

Exploring Narrative Warfare as a Tool of Psychological Influence in Contemporary Geopolitics

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Abstract

In the era of information saturation and hybrid warfare, narrative warfare has emerged as a potent psychological tool in shaping perceptions, influencing behaviours, and manipulating geopolitical outcomes. This qualitative research explores how states and non-state actors deploy narrative warfare to assert ideological dominance, undermine adversaries, and control public consciousness. Drawing on primary and secondary sources—ranging from state propaganda, disinformation campaigns, and digital storytelling—the paper investigates the use of curated narratives in recent geopolitical conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, China's global media expansion, and the U.S. information operations in the Middle East. Using a constructivist framework and thematic analysis, this study reveals the mechanisms through which narratives alter belief systems, foster nationalistic sentiments, and polarize global discourse. Key themes include the weaponization of history, emotional appeal, enemy construction, and mythmaking. The paper argues that narrative warfare represents a subtle yet powerful extension of psychological influence, where control over meaning becomes as critical as control over territory. Ultimately, the research underscores the urgent need for geopolitical literacy, media resilience, and counter-narrative strategies in an increasingly narrative-driven global order.

Keywords: Narrative Warfare, Psychological Influence, Geopolitical Strategy, Disinformation, Soft Power, Hybrid Warfare.

Abstrak

Di era kejenuhan informasi dan perang hibrida, perang naratif telah muncul sebagai alat psikologis yang ampuh dalam membentuk persepsi, memengaruhi perilaku, dan memanipulasi hasil geopolitik. Penelitian kualitatif ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana negara dan aktor non-negara menggunakan perang naratif untuk menegaskan dominasi ideologis, melemahkan musuh, dan mengendalikan kesadaran publik. Dengan menggunakan sumber primer dan sekunder—mulai dari propaganda negara, kampanye disinformasi, dan penceritaan digital—makalah ini menyelidiki penggunaan narasi yang dikurasi dalam konflik geopolitik terkini, seperti perang Rusia-Ukraina, ekspansi media global Tiongkok, dan operasi informasi AS di Timur Tengah. Dengan menggunakan kerangka kerja konstruktivis dan analisis tematik, studi ini mengungkap mekanisme yang digunakan narasi untuk mengubah sistem kepercayaan, menumbuhkan sentimen nasionalis, dan mempolarisasi wacana global. Tema-tema kunci meliputi persenjataan sejarah, daya tarik emosional, konstruksi musuh, dan pembuatan mitos. Makalah ini berargumen bahwa perang naratif merepresentasikan perluasan pengaruh psikologis yang halus namun kuat, di mana kendali atas makna menjadi sama pentingnya dengan kendali atas wilayah. Pada akhirnya, penelitian ini menggarisbawahi kebutuhan mendesak akan literasi geopolitik, ketahanan media, dan strategi kontra-narasi dalam tatanan global yang semakin didorong oleh narasi.

Kata Kunci: Perang Naratif, Pengaruh Psikologis, Strategi Geopolitik, Disinformasi, Kekuatan Lunak, Perang Hibrida.

INTRODUCTION

Narratives have always played a crucial role in shaping collective memory, identity, and political legitimacy. However, in the 21st century, the proliferation of digital platforms and the intensification of ideological competition have transformed narratives into active instruments of warfare. Narrative warfare—defined as the deliberate crafting and dissemination of strategic stories to influence adversaries and audiences—has become central to psychological operations (psyops) in contemporary geopolitics (Paul, 2011). Psychological warfare, commonly referred to as psywar, has been utilized with differing levels of effectiveness in various forms of conflict, spanning from total warfare to low-intensity conflicts (LICs), as well as in ideological and organizational confrontations (Schleifer, 2014). Unlike traditional warfare, which relies on kinetic force, narrative warfare operates in the cognitive domain. Its primary goal is not to destroy infrastructure but to shape perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours. According to Nye's (2004) theory of soft power, the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce has become a strategic asset. Narrative warfare extends this concept by weaponizing stories to manipulate consent and undermine the legitimacy of rivals.

From Russia's disinformation campaigns in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine to China's deployment of state-controlled media for global influence, and the West's strategic communication in counterterrorism efforts, narratives are being constructed and deployed with calculated intent. These narratives not only inform how populations interpret geopolitical events but also serve as tools for psychological destabilization, fostering confusion, division, and mistrust (Ribeiro et al., 2018).

The epistemological foundation of this research is constructivist, viewing reality as socially constructed through language and discourse (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Therefore, narratives are not mere reflections of reality; they constitute reality for those who internalize them. This makes narrative warfare particularly insidious and effective—by shaping what people believe to be true, it influences how they act, vote, resist, or comply. Considering the multi-dimensional effects of war, it needs to rethink about the war (Chifu, & Simons, 2023). This study aims to examine how narrative warfare functions as a tool of psychological influence in contemporary geopolitics. Through qualitative thematic analysis of case studies and discourse, the research will reveal patterns, intentions, and consequences of narrative construction and dissemination in global conflicts.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the evolving discourse on hybrid and psychological warfare by focusing specifically on narrative as a weaponized tool. While much attention has been paid to cyber warfare and military tactics, narrative warfare remains underexplored despite its growing influence in shaping global events. Second, the research offers valuable insights into how public perception, national identity, and political ideologies are manipulated through storytelling. In an age of rapid information dissemination, the ability to influence mass opinion without physical coercion has become a critical advantage for state and non-state actors alike. Understanding these mechanisms is vital for policymakers, media practitioners, educators, and civil society. Third, the study provides a framework for identifying and analysing narrative strategies across different geopolitical contexts. By decoding how narrative warfare operates, the research helps in developing counter-narrative strategies and psychological resilience—particularly important for democratic societies vulnerable to polarization and manipulation. Sometimes, democratic societies may be challenged due to the civil wars. The financial crisis also can be appeared. In 2022, Sri Lanka had experienced such crisis. The financial crisis of Sri Lanka was not only happened due to ethnic crisis but also for a couple of reasons (Nandy, Mamun, & Akon, 2023).

The research addresses urgent ethical and security concerns, as unchecked narrative warfare can lead to mass disinformation, erosion of trust in institutions, and destabilization of international relations.

By exposing the structure and function of strategic narratives, the study advocates for greater transparency, media literacy, and global cooperation in mitigating the psychological impacts of narrative conflict, with specific objectives to identify the psychological mechanisms that make narrative warfare effective, examine the strategic use of narratives in modern geopolitical conflicts, and explore the impact of digital media on the dissemination of geopolitical narratives. Many countries in the world focusing on development despite having good track record of economic development, for instance Malaysia. This Indo-Pacific island country emphasizes on market economy (Nandy, 2021).

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative study employs thematic analysis within a constructivist framework to explore narrative warfare. Data sources include media reports, policy documents, propaganda material, and social media content from selected geopolitical case studies (Russia-Ukraine, China's global media, and U.S. Middle East strategy). Discourse analysis is used to decode language, metaphors, symbols, and emotional appeals. Triangulation ensures credibility, and reflexive journaling tracks researcher bias. This method allows deep interpretation of how narrative warfare functions as psychological influence in contemporary geopolitics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case Studies in Contemporary Geopolitics

Russia and the West

Russia's narrative campaigns have targeted both domestic and international audiences. Domestically, narratives emphasize Russian strength and victimhood; internationally, they seek to portray the West as divided and hypocritical. Russian information operations during the 2016 US presidential election and in the context of the Ukraine conflict exemplify the weaponization of narratives to destabilize societies and influence foreign policy outcomes. Russia often in confrontation with the West (The Conversation, 2024).

China's Narrative on Territorial Disputes

China's persistent narrative that Arunachal Pradesh is part of "South Tibet" is reinforced through maps, renaming of places, and diplomatic statements. These efforts aim to normalize China's territorial claims and influence international perceptions, regardless of the factual basis.

Israel-Hamas Conflict

Since the mid-20th century, the Middle East has emerged as a focal point of instability, characterized by Israel's involvement in wars and its confrontations with militias such as Hamas and Hezbollah. These conflicts have drawn in both regional and global powers, resulting in extensive unrest and violence (Wright, 2024). The Israel-Hamas conflict has seen both sides engage in narrative warfare, using edited videos, fabricated images, and social media campaigns to shape international opinion and domestic morale. The rapid spread of misinformation and emotionally charged content demonstrates the potency of narrative as a psychological weapon. By engaging in defense and counterterrorism collaborations with Israel while supporting Palestine's statehood, India continues to assert its pragmatic and balanced foreign

policy approach in West Asia (Nandy, 2021 a). As a result of the assaults by Israel on the Gaza Strip that commenced in October 2023, thousands of innocent Palestinians have lost their lives, and many others have sustained injuries. The majority of Gaza's infrastructure, including buildings, schools, hospitals, and commercial centers, has already been destroyed. An acute food crisis and health-related dangers have emerged. Human security has faced significant threats. Psychologically, the populace is experiencing demoralization. Numerous families have been fractured. The escalating tensions in the Middle East introduce additional uncertainties for the global economy, even as policymakers begin to commend themselves for navigating it away from a period of high inflation without instigating a recession (Moonakal, 2025). Israel, which has been engaged in conflict with Hamas in Gaza for nearly a year, has deployed its forces into southern Lebanon following two weeks of intense airstrikes, thereby intensifying the conflict in the Middle East (John, 2024).

India-Pakistan

During crises, such as the Pahalgam carnage, both India and Pakistan have sought to dominate the narrative battlefield. The Kashmir conflict remains the most significant unresolved issue between the two nations (Nandy & Das, 2025). While India's military responses may achieve tactical objectives, early dominance of the narrative by Pakistan has shaped global perceptions and influenced diplomatic outcomes. India-Pakistan conflict escalated in May 2025 due to Pakistan's cross-border terrorism. The recent ceasefire between India and Pakistan succeeded in normalizing their bilateral relations (The Times of India, 2025).

Analysis & Findings:

Psychological Mechanisms That Make Narrative Warfare Effective

Narrative warfare derives its power not only from the content of the stories it promotes but also from the psychological mechanisms it activates in the human mind. These mechanisms shape how individuals process information, form beliefs, and engage with political realities. The effectiveness of narrative warfare is rooted in several interrelated cognitive and emotional factors:

Emotional Resonance and Affective Framing

Narratives that evoke strong emotions-such as fear, pride, anger, or victimhood-are more likely to be internalized and remembered. Emotional content bypasses rational scrutiny and taps directly into the limbic system, which governs feelings and instinctive reactions. For example, narratives portraying existential threats ("our nation is under attack") or moral superiority ("we are the true defenders of peace") create urgent emotional frames that override critical analysis and encourage group solidarity. Numerous Ukrainians are confronted with the prospect of enduring psychological scars. The Russian incursion into Ukraine could result in a heightened likelihood of PTSD, depression, and anxiety among the civilian population. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which commenced on February 24, 2022, has resulted in catastrophic consequences for the Ukrainian populace as well as for the global economy, environment, and political landscape. Nevertheless, there is limited understanding regarding the psychological conditions that emerged with the onset of the conflict, especially concerning the mental health of individuals residing outside of Ukraine (Scharbert, Humberg, Kroencke, et.al. 2024)

Confirmation Bias and Selective Perception

Individuals tend to seek out, interpret, and recall information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. Narrative warfare exploits this bias by reinforcing dominant cultural myths, nationalistic ideologies, or historical grievances. When people encounter familiar narratives that echo their worldview, they are more likely to accept them as truth and disregard contradictory evidence. This psychological filtering reinforces echo chambers and polarizes public opinion.

Repetition and Familiarity Effect (Illusory Truth Effect)

Repeated exposure to the same narrative—even when false—increases its perceived truthfulness. Known as the illusory truth effect, this phenomenon explains why slogans, sound bites, and memes are powerful tools in narrative warfare. Repetition reduces cognitive effort and increases mental fluency, making the narrative easier to accept. Strategic actors use social media, state media, and coordinated campaigns to flood the information space with consistent messaging.

Identity-Based Influence and In-Group/Out-Group Dynamics

Narratives that appeal to collective identity—ethnic, religious, national, or ideological—activate deep psychological attachments. These stories often depict a heroic “us” against a villainous “them,” enhancing group cohesion and fostering hostility toward perceived outsiders. In geopolitical conflicts, such dichotomies are exploited to justify aggression, suppress dissent, and maintain internal unity. Narrative warfare thus becomes a tool for constructing social realities where loyalty and belief are synonymous.

Cognitive Simplicity and Heuristic Thinking

Narratives that simplify complex realities into easily digestible stories are more effective than abstract analysis. Human cognition favours coherence and causality. Simple plots with clear causes, heroes, and villains satisfy this need. This mechanism explains the appeal of conspiracy theories and populist rhetoric, which often reduce multidimensional conflicts to binary moral dramas. Strategic actors use these stories to shape political opinions and influence behaviour at scale.

Temporal Anchoring and Historical Revisionism

Narrative warfare often involves the reinterpretation or manipulation of history to create legitimacy. By anchoring current events in emotionally charged historical narratives (e.g., past invasions, colonial oppression, civilizational glory), propagandists create continuity and moral justification. These anchors help frame the present conflict as a historical necessity, appealing to collective memory and cultural pride.

The psychological mechanisms underpinning narrative warfare demonstrate its potency as a form of non-kinetic conflict. By leveraging emotion, identity, memory, and cognitive shortcuts, narrative warfare deeply influences how populations perceive reality, assess threats, and make decisions. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for crafting counter-narratives and developing societal resilience in an age of strategic information manipulation.

The Strategic Use of Narratives in Modern Geopolitical Conflicts:

Narratives are increasingly being used as deliberate tools of influence and control in modern geopolitical conflicts. Unlike traditional warfare, which focuses on physical domination, strategic narratives are employed to manipulate meaning, justify actions, and delegitimize adversaries. This section

analyses how key state and non-state actors strategically deploy narratives in contemporary conflicts to serve political, ideological, and military objectives.

Framing Geopolitical Agendas through National Identity and Legitimacy

Strategic narratives are often crafted to reinforce national identity and justify foreign policy decisions. For instance, Russia's justification for the annexation of Crimea was framed through the narrative of "reunifying Russian-speaking people" and correcting historical injustices. This appealed to nationalist sentiment and legitimized aggressive actions domestically and internationally (Pomerantsev, 2015). The strategic use of historical memory here created a moral rationale for expansionism.

Demonization and Enemy Construction

In geopolitical conflict, the creation of a threatening "other" is a common narrative tactic. The United States' "war on terror" strategically constructed a global enemy, often framed in moral and religious terms (e.g., "axis of evil"), to justify military interventions in the Middle East. Similarly, China uses narratives about "Western interference" and "foreign hostility" to present itself as a victim of global injustice while asserting its geopolitical autonomy. This enemy construction fosters internal cohesion and reduces dissent by redirecting public frustration toward external actors.

Narrative as a Soft Power Instrument

Narratives serve as a soft power mechanism by shaping global perceptions and aligning international audiences with a state's values or policies. China's Belt and Road Initiative is framed as a story of "mutual prosperity and peaceful development," appealing to countries seeking economic growth without Western conditionalities. The strategic dissemination of such narratives via state-sponsored media (e.g., CGTN, Xinhua) aims to position China as a benevolent global leader and undermine the influence of Western liberal democracies (Shambaugh, 2015).

Strategic Ambiguity and Disinformation

Narrative warfare in modern conflicts often includes disinformation and strategic ambiguity, especially through digital media. Russia's involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine was initially denied, with multiple contradictory narratives being circulated to confuse both international observers and local populations. This "firehose of falsehood" strategy (Paul & Matthews, 2016) dilutes truth, erodes trust in democratic institutions, and impedes collective action by flooding the information environment with uncertainty.

Mobilizing Domestic and Diaspora Populations

Strategic narratives also serve to mobilize internal and transnational populations. Governments craft emotionally compelling stories to rally public support for war or sanctions. In India, narratives around national pride and border security have been used to justify military responses and garner electoral support. These stories are often amplified by media, influencers, and political actors to sustain public momentum and suppress counter-narratives.

Strategic narratives in modern geopolitical conflicts function as instruments of psychological and political warfare. They shape public opinion, justify aggression, delegitimize adversaries, and consolidate internal power. Far from being peripheral, these narratives are central to the conduct of statecraft in the

21st century. Recognizing the deliberate construction and dissemination of such narratives is crucial for understanding modern geopolitical dynamics and resisting manipulative influence.

The Impact of Digital Media on the Dissemination of Geopolitical Narratives:

Digital media has revolutionized the scale, speed, and scope with which geopolitical narratives are created, disseminated, and internalized by global audiences. In the contemporary information ecosystem, platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok serve not only as spaces for communication but also as strategic battlegrounds for narrative warfare. This section examines how digital media amplifies the influence of geopolitical storytelling, enabling both state and non-state actors to shape public consciousness in unprecedented ways. In the 21st century, the role of digital media has been increased (Hoskins, 2020).

Acceleration and Real-Time Dissemination

One of the most significant impacts of digital media is its ability to spread narratives rapidly and in real time. Strategic actors use social media platforms to inject their preferred narratives into ongoing events, often within minutes of geopolitical developments. For example, during the Russia-Ukraine conflict, both governments utilized Twitter to broadcast competing narratives to global audiences. Hash tags, videos, and short-form messages allowed each side to frame the conflict in favourable terms almost instantaneously.

Algorithmic Amplification and Echo Chambers

Digital platforms use algorithm-driven content curation, which prioritizes content that maximizes engagement—often controversial, emotional, or sensational. This creates “echo chambers” where users are repeatedly exposed to similar narratives, reinforcing ideological positions and making them more resistant to alternative perspectives. Geopolitical narratives thus become self-sustaining within segmented digital communities, contributing to polarization and the entrenchment of nationalistic or antagonistic viewpoints.

Virality and Memetic Warfare

Memes, short videos, and viral posts have become powerful tools in the dissemination of political narratives. Their simplicity, humor, and emotional appeal make them highly shareable and capable of reaching vast audiences with minimal effort. During geopolitical conflicts, such as the Israel-Palestine crisis or U.S.–China tensions, digital actors—both official and unofficial—deploy meme-based content to spread ideological messages and discredit opponents. This form of memetic warfare plays a critical role in narrative framing among younger, digital-native populations.

Weaponization of Disinformation and Bots

Digital media enables the mass production and spread of disinformation at a low cost. State-sponsored actors and cyber units deploy bot accounts, troll farms, and fake news websites to distort facts, create confusion, and amplify preferred narratives. Russia’s Internet Research Agency, for instance, has used coordinated campaigns to influence both domestic and foreign audiences. These techniques destabilize trust in mainstream media and democratic processes while legitimizing authoritarian or revisionist agendas.

Democratization and Decentralization of Narrative Power

While digital media empowers states, it also enables non-state actors, activists, and citizens to challenge dominant narratives. Grassroots campaigns and citizen journalism-e.g., the Arab Spring or Black Lives Matter-have shown how counter-narratives can emerge from below, disrupt state-controlled messaging, and mobilize global solidarity. However, these platforms are equally vulnerable to manipulation, making digital spaces contested arenas for narrative control.

Digital media has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of geopolitical narrative warfare. It acts as both a weapon and a battleground-facilitating rapid dissemination, emotional manipulation, and audience segmentation. While it empowers strategic actors to exert psychological influence across borders, it also introduces new challenges related to misinformation, digital sovereignty, and cognitive security. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for countering manipulation and promoting media literacy in a globally connected world.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the centrality of narrative warfare as a tool of psychological and geopolitical influence in the digital age. Modern conflicts are no longer confined to physical battlefields; they are fought in the minds of populations through stories, symbols, and strategic messaging. As revealed in the analysis, narratives are powerful because they engage cognitive biases, shape collective identity, and emotionally resonate with targeted audiences (Kahneman, 2011; Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The strategic use of narratives by state actors-such as Russia's framing of its actions in Ukraine, or China's promotion of a peaceful global rise-illustrates how history, culture, and ideology are repurposed to justify political ambitions and delegitimize opponents (Pomerantsev, 2015; Shambaugh, 2015). These narratives operate as psychological operations (psyops), designed to normalize aggression, polarize societies, and suppress dissent. Ongoing discussions between India and the Central Asian republics focus on collaborative efforts to combat cross-border terrorism (Nandy, 2020).

Digital media significantly amplifies the effectiveness of narrative warfare. Platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok serve as accelerators of real-time messaging, while algorithms create echo chambers that reinforce selective narratives and marginalize dissenting voices (Sunstein, 2009; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Disinformation campaigns and memetic warfare further complicate the information landscape, enabling actors to flood audiences with emotionally charged, often false content that blurs the line between fact and fiction (Paul & Matthews, 2016). Without ironic rules and regulations, it was impossible to mobilize the huge population of a backward society (Nandy & Biswas, 2025).

The decentralization of narrative power through digital media provides both opportunity and risk. While grassroots movements and citizen journalism can challenge state propaganda and offer alternative narratives, these same platforms are susceptible to weaponization by authoritarian regimes, extremist groups, and foreign influence operations. This study highlights the urgent need for geopolitical literacy, digital resilience, and the development of counter-narratives rooted in truth and transparency. Without these, democracies risk losing the narrative battle to actors who manipulate reality to serve authoritarian or divisive ends. Thus, understanding and addressing the psychological mechanisms and digital dynamics of narrative warfare is critical for safeguarding democratic values and global stability. Peace always needs to avoid war. Development is the best way and armament is the worst way. Most of the developed and powerful countries in the world used to sell arms to the least developed countries, for instance, USA, China, Russia, France, etc. But policy of Japan is far different than other so called developed countries. Japan's South Asia approach is exclusively revolves around the development (Akon, Nandy, and Naha, 2022). As

the world confronts a multitude of simultaneous challenges, global leaders are contending with a situation that echoes the pressures of the Cold War. The rise in militarization, the emergence of new economic divisions, and the intensification of cyber warfare are contributing to heightened tensions in international diplomacy and eroding multilateral collaboration (Opinion, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Civil society in Bangladesh has been a significant driver in the environmental movement, influencing policies, fostering local activism, and advocating for a more sustainable and climate-resilient future. Through legal, advocacy, and educational efforts, civil society groups continue to raise awareness and push for changes that can help protect Bangladesh's fragile ecosystems in the face of climate change. From the result it can be stated that NGOs influence in political socialization (12%), new organization creation (24%), and pressure groups (8%) is rated high. This rating indicates a less influential role of NGOs in grassroots environmental activism. On the other hand, influence in introducing environmental issues (48%), youth leader creation (36%), and providing volunteers and trainers (40%) scored high. This high rating indicates NGOs environmental activism and acceptance at the grassroots level of Bangladesh. Though all the indicators separately refer to the influence of civil society at the grassroots level.

The multifaceted impact of NGOs in Bangladesh underscores their vital role in shaping grassroots environmental activism. While their capacity to create pressure groups remains limited, they excel in raising awareness and introducing critical environmental issues, accounting for 48% of their impact. Furthermore, the cultivation of youth leaders at a notable rate of 36% highlights their commitment to fostering the next generation of environmental advocates. Coupled with a robust provision of volunteers and trainers—40%—NGOs are not just participants but pivotal players in enhancing civil society's effectiveness at the grassroots level. The synthesis of these efforts reveals a dynamic landscape where NGOs serve as catalysts for change, empowering communities to address environmental challenges and fostering a culture of activism that promises hope for a sustainable future.

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