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Competing Narratives, Divided Audiences: Media Framing of Indo-Pak Crises as Instruments of Narrative Warfare

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Abstract

The study analyzes the role of media framing as a weapon of narrative warfare during the times of Indo-Pak crisis that involves different perceptions of domestic and international audiences. Media systems serve as creators not just of information, but also as strategic actors who help to shape conflicting interpretations of conflict, security and national identity in the background of the conflictual relationship between the two States for Pakistan. Media systems in Pakistan serve not only to provide information but also to shape different narratives of conflict, security and national identity as key strategic actors in an ongoing conflictual relationship with India. This research applies a qualitative content analysis and framing theory approach to analyze selected TV broadcastings and newspaper reports and digital media outputs from both countries in major crisis events. The study reveals that the Indian and Pakistani media consistently use opposing frames including security, victimhood, nationalism and delegitimization of “other” to shape the public opinion and strengthen the state-driven strategic narrative. The following framing practices help cause cognitive polarization and to escalate narrative warfare beyond the battlefield. The study is a conclusion that the framing of media in Indo-Pak crises is not a neutral reporting of facts but a psychological and informational tool of conflict, which gets structured and impacts the region of instability and deadlock in diplomacy.

Keywords: *Narrative Warfare, Media Framing, Indo-Pak Conflict, Strategic Narratives, Information Warfare, South Asia*

1. Introduction

Today's global information environment has changed the nature of conflict from the battlefield to the Internet. Rather, it unfolds more and more in the domain of cognition and communication where meaning, perception and legitimacy are questioned. This shift is part of a larger change in global politics towards the concept of “post-kinetic warfare,” in which influence, stories, and information environments are increasingly determining the political results. However, in this ever-changing environment, a major means of state and non-state actors to shape domestic public opinion, to influence their opponents, and to persuade the international community is narrative warfare.

Narrative warfare involves creating, expanding, and formalizing narratives that create a “who is right”, “who is wrong” and “who is threatening whom” dichotomy. Narrative warfare is a more dynamic, decentralized, and widely integrated mode of warfare centered around

multiple forces and multiple stories, as opposed to the traditional propaganda models, which focus on one-way information propagation. It is closely related to media framing, which media packages, interprets, and presents events to the audience. By the means of framing, media organisations emphasize some aspects of reality, while ignoring others, and therefore influence the public perception of complex political and security issues.

The relationship between the two countries, India and Pakistan is one of the most longstanding and fragile in international relations, with periodic military skirmishes, diplomatic disagreements and historic grievances. But in addition to the territorial disputes that have marked the history of the partition of British India (1947), both states have had a battle for legitimacy, identity and international perception. In both countries, the media have been vital in building national narratives which support state stances and unite the nation during crises.

The Kargil War (1999), the Mumbai attacks (2008), the surgery strike of 2016 and the Pulwama-Balakot crisis (2019) are some of the major conflict episodes which have shown how media systems emerge as intense zones of narrative construction during the escalation stage. During such periods, rather than simply reporting on events, media plays an active role in interpreting them, predominantly in the context of national security issues, and usually reinforcing prevailing state views. Consequently, the same event is presented in vastly different light in the Indian and Pakistani media, and for Indian and Pakistani audiences, there are what can be termed as parallel realities.

For example, in Indian media discourses, the cross-border events are often addressed from the lens of security concerns, with a focus on terrorism, national sovereignty and the need for military deterrence. However, much the same events are being reported in a discourse of sovereignty violation and victimhood in Pakistani media, where civilians have suffered, international law has been violated and India allegedly infringed upon Pakistan's sovereignty. These different frames are not only explicitly chosen by the editors, but also fit into the strategic communication goals of the different states. Thus, media systems are critical in maintaining national narratives that rationalize policies and consolidate people's identities.

This has been further exacerbated by the growth of digital media and social networking sites. Digital platforms allow for the quick spread of emotionally charged content, and this type of content is not always subject to editorial verification. Algorithmic curation on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and YouTube only enhances the sensationalist and nationalist stuff, leading to echo chambers and information silos. This context fuels polarization of narratives, which make it harder for audiences to access alternative or common perspectives of events in conflict. In this framework, narrative war is not only produced by the state but also consumed by the audience, as they are involved in the creation and dissemination of framed narratives.

While there has been increasing research interest in media bias, propaganda and disinformation in South Asia, the need for more integrated analytical approach is still there which will combine media framing theory with the larger concept of narrative warfare. The literature generally views media bias as a journalistic problem or looks at information warfare as a state-centred approach, yet fails to consider the interplay between media structures, political agendas and audience reception. The aim of this study is to fill this vacuum by

theorizing the media framing as an important mechanism that facilitates the enactment and perpetuation of narrative warfare in Indo-Pak crises.

Therefore, the present research would submit that framing is not only due to the political realities, but it also shapes the realities in India and Pakistan. Media outlets frame the perception, understanding and the memory of conflict events through the choice of the frames used, including security threat, victimhood, nationalism, delegitimization, etc. Such framing of narratives creates competing strategic narratives that help to build national identity, while also adding to interstate mistrust.

The aim of the present study is thus to understand the role of the competing media frames as a tool of narrative warfare in the context of Indo-Pak crisis and their role in polarizing the domestic and international audience. It seeks to do this so as to help build a better understanding of the relationship between media, conflict and strategic communication in one of the most sensitive geopolitical areas in the world.

The importance of this study is in the academic and policy context. Academically, it further develops the framing theory alongside the studies of narrative warfare. In practice, it underscores the consequences of the polarized nature of media for the stability of the region, the escalation of crises, and diplomatic dialogue between the two nuclear-armed neighbours

2. Literature Review

2.1 The ability to tell a story during a war. Strategic communication and narrative war.

In today's international arena narrative warfare has become an important aspect of contemporary international relations – it is the battle between political actors to control the meaning making process in a conflict. Narrative warfare, unlike conventional information warfare, is about the development of a coherent narrative over time to establish the legitimacy, identity and perception of threat (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013). The purpose of these narratives is to impact the international audience as well as to sway the domestic one by not only informing but by shaping the interpretations of events.

Much more recently, recent scholarship has indicated that narrative warfare is becoming a part of statecraft and digital diplomacy, with narratives actively built through crises by states against one another (Otmakhova & Frermann, 2025). These stories frequently have binary moral frameworks, like “hero vs. villain” and “victim vs. aggressor”, that promote feeling and political positioning in conflict scenarios (Frermann et al., 2023). The latter type of narrative construction is cognitively easier to comprehend, but also helps to widen the gulf between different audiences.

2.2 Media Framing Theory

Media framing theory offers a basic lens to examine the influence of news organizations in the process of constructing public perceptions. Entman (1993) defines framing as the process of taking some elements of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communication text in order to suggest a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and recommendation for treatment.

Framing is thought to be a second-level agenda-setting (Scheufele, 1999) phenomenon, whereby people think about issues rather than what issues they think about. The use of language, metaphors, imagery and the emphasis given to themes all express frames which will impact audience interpretation (Goffman, 1974). This current research indicates that framing takes place on a number of levels: frame building (which is shaped by political actors

and political institutions) and frame-setting (which is the impact that media has on their audiences) (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Framing is particularly important in a conflict's reporting as it defines the responsibility of the actors, the legitimacy of violence, and the positioning of the actors in the moral frame of the conflict (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Research reveals that framing can have profound impacts on public opinion towards war, peace, and foreign policy decisions – even when it comes to minor changes.

2.3 Journalism of War, Peace and Conflict Frames

Galtung's theory of war and peace journalism is a critical extension of the framing theory in the theory of conflict. Galtung (2002) believes that war journalism tries to focus on violence, elite point of view and zero-sum or win-lose situations, whereas peace journalism tries to focus on conflict resolution, humanization of both sides and non-violent resolution.

Empirical studies that have been conducted on this model to explain the frame usage in Indo-Pak media coverage shows high war frames usage. Comparative studies of the Indian and Pakistani press, for instance, show that the elite press in both countries often use 'war' frames in their reporting of bilateral tensions especially when crisis events occur (Yousaf, Elahi, & Adnan, 2018). Likewise, post-Pulwama analyses suggest that the narratives of the media are more likely to focus on hostility, retaliation, and security issues than on diplomacy. (Shahzad et al., 2019)

Several more recent studies also show that the nature of conflict journalism is inclined towards the escalation of narratives, which can lead to polarization amongst the audiences and not allow space for peace discourses (Ashfaq, Shahid & Zubair 2022).

2.5 Media Framing in India and Pakistan

There are no dearth of studies on India-Pakistan conflict that explore how competing media narratives have been created. The scholars believe that during a crisis situation both countries' media system becomes a part of national strategic communication apparatus (Fair, 2014). Media framing here does not mean the normal reporting of events, rather it is an elaboration of the stories that are already in place in the geopolitical sphere.

The literature review reveals that the framing of news report on Indo-Pak relationship always remained imbalanced. The Pakistani media tends to focus more on the issues of sovereignty violation, civilian suffering, and international legal norms while the Indian media focuses on terrorism, cross-border aggression, and national security challenges (Yousaf et al., 2021). The differences in framing can help explain the possibility of “parallel information realities” in which different publics get different “readings” of the same event.

Framing analysis showed for example, in the context of the Pulwama-Balakot crisis, that the prevalence of responsibility frames and conflict frames is the same in both countries, but with opposing attributions of blame (Shahzad et al., 2019). This exemplifies how framing does not just represent a national interest, but also creates opposing identities.

Digital media have changed the game of narrative warfare. Digital platforms allow for the speedy spread of emotionally charged and unverifiable material, unlike the traditional media. Algorithmic recommendation systems can boost sensationalist stories and make them visible and engaging.

Recent research has shown that platforms with social media amplify the framing of conflict, through the spread of content that elicits a strong emotional reaction, frequently nationalistic

and antagonistic (Khan & Pratt, 2022). In the Pakistani context, there is an increase in the use of social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) for the development of motivating and justifying frames in the context of security operations by the military and state (Ali & Ali, 2026).

Moreover, computational framing studies show that in digital environments there is a greater possibility to ensure the spread of war narratives, which tend to serve the reinforcement of “us vs them” binaries, and less opportunity to hear counter narratives (Kaur & Arora, 2025). This digital amplification is a part of echo chambers and ideology polarization, especially in Indo-Pak crisis.

2.6 Research Gap

While a considerable amount of literature has been written on framing and reporting conflicts in media, there are a number of missing elements. First, most studies focus on the two aspects (framing and narrative warfare) separately rather than in a combined framework. Second, there is scant research that looks into the way framing works in the traditional and digital media in the Indo-Pak context in this time of crisis. Thirdly, there is a lack of comparative study in the dynamics of escalation phases in relation to competing national narratives.

This study aims to fill these gaps by developing a theoretical framework on media framing as the operational mechanism of enacting a narrative warfare. It contends that the Indo-Pak media do not just report conflict but also create an alternative strategic discourse that influences local and international perspectives of the conflict.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design of this study is qualitative comparative case study to explore the role of media framing as a tool in the context of narrative warfare during Indo-Pak situation. It is an interpretive-exploratory method for building meanings and not quantifying media bias. The overall research approach combines the theories of Framing Analysis (Entman, 1993) and Narrative Warfare Theory (Miskimmon et al., 2013) to investigate the process of creating competing strategic narratives in crisis communication.

The study is designed as a cross-national comparative media analysis in the context of the mainstream media of India and Pakistan during specific conflict episodes.

3.2 Case Selection

Four critical geopolitical salience crisis events between India and Pakistan were chosen because they received significant attention in the media:

1. Kargil War (1999)
2. Mumbai Attacks (2008)
3. Uri–Surgical Strikes (2016)
4. Pulwama–Balakot Crisis (2019)

These cases can be understood as different stages of escalation, retaliation and contestation of the narrative.

3.3 Data Sources

The purposive sampling method used to select the mainstream and digital media outlets was used to collect data.

India

- NDTV

- Times Now
- Republic TV

The Times of India.

Pakistan

- Geo News
- ARY News
- Dawn
- Express Tribune

Digital Platforms

X (Twitter) marked the accounts of the journalists, ministries and defense spokespeople as verified accounts.

- Sporadic news articles in newspapers

Position yourself as a member of the media. Be a government official press release.

3.4 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was used to select:

- Prime-time news bulletins
- Editorial reports

Escalation windows is an ideal time to break news, however, the best time would be during a news update.

Instead of using political talk shows to discuss any issues, they are used to discuss issues during the crisis.

A total of about 120 media items were analyzed per country, per crisis.

3.5 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was:

The smallest unit of news in a media report: "A single news frame or a single narrative segment."

3.6 Analytical Framework: Framing Categories

Four major framing categories were used: deductive + inductive coding.

1. Security Frame
2. Victimhood Frame
3. Nationalist Frame
4. Delegitimization Frame

Each frame was then analyzed in terms of the following narrative warfare functions (NWFs):

- Threat construction
- Identity formation
- Moral positioning
- Legitimization of action

3.7 Coding Procedure

Media texts were transcribed and translated (where required).

Initial open coding revealed the consistent themes in the stories.

4. The patterns were aggregated by framing categories using axial coding. Patterns were coded categorically according to framing using axial coding (4.).
5. The story of narrative warfare was assigned to frames in a selective coding process.

A cross case comparison was done between India and Pakistan. A cross case comparison was done between India and Pakistan.

4. Findings

The different framing patterns are summarized.

The study finds that the framing is systematically different between Indian and Pakistani media with high degree of strength. Both media systems continuously develop oppositional strategic narrative, legitimizing the media system and delegitimizing the opposition.

Table 1: Comparative Media Framing Patterns (India vs Pakistan)

Frame Type	Indian Media Dominant Narrative	Pakistani Media Dominant Narrative	Narrative Warfare Function
Security Frame	Terrorism threat from Pakistan; national defense justification	Indian aggression and border violation	Threat construction
Victimhood Frame	Indian civilians/military as terror victims	Kashmiri civilians and Pakistani sovereignty victims	Moral positioning
Nationalist Frame	Patriotism, military strength, surgical retaliation	Sovereignty, Islamic identity, resistance narrative	Identity reinforcement
Delegitimization Frame	Pakistan as sponsor of terrorism	India as regional hegemon	Enemy construction

4.2 Security Frame Analysis

Overall, the security frame was most salient in each of the crises. The Pakistani issue was always portrayed as a security threat emanating from Pakistan, especially in the context of the presence of Pakistani security networks and infiltration from the Pakistani border. The Pakistani media, on the other hand, saw the Indian military operations as a violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and international standards.

This framing creates a state of continuous security threat, in which conflict is become a regular feature of security needs, as a means for resolving the crisis, rather than a crisis itself.

4.3 Victimhood Frame Analysis

Strong victimhood narratives are constructed in both media systems, albeit with a different attribution.

Key Pattern:

The media in India: Victim = Indian civilians & soldiers

One of the Pakistani media had concluded that the victim was Kashmiris civilians and the Pakistani border communities.

This is a situation of double victimization, with each side claiming the defensive authority.

Table 2: Victimhood Frame Sub-Coding

Sub-Frame	India	Pakistan
Civilian Harm	Emphasis on terror attacks (e.g., Mumbai, Pulwama)	Emphasis on shelling in border regions
Moral Emotion	Anger, retaliation, justice	Sympathy, injustice, humanitarian concern
Responsibility Attribution	Pakistan-based groups	Indian military operations

4.4 Nationalist Frame Analysis

Nationalist framing intensifies during escalation phases. Media outlets construct emotionally charged narratives that elevate national identity and glorify military action.

Observed Features:

- Use of heroic military language (“surgical strike heroes”, “defenders of sovereignty”)
- Historical references to past wars
- Emotional rhetoric (honor, sacrifice, pride)

This frame plays a crucial role in mobilizing public consent for escalation policies.

4.5 Delegitimization Frame Analysis

The delegitimization frame is central to narrative warfare dynamics. Each side constructs the other as an illegitimate political actor.

Patterns Identified:

- Questioning credibility of official statements
- Portraying leadership as irrational or deceptive
- Accusing state sponsorship of violence

This frame produces cognitive exclusion, where audiences reject opposing narratives regardless of evidence.

Table 3: Delegitimization Techniques

Technique	Indian Media	Pakistani Media
Labeling	“Terror state”, “sponsor of militancy”	“Aggressor state”, “hegemonic power”
Source Discrediting	Pakistani statements labeled unreliable	Indian claims labeled propaganda
Historical Anchoring	1947–Kashmir conflict framing	Partition injustice framing

Rising inequality of opportunity to access digital media, along with its amplification effects.

The use of digital platforms has a significant impact on narrative warfare by:

- Viral nationalist content

Have you ever participated in a hashtag war? Have you ever been involved in a hashtag war (#IndiaStrikesBack / #PakistanZindabad)?

Conflict Zone Emotional Video Clips

The reinforcement of ideological information through algorithms.

This results in “info echo” whereby users will only be inundated with the same message.

4.7 Cross-Case Synthesis

Framing patterns continue to be very similar for all four crises. But, when there is an escalation (high escalation) event (Pulwama-Balakot is at the highest level).

Key Insight:

The framing of the media does not happen on an ad hoc basis, but in a manner that is structurally integrated in the strategic communication systems of both the Pak and Indo countries.

4.8 Summary of Findings

The study finds that:

1. Media framing functions as a mechanism of narrative warfare
2. Both states construct mirror-image narratives of victimhood and threat
3. Digital media amplifies polarization through algorithmic reinforcement
4. Frames are stable across time but intensify during crises
5. Media ecosystems contribute to cognitive separation of audiences

5. Discussion

The results of this study show that Media framing is not a mere journalistic phenomenon, but it is an organised part of the narrative warfare of both countries, which are in its state-centric and society-based communication arena. The convergence of the different frames in the Indian culture and the Pakistani culture reveals that both are parallel systems of meaning production and give different meaning to the same geopolitical events.

The strategic use of security framing is at the very heart of this difference. It's about the strategic use of security framing and the creation of a state of permanent threat. The media selects elements of reality, as per Entman's (1993) framing theory, to highlight those elements that are of national security importance. In the Indo-Pak scenario, however, this goes beyond selection and strategic amplification of antagonism is achieved through the reporting and act of antagonism as a proof of the perpetually existing threat. This adds to the so-called 'securitization cycle' of bilateral relations, which has been in existence for a long time, with one side using security as its focal point in shaping the other side's actions.

It is important to note that the construction of competing moral worlds is further illustrated by the fact that both types of media systems have strong victimhood frames. Both sides represent themselves as being the victims of the other side's aggressive actions and thus allow each side to enact defensive or retaliatory policies. This double victimhood creates a lack of common ground to find a moral compass as viewers are presented with highly emotional stories that fuel collective grievance and not understanding. In terms of narrative warfare, this is a symmetrical moral polarization, with each side claiming to be more moral; and the other less moral and therefore illegitimate.

The nationalist approach to framing that has been detected in both media is significant to mobilizing citizens in the country. Sovereignty and historical memory, as well as national pride, are linked to the events of conflict, thereby turning a geopolitical crisis into an emotionally charged struggle for a nation. This process enhances the involvement of audiences and the quality of the analytical distance and can make it more difficult to evaluate state actions critically. Thus media framing is used for governing people's emotions and feelings, like anger, pride or fear, are artfully used to keep the public on board.

The delegitimization frame comes into play as the most powerful tool in the narrative warfare toolbox. Media ecosystems have epistemic boundaries that restrict the credibility of cross-narrative in a systemic way, through the discrediting of opposing narratives, sources, and political actors. An opposing narrative set up as being false or as propaganda will not be open to critical review by the audience. This helps fix in cognitive closure, which happens when alternative interpretations are “rejected” ahead of time. This creates over time entrenched informational silos, and limits the chance for convergence in diplomacy narratives.

One of the main conclusions of this research is the contribution of digital media amplification in the escalation of the narrative warfare. Digital platforms are different from conventional broadcast because they are based on algorithmic curation, and are focused on engagement-based content. Consequently, the tone of the stories on national sentiment and emotion creep into the spotlight. This results in an algorithmic asymmetry, that is, the most controversial explanations of events reign supreme in public discourse. Social media also helps in spreading the message and polarisation of the narrative, further widening the gulf between Indian and Pakistani audiences.

Importantly, the cross-case analysis shows that although there are differences in intensity of a frame used in the various crises examined, the configuration of the narrative components stays relatively consistent over time. It indicates that there is no de-institutionalization of media systems in Indo-Pak but they are following institutionalized narrative paradigms. These paradigms are formed by historical recollection, state security paradigms, and specific journalistic paradigms. Thus, narrative warfare is structural and not episodic, and can be triggered and amplified in times of crisis.

Theoretically, this paper adds to the merging of the two fields of framing theory and narrative warfare. It is shown that framing is not only a mechanism in the media but a also a tool in the hands of international political communication. The book's interconnections between the micro level of framing decisions and the macro level of narrative structures make it a link between communication studies and literature in international relations.

6. Conclusion

This research project aimed at the examination of the role of media framing as an instrument of narrative war in Indo-Pak's crisis. From the findings emerged a clear evidence that Indian media and Pakistani media are continuously able to develop their own strategic narratives during conflict situations, which affects public perceptions, strengthens national identity and validates national positions.

The analysis shows that the framing of the media works on four main mechanisms: construction of security, attribution of victimhood, nationalist mobilization and delegitimization of the adversary. These are highly polarized information environments, in which the same events are viewed through fundamentally different lenses. This means that in India and Pakistan, viewers don't just vary in their understanding of what the stories mean—they live in different story worlds.

One of the main findings of this study is that media systems in both countries actively take part in the war of narratives, not as a bystander. Media organisations can reinforce state narratives and challenge other perceptions, allowing for the cementing of oppositional identities. The implications for regional peace and conflict dynamics are great, because if

there is no room for dialogue and understanding in the face of persistent narrative polarization, there is no room for regional peace and conflict.

The study also sheds light on the digital media's transformative power in modern warfare of narration. The algorithm-driven platforms further amplify emotions and speed up the diffusion of nationalist narratives that further fuel informational segmentation. In this context, the role of traditional journalistic gatekeeping is undermined and competition for the narrative is more volatile and diffuse.

Theoretically, this study adds to the slowly increasing body of literature on strategic narratives and media framing by showing how the two are operationalized in the context of conflict. It demonstrates that there is a way of warfare in the narrative and that the communicative process is measurable and can be performed in framing practices in traditional and digital media systems.

The findings from a policy perspective indicate that while addressing Indo-Pak tensions, it's not just sufficient to engage in diplomatic dialogue at the state-level. There is also a need to establish media responsibility frameworks, cross-border journalistic dialogue and digital literacy programs that can help to decrease polarization of the narratives. Political de-escalation attempts could be less successful if they fail to tackle the informational aspect of the conflict.

Finally, the Indo-Pak media landscape is a continuous theatre of contestation on narratives and the narrative itself is a strategic tool. The comprehension of this dynamic is key to understanding regional conflict behavior as well as to the 21st century information-driven warfare.

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