



Strategic Narrative: A Key to Win the Battle of Narratives in Jammu and Kashmir



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Introduction

The nature of warfare has witnessed a structural transformation in the 21st century wherein, not only the soldier but also the civilians have become the primary targets of the belligerents.¹ In technology driven contemporary times, war and conflict have become more 'citizen-centric' and are being witnessed, experienced and judged by people based on the narrative — a combination of thoughts, words and deeds², that are being portrayed. Information sharing tools like the social media combined with online news sources and traditional forms of media, makes it easy for the adversaries, both State and non-State actors, to influence the targeted nation's political process more directly, including the minds of its citizen.³ Creating and delivering 'stories'/ 'narratives' to citizens have become an

Key Points

- A strategic narrative is a deliberately constructed cyclical process of formation, projection and reception of communication to achieve political objectives with a credible speaker's rational and emotional appeal.
- Deducing from the 'Strategic-Buy in Framework', it has been recommended that, to win the battle of narratives in J&K, Indian policymakers must focus on both 'material incentives' and people's 'ontological security' i.e. the "security of being".
- To wane the adverse effects of the battle of narratives, it has become pertinent for the Indian establishment to produce long-term strategic narratives in an institutionalised way i.e. a dedicated team of officials from security agencies, academicians, social engineers and researcher will work on setting the correct narrative within the country and on international platforms by debunking foreign propaganda and disinformation efforts more routinely.

important ‘means of victory’ in new-age conflicts, and there is also a realisation amongst the policymakers and strategists that ‘persuasive storytelling’ has become an essential communication tool in national security. To elucidate the significance of narratives, Ajit Doval, India’s National Security Advisor, has defined false narratives as a ‘potential threat to democracy’.⁴

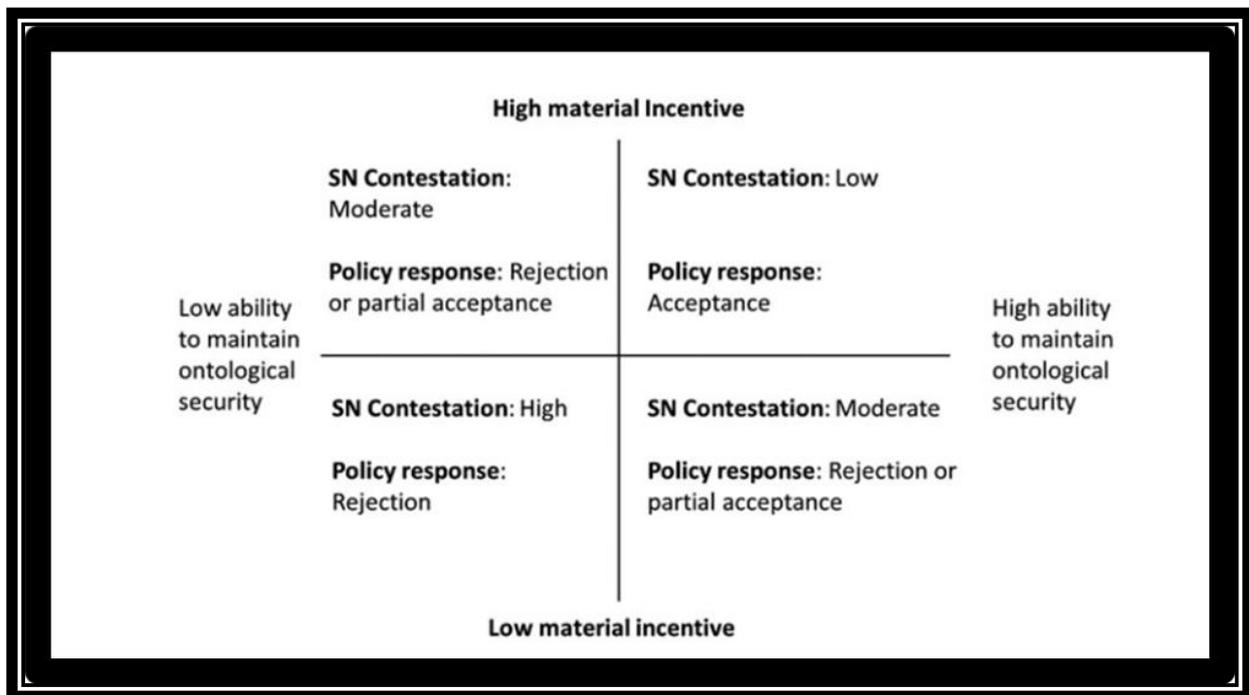
Furthermore, the ‘game of narrative’ became all the more significant during the Russo-Ukraine crisis, wherein, according to Peter W Singer, Ukraine has effectively won the narrative battle, especially on social media, by diligently employing ten essential messaging themes. Ukraine has **(a)** ‘pre-bunked’ the narrative; **(b)** ‘highlighted heroism’; **(c)** ‘selectively emphasised’ specific facts; **(d)** ‘invoked mythologies’ vis-à-vis martyrs; **(e)** ‘glorified’ the leader– President Zelensky; **(f)** ‘amplified’ civilian harm; **(g)** ‘magnified’ civilian resistance; **(h)** ‘encouraged’ the international community to join the bandwagon; **(i)** ‘humanised’ its side; and, **(j)** ‘mocked’ Russia.⁵ One could argue that Ukraine created a Strategic Narrative⁶— a ‘deliberately constructed’ cyclical process of formation, projection and reception of communication with the following critical elements: logos (rational appeal), pathos (emotional appeal) and ethos (being narrated by a credible speaker), to achieve political objectives i.e. to gain international political support in the asymmetrical war.

India has been involved in the battle of narratives against Pakistan, and its allies, especially Turkey and Malaysia⁷, over Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), which have only intensified with the continued expansion of India’s hard power differential. In 2021, Paul Antonopoulos analysed a *Disinformation Lab Report* titled “The Unending War: From Proxy War to Info War”, which revealed that Pakistan and Turkey are aligned in their bid to create an anti-India image using the constructivist concept of ‘perception management’ that includes rolling out dossiers, reports and documentaries containing fake anti-India narrative, mostly related to Human Rights Violations, on a sustained basis and rigorously cite each other’s works, with the origin of information often being sketchy.⁸ For example, on 12 September 2021, Pakistan widely circulated a 131-page dossier titled *Indian Human Rights Violations in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK)*; the dossier lacks ground as it makes preposterous claims like India manages five ISIS training camps and uses chemical weapons in the Kashmir valley. The intent of the dossier, released and promoted by the Pakistani Government, is only to sustain the anti-India narrative.⁹

The persistent targeted battle of narratives, perpetrated by adversaries, has created ‘Cognitive Dissonance’¹⁰ amongst the susceptible people of J&K, which, at worst, has pushed vulnerable young people towards violent radicalisation. To wane the adverse effects of the battle of narratives, it has become pertinent for India to produce long-term strategic narratives, in an institutionalised way, to communicate clarity of purpose and consistency that will enhance the prospect of success despite the persistent presence of anti-narratives.

Strategic Narrative Buy-In Framework

Figure 1: Strategic Narrative Buy-in Framework



Source: Carolijn van Noort and Thomas Colley, “How do strategic narratives shape policy adoption? Responses to China’s Belt and Road Initiative”¹¹

According to Lene Hansen and Ole Wæver, material interests and socially constructed ideas constitute the narratives via which States use to justify their actions or policy choices to the international and domestic public.¹² Based on the argument, Noort and Colley have formulated the ‘Strategic Narrative Buy-in Framework’, to study the acceptance or objection of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in various states. The Framework is based on two

critical elements¹³: **(a)** 'Material Incentives', where the narrative would typically explain how the policy ensures prosperity, and **(b)** 'Ontological Security', in which the narrative will provide 'security of being' that precisely deals with self-consciousness in terms of identity. The usage intensity of these two elements by the 'narrative-creator' decides the acceptance of the narrative. Deducing the model given by Noort and Colley, it has been argued that, to win the battle of narratives in J&K, the Indian policymakers must focus on both material incentives and people's ontological security i.e. the "security of being".

In the context of J&K, since the abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A, policymakers have constantly focussed on material incentives such as development, industrialisation for *Atmanirbharta* (self-reliance), employment and skill development. The narrative is largely built around the State being a "development agent" and "benevolent power" to reduce alienation.¹⁴ For instance, significant aspects of the Ministry of Home Affairs report titled *The Dream of One Nation, One Law, One Symbol fulfilled*¹⁵ would primarily be described as material incentives.

As per the 'Strategic Narrative Buy-in Framework' (**see figure 1**), since India somewhat provides a high material incentive to the people of J&K, with least focus on ontological security, therefore, the narratives received contestation and rejection or partial acceptance. In this scenario, it is essential to understand that providing only material incentives, to rule out the anti-narratives, is insufficient. It is a well-known fact that, India have always provided J&K with special and generous economic packages and aid. The Central Government has undertaken strategies to promote cross Line of Control trade, implement reservations in educational institutions, initiate skill enhancement & employment schemes, provide education scholarships, and introduce education & livelihood schemes such as Upgrading the Skills and Training in Traditional Arts/ Crafts for Development (USTTAD), Udaan, and Nai Manzil.¹⁶ The argument of state induced economic incentives, to win the battle of narratives, by winning the 'hearts and minds' of people, holds very little worth because J&K is far ahead of many states in India on the Human Development Index (HDI) and is doing better than several states in socio-economic indicators, despite being engulfed in an interstate conflict.

Even arguments of unemployment and deprivation of education, leading to internal conflicts, are irrelevant with respect to Kashmir because, in recent times, the conflict has also witnessed the involvement of educated professionals, such as Riyaz Naikoo, a Teacher and Rafi Bhat, a Professor, in militancy. It has also been reiterated that conflict in Kashmir is not due to lack of education and employment— only three out of 67 local militants in Kashmir have never been to school.¹⁷

What is evident is that, material incentives are not enough to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of vulnerable citizens— it is essential to address the ontological security concerns intricately especially those related to unaddressed grievances. In the case of Kashmir, it has been noted that adversaries often use ‘unaddressed grievances’ to hijack ontological security—a key component of their narrative. To strengthen its narrative in J&K, which will consequently improve the narrative on the international platform, India must focus on addressing the ontological (in)security concerning the people of J&K, particularly Kashmiri Muslims, who are the target audience of Pakistan’s battle of narratives and Kashmiri Pandits, who are desperately waiting for the return to their homeland. This can be done by reviving the narrative of ‘*Insaniyat*’ (humanity), ‘*Jamhuriyat*’ (democracy) and ‘*Kashmiriyat*’ (identity of the Kashmir people) propagated by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the former Prime Minister of India.

Address the Ontological Security Concerns

Ontological security theorists assert that, the behaviour of an individual or a group of people or people with shared identity reflects not just the desire for physical security but also the continual desire for ‘security of being’, the subjective sense of ‘who one is’, which enables and motivates action and choice— a basic need essential to feel stable that generates a sense of personal or societal continuity wherein one’s action can sustain, which is vital for learning and development, that ultimately underwrites their capacity for agency.

Catarina Kinnvall suggested that, ontological security is intimately connected to emotions — not because people are, by nature, security seekers; however, fear and anxiety reduction are often related to the search for stability because ‘security of being’ is grounded in temporal and spatial emotional structures through which individuals, societies and states make sense of themselves and the world around them.¹⁸

Ontological insecurity arises from the often ‘engulfing’ and ‘impinging character’ of conventional social structures and the ‘coldness’ of alienated social relations that commodifies and depersonalises individual. The 1989 Kashmir insurgency brought about a societal change in Kashmir that did not just ‘commodified’ and ‘depersonalised’ the people, both Pandits and Muslims, but also created an ‘anti-local’ image of the State wherein the same was considered to be ‘morally inferior’. The reproduction of this narrative becomes embedded in various routines and habits, enters into practical consciousness and thus generates ontological insecurity that, in general, we call grievances.

According to the Grievance Theory, grief originates from inequalities amongst social groups, lack of economic alternatives, political exclusion, non-inclusive governments, discrimination, human rights violation, cultural differences, justice denial or alienation, which contributes to conflict outbreaks¹⁹ and leads society towards ‘mass victimisation’ and ‘loss of identity’, ‘autonomy and power’— factors that creates ontological insecurity.

As explained in the Grievance Theory, economic disparities and deprivation as prominent reasons for a conflict outbreak, is ill-suited in the context of J&K since it has better socio-economic indicators than many other Indian states; rather, socio-political grievances such as political exclusion, non-representative governments and loss of identity, autonomy and power plays an essential role in the conflict.

Kashmir’s history of socio-cultural interactions has shaped the unique identity of *Kashmiriyat* that demands autonomy and secularism.²⁰ These two demands persuaded most Kashmiri elites especially Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, former Chief Minister of J&K, to prefer a democratic, secular and federal India over Pakistan. According to AS Dulat, advisor on Jammu and Kashmir to Atal Bihari Vajpayee, abrogation of the special status without deliberation and rising communalism in other parts of India, have devalued the two demands and worsened the sense of socio-political alienation among Kashmiri youths.²¹

Indian Government’s anti-militancy and counterinsurgency actions which includes crackdowns, arrests, killings of local militants, and heavy enforcement of laws such as the Public Safety Act (PSA) and the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)²², since 1989, has embedded a strong ‘Us vs Them’ narrative amongst the Kashmiris and alienated them



more from the Indian Union. Operation Sadbhavana, an amalgamation of initiatives by the Indian Army to win ‘hearts and minds’ of the people of J&K, has got limited success as it is being conducted, in parallel, with the hard tactics—i.e. killing of militants, arrests of local OGWs, and the heavy-handed use of AFSPA and PSA laws. The goodwill initiatives are therefore viewed with scepticism and perceived as mere tactics of occupation.²³

Consequently, a negative perception of India and its policies has been nurtured by adversaries like Pakistan. For instance, there is a popular perception, which over the years has been repeatedly propagated by Pakistan amongst the Kashmiri people is that, the Indian State is portrayed as a “coloniser” or an “occupier”. The impact of these perceptions has only exacerbated in recent years because government policies like the new domicile policy, bifurcation of State into two union territories and delimitation, were rolled out without much communication, consultation and deliberation with local leaders.

Regarding ontological security, scholars like P G Nabi, JYe and Kaustav Dhar Chakrabarti have asserted that, the Kashmiri people prefer ‘own governance’ rather than ‘good governance’ and would prioritise political ambitions, goals, and collective memories over material or economic incentives.²⁴ Therefore, in the strategic narrative, the State has to prioritise socio-political ambitions and goals of the people over economic incentives and good governance. For example, ‘Mission Pehal’— an initiative by the Indian Army, launched in March 2021²⁵, wherein officers conducts face-to-face interactions with the Kashmiri youth. The initiative, which is the first of its kind, aims to encourage the youth to express their grievances, complaints and the reasons they believe in, for distrusting the Indian State; the Army officers, for their part, articulate their perspectives.²⁶ In recent years, Army’s outreach efforts have contributed to a decline in stone pelting incidents and anti-security protests. For instance, in 2020, immediately after the operation in South Kashmir’s Amshipora village in Shopian, allegations were reported against the operation. The Army was quick to respond and initiated an enquiry into the same. In April 2022, the Army initiated a general court martial against a Captain of the 62 Rashtriya Rifles that conducted the staged gunfight, saying three militants were killed in the exchange of fire, which turned out to be civilians.²⁷ Throughout the trial, the Army kept the local population and the country informed about the

proceedings. The approach seemed to have convinced the people in Kashmir as no protests, following the killings, were reported.

The Way Forward

In contemporary times, narratives have become a critical part of national security, as it has become a tool of interference in the domestic affairs of nations, affecting the outlook and subsequent aspirations of such nations. The intersection of ‘disinformation’ and ‘alienated people’ in the age wherein information could traverse at net speed, as in the case of J&K, is an adverse scenario. It is strongly recommended that India should establish a narrative management institution comprising security agencies, academicians, social engineers and researchers that should precisely and robustly work towards, on a long-term basis, setting the correct narrative within the country and on international platforms by debunking foreign propaganda and disinformation efforts more routinely. There is an urgent need to institutionalise the battle of narratives wherein the focus should remain on strategic narratives that has two key components: **(a)** material incentives, i.e. socio-economic upliftment and **(b)** ontological security, i.e. addressing the insecurities related to ‘security of being’. Formulating a strategic narrative against the adversaries, should be a sustained effort, preferred over ad hoc and episodic forms of confrontation coupled with a more proactive and wider use of public diplomacy efforts.

End Notes

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- ¹⁰ Cognitive Dissonance is a psychological condition in which a belief solidifies over time so much so that the mind does not accept the evidence that works against that belief.
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- ¹³ Ibid.
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