed to represent defunct UN-accredited NGOs, were used to disseminate anti-Pakistan and pro-India narratives in Europe and at the UN Human Rights Council. The network operated for over 15 years, highlighting the scale and endurance of India's influence operations (Jaffar, 2021). These revelations confirmed that India had invested in long-term, transnational disinformation campaigns to construct and legitimize its strategic narratives. India's use of cyber and digital surveillance also forms a critical component of its hybrid strategy. Allegations of digital espionage, including the reported use of Pegasus spyware, reflect an attempt to monitor and potentially manipulate dissenting voices domestically and internationally. While such tactics are often used to suppress internal dissent, they can also be weaponized to gather intelligence and influence perceptions regarding Pakistan, especially within the context of Kashmir-related activism and diaspora advocacy.

Diplomatic pressure is another powerful lever India employs. Through its extensive global partnerships and economic diplomacy, India has sought to influence international institutions such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), where Pakistan has repeatedly faced scrutiny regarding its counter-terrorism financing framework. India's consistent lobbying efforts have played a role in keeping Pakistan on the FATF grey list for several years, thereby undermining investor confidence and reinforcing the narrative of Pakistan's alleged complicity in global terrorism (Chawla, 2021). India also leverages cultural and diaspora diplomacy to promote a soft image of itself while discrediting Pakistan. Indian embassies, cultural missions, and diaspora organizations work systematically to project India as a pluralistic, democratic, and responsible actor, often in contrast to the depiction of Pakistan as unstable or extremist. Bollywood, Indian cultural festivals, and academic networks serve as conduits for promoting strategic narratives, particularly in Western capitals where public opinion can shape foreign policy orientations.

The abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, which stripped Jammu and Kashmir of its special constitutional status, was accompanied by a calculated narrative offensive. India presented the move as an internal administrative reform necessary for development and integration, despite international criticism and concerns about human rights violations. The Indian government launched a global campaign, mobilizing diplomatic missions and diaspora voices to justify its action and marginalize Pakistan's counter-narrative, which emphasized self-determination and international law. The blackout imposed in Kashmir during this period further restricted the flow of alternative narratives, giving India near-total control over the international messaging (Chaudhary, 2024). In sum, India's hybrid strategy integrates various instruments of influence to undermine Pakistan's internal cohesion and international legitimacy. The blending of

disinformation, cyber capabilities, diplomatic maneuvering, and cultural projection forms a potent hybrid architecture. Understanding these tactics is essential for assessing the efficacy of Pakistan's response through public diplomacy and strategic communication.

4. Pakistan's Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy Response

In response to India's assertive hybrid tactics, Pakistan has increasingly sought to recalibrate its strategic communication and public diplomacy efforts to defend its national image, counter disinformation, and project its narrative to both domestic and international audiences. Though historically reactive and fragmented, Pakistan's narrative-building apparatus has undergone notable evolution, with coordinated engagement across state institutions, media, and the diaspora. Key actors in Pakistan's communication strategy include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) the media wing of the military and select national media outlets. These institutions play a vital role in disseminating official statements, responding to external accusations, and shaping strategic narratives. Furthermore, diaspora networks, especially in the United Kingdom, North America, and Europe, have been mobilized to project Pakistan's perspective on contentious issues like Kashmir, counter-terrorism, and regional peace.

4.1 Pakistan's counter-narrative tools have expanded to include:

Real-time media rebuttals: ISPR and MoFA regularly issue immediate denials or clarifications in response to Indian allegations or disinformation. For example, during the Pulwama-Balakot episode in 2019, ISPR provided timely briefings that challenged Indian claims, especially regarding the efficacy of the Balakot airstrikes. These counter-narratives were widely circulated on social media and picked up by international outlets, offering an alternative perspective that questioned India's official stance. Engagement with international organizations and think tanks: Pakistan has actively sought to internationalize the Kashmir issue through engagement with the United Nations, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and prominent international think tanks. Diplomatic missions abroad have organized briefings, published white papers, and lobbied for attention to human rights violations in Indian-administered Kashmir, especially post-August 2019. These efforts have aimed to reframe the Kashmir conflict from a bilateral dispute to a humanitarian and legal issue rooted in international law. Digital diplomacy has emerged as a powerful tool for Pakistan. Twitter diplomacy, led by official handles of the Prime Minister's Office, MoFA, and ISPR, has allowed Pakistan to communicate directly with global audiences and respond quickly to unfolding events. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan's personal engagement on Twitter was especially instrumental in framing Pakistan's stance on regional peace, Islamophobia, and Kashmir. Additionally, documentaries, media productions, and speeches at multilateral forums, such as the UN General Assembly, have been leveraged to humanize the Kashmiri struggle, highlight Pakistan's peace overtures, and challenge India's global messaging.

In terms of framing, Pakistan has consistently emphasized the principles of self-determination, international legality, and human rights in its narrative on Kashmir. It portrays itself as a responsible regional actor advocating for peace and stability, contrasting India as an aggressive and intolerant power. The narrative of victimhood as a country targeted by hybrid tactics, disinformation, and diplomatic coercion is used to generate sympathy and legitimacy in international forums. The terrorism discourse, often weaponized by India, is countered by highlighting Pakistan's sacrifices in the global war on terror, its success in counterinsurgency, and the need for a cooperative regional security framework. Pakistan's peace diplomacy is another critical strand. From offering dialogue to proposing mechanisms for conflict resolution and border management, Pakistan has attempted to shift global focus from confrontation to cooperation. These diplomatic overtures, while often rebuffed by India, serve

an important symbolic function they reinforce Pakistan's image as a state willing to negotiate and defuse tensions.

Nonetheless, challenges remain. Pakistan's strategic communication suffers from issues of coordination, resource allocation, and sometimes inconsistency between civil and military messaging. Furthermore, its international media reach and cultural influence remain limited compared to India's expansive soft power ecosystem. Despite these limitations, Pakistan's evolving use of digital platforms, proactive diplomacy, and institutional coordination signals a growing recognition of narrative power in geopolitics. In the broader contest of hybrid warfare, public diplomacy and strategic communication are no longer peripheral they are frontline defenses in shaping legitimacy, policy, and global perception.

5. Evaluating the Effectiveness of Pakistan's Narrative Strategy

Assessing the effectiveness of Pakistan's strategic communication and public diplomacy requires a nuanced examination of both its successes and limitations in shaping international perceptions and countering India's hybrid tactics. While Pakistan has made meaningful strides in articulating its narrative on contentious issues like Kashmir and counterterrorism, its overall global reach and impact remain constrained by multiple structural and operational challenges. One clear strength of Pakistan's narrative strategy lies in its ability to mobilize targeted diplomatic and diaspora networks to sustain attention on key issues, particularly within Muslim-majority countries and certain international organizations like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Pakistan's consistent messaging on Kashmir's human rights situation has elicited statements of concern from various UN bodies and international NGOs, demonstrating some traction in framing the dispute as a legitimate international concern (Kuszevska, 2022). Moreover, the use of digital diplomacy through official social media channels has expanded Pakistan's ability to engage with global audiences in near real-time, which is a significant improvement over previous more reactive communication models.

However, significant gaps in coordination and resources hinder Pakistan's capacity to match the scale and sophistication of Indian narrative efforts. Unlike India, which benefits from a vast, well-funded media ecosystem, state-supported think tanks, cultural diplomacy platforms, and an extensive diaspora actively promoting its global image, Pakistan's media infrastructure and public diplomacy apparatus are comparatively limited. This disparity manifests in several ways:

Media resources: Pakistan lacks the extensive international broadcasting presence akin to India's Doordarshan or globally consumed media content, which impacts the ability to shape narratives proactively across multiple regions (Murtaza, 2025).

Coordination challenges: Fragmented messaging between civilian government entities and military institutions sometimes leads to inconsistent narratives, undermining the coherence necessary for sustained diplomatic persuasion. International alliances: While Pakistan has successfully engaged select countries sympathetic to its narrative, it faces difficulties in broadening its diplomatic support, particularly in Western capitals where India's economic and strategic ties carry significant influence.

A prominent shortcoming in Pakistan's approach is its predominantly reactive posture. Much of Pakistan's strategic communication is focused on rebutting Indian claims and responding to crises rather than proactively setting the agenda or advancing a comprehensive positive narrative. For instance, Pakistan's responses during crises such as the Pulwama-Balakot incident or the abrogation of Article 370 have largely been defensive, aimed at damage control rather than initiating global discourse or shaping the terms of engagement. This reactive strategy limits Pakistan's ability to dominate narrative spaces or influence broader international opinion effectively.

In contrast, India's narrative capacity is characterized by proactive, multi-level engagement that leverages its growing economic clout, cultural exports, and global diaspora to project

soft power. India's media outreach, strategic partnerships, and sustained information operations provide it with a more persistent and pervasive presence in international discourse. The revelations by the EU DisinfoLab about India's long-term influence operations highlight the structural advantages India holds in narrative warfare, allowing it to shape perceptions over time and across regions (Khan, 2021).

In conclusion, while Pakistan's narrative strategy has made important gains in highlighting its positions and defending against hybrid threats, its overall effectiveness is curtailed by limited resources, coordination issues, and a reactive communication style. To enhance its impact, Pakistan must invest in building a more coherent, proactive public diplomacy framework, expand media outreach beyond traditional allies, and strengthen its international partnerships. Only through such comprehensive efforts can Pakistan effectively counterbalance India's superior narrative infrastructure and assert its perspectives in the global information environment.

6. Strategic Recommendations

To enhance the effectiveness of Pakistan's strategic communication and public diplomacy in countering India's hybrid tactics, a more structured and innovative approach is essential. The following recommendations focus on strengthening institutional capacity, expanding narrative reach, and fostering sustainable engagement with global audiences.

First, Pakistan should develop a centralized public diplomacy strategy that integrates efforts across government ministries, military communication wings, and media organizations. Establishing professional media units staffed with skilled communication experts, digital strategists, and narrative analysts will ensure coherent messaging and timely responses. This central coordination would minimize conflicting narratives and provide a unified front in both reactive and proactive communication initiatives.

Second, investment in narrative innovation is crucial. Pakistan's public diplomacy must move beyond traditional rhetoric and engage with contemporary tools such as academic collaborations, cultural diplomacy, and multimedia storytelling. Partnerships with universities and think tanks can help generate research-based narratives that enhance credibility, while cultural diplomacy initiatives such as film festivals, art exhibitions, and literary forums can promote a positive image of Pakistan's heritage, diversity, and peace efforts. These initiatives would not only reach broader audiences but also humanize Pakistan's story beyond geopolitical tensions.

Third, forging stronger alliances with international civil society, scholars, and digital influencers is imperative. Engaging with independent academics, journalists, human rights advocates, and social media personalities who hold sway in global discourse will diversify Pakistan's narrative reach and add layers of authenticity. These partnerships can help counter disinformation campaigns and amplify Pakistan's voice in international forums, particularly where official diplomacy may face limitations.

Lastly, Pakistan should invest in long-term storytelling campaigns that build on core themes such as national identity, peace advocacy, and regional security cooperation. Rather than episodic, crisis-driven communication, sustained narratives focused on Pakistan's commitment to stability, development, and intercultural harmony will gradually reshape global perceptions. Storytelling formats such as documentaries, podcasts, and interactive digital content can be employed to engage younger and more diverse audiences worldwide.

By adopting these strategic recommendations, Pakistan can transition from a predominantly reactive posture to a more confident and proactive narrative presence. This will not only strengthen its public diplomacy response to hybrid warfare but also enhance its broader international standing and contribute to regional peace and stability.

7. Conclusion

In today's geopolitical landscape, narrative warfare has emerged as a decisive and intrinsic component of hybrid conflict, fundamentally altering how states contest influence and legitimacy beyond traditional military engagement. This is especially evident in the complex and protracted rivalry between India and Pakistan, where the battleground extends into information domains, shaping global and domestic perceptions that carry real strategic consequences. The research has demonstrated that India's hybrid tactics encompassing media disinformation, cyber operations, diplomatic pressure in international forums, and diaspora engagement form a sophisticated multi-dimensional strategy designed to erode Pakistan's international standing and internal stability. Pakistan's response through strategic communication and public diplomacy highlights the critical role of narrative as a tool of both resistance and projection. Initiatives such as rapid media rebuttals, digital diplomacy platforms, and targeted engagement with international organizations reflect an increasing awareness of the importance of controlling the narrative space. However, this study also reveals that Pakistan faces notable structural and operational challenges. These include a fragmented and often inconsistent messaging apparatus, insufficient resources to sustain global media campaigns, and a predominantly reactive rather than proactive stance in narrative building. Such limitations constrain Pakistan's ability to match the reach, depth, and impact of India's sustained narrative campaigns, which benefit from a far larger media ecosystem, extensive international alliances, and a dynamic diaspora network actively supporting its global image.

For example, the global media narratives following the Pulwama-Balakot crisis in 2019 vividly illustrated these dynamics. India's swift diplomatic outreach and media blitz sought to frame Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism, shaping perceptions in Western capitals and international forums. Pakistan's response, while timely, struggled to penetrate these dominant narratives, highlighting the challenges of competing against a well-resourced, multi-platform narrative strategy. This analysis underscores the imperative for Pakistan to develop a centralized, well-resourced, and strategically coordinated public diplomacy framework. Beyond defending against adverse narratives, Pakistan must invest in innovative and sustained narrative construction that centers on themes of peace, regional cooperation, national identity, and development. Strengthening partnerships with international civil society, academic institutions, media experts, and digital influencers will diversify Pakistan's narrative reach and enhance credibility. This holistic approach can shift Pakistan's posture from predominantly reactive responses to shaping long-term, positive discourse that resonates across diverse audiences.

Looking forward, future research should explore the implications of emerging digital technologies such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, and social media algorithms on the efficacy of strategic communication. These tools increasingly shape how narratives spread and influence public opinion, making their understanding critical for effective public diplomacy. On the policy front, Pakistan must prioritize capacity-building within its diplomatic and media institutions, broaden its cultural and academic diplomacy initiatives, and design storytelling campaigns that engage not only governments but also civil society and the global public. In conclusion, narrative warfare is no longer a peripheral or supplementary element of modern conflict; it is a central front that demands deliberate, comprehensive, and sustained engagement. For Pakistan, enhancing its strategic communication and public diplomacy capabilities is vital to safeguarding its sovereignty, asserting its narrative in the international arena, and contributing constructively to regional peace and stability amid an increasingly contested information environment.

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