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Constructing Threats, Shaping Consent: Media Framing of the Pahalgam Incident in India and Pakistan

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Abstract

This study examines the role of media framing in shaping public perceptions and strategic narratives surrounding the Pahalgam incident within the broader context of India–Pakistan relations. Drawing upon the theoretical foundations of media framing, agenda-setting, securitization, and narrative warfare, the research investigates how media institutions in both countries constructed competing interpretations of the event and mobilized public consent for particular political and security positions. The study argues that contemporary conflicts are increasingly fought in the informational domain, where narratives function as strategic instruments of influence alongside traditional military and diplomatic tools. Through a comparative analysis of media discourse, the article explores how Indian media predominantly framed the incident through security-nationalist and counterterrorism narratives, while Pakistani media emphasized humanitarian concerns, political grievances, and questions of regional justice. The research further examines the impact of digital media platforms, algorithmic amplification, echo chambers, and selective information consumption in reinforcing polarized interpretations of the incident. By highlighting the interaction between traditional and digital media within a hybrid communication environment, the study demonstrates how competing narratives contribute to threat construction, identity formation, and the securitization of interstate disputes. The findings suggest that media framing plays a critical role in shaping conflict communication, influencing public opinion, and sustaining adversarial perceptions, thereby affecting prospects for dialogue, de-escalation, and regional stability in South Asia.

Keywords: Preaching Methodology, Qur’anic Narratives, Contemporary Requirements, Guidance, Moral Reform

Introduction:

Communication has become a key tool of power in the contemporary international relations, and it has completely transformed the nature of conflict, diplomacy and political legitimacy. Increasingly, informational, symbolic, and discursive types of struggle have been added to-and even substituted by classical conceptions of warfare that have largely focused on military competence, physical occupation, and alliances (Nye, 2008). According to scholars, contemporary conflict spaces are defined by the fact that it is not only a physical conflict but also a strategic creation and distribution of meaning via the media infrastructure and the internet (Miskimmon, Nye, 2008). This change is representative of a larger change where perception itself is a strategic asset and that narratives are a weapon of influence that is used not only to influence masses of people at home but also to impact foreign policy. Narrative warfare has been a concept that has become dominant in the communication studies and international relations as a way of

making sense of how rival actors create, project and challenge meaning in conflict settings. Narrative warfare can be described as the tactical application of narrative, framing and discursive techniques to shape the understanding and interpretation of events. In contrast to conventional warfare, in which physical force is involved, narrative warfare is played in the symbolic space, where legitimacy, identity, moral positioning are constantly negotiated in the context of media discourse (Miskimmon et al., 2013). In that regard, states, political forces, mass media, and web users are busy battling over what constitutes reality as such, and communication seems to be a key frontline of contemporary geopolitics. The media framing theory offers a theoretical basis for the analysis of this process. Entman (1993) defines framing as the process of choosing where to focus on the perceived reality and salience in communication in order to advance the definition of a certain problem, causal interpretation, moral judgment and policy suggestions. Framing is very strong in conflict situations since it defines the way in which an event is perceived as either a terrorism or resistance or aggression or a political grievance. Such frames are not neutral; it is more of an ideological stand, institutional interests as well as power relations that are entrenched in the media systems (Fairclough, 1995). Therefore, media discourses are not merely descriptive accounts of events but rather actively build interpretive systems that influence the societal knowledge and political actions. The agendas setting theory goes further in explaining how the media affects the way people think since it determines the salience of matters as opposed to telling people what to think. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), repetitive media coverage of certain issues makes the issues appear to be more important to the audiences, thus influencing what people think about, rather than how they think. This mechanism is particularly important in conflict settings, where years of focusing on security-related matters may lead to the rise of perceptions of threat and urgency, thus affecting how people will support state policies and military intervention (McCombs, 2004). In the long run, this leads to an organized view of reality whereby some of the narratives prevail at the expense of other interpretations. This comprehension is further enhanced by the securitization model which elucidates how political agents construct issues and turn them into existential threat by discursive means. Buzan, Waever and de Wilde (1998) suggest that securitization takes place when an issue is cast as a question of survival, as such that justifies the use of extraordinary political action. Securitization in the media discourse is manifested in the language used, metaphors, and visual images that highlight the danger, urgency, and vulnerability of the nation. This most especially applies in conflict prone regions like South Asia, where historical resentment and territorial differences are some of the factors that lead to very securitized media climates. The India-Pakistan conflict is one of the longest and mediated geopolitical tussles in the contemporary world. Since the British India was divided into East and West Pakistan and India in 1947, the two countries have been in constant wars, diplomatic crises and constant tensions, especially in the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. In this context, media systems in the two countries are imperative in shaping the perception of the people and strengthening national identity. Instead of acting as neutral observers, media institutions tend to be reflections and replications of dominant state narratives and thus help to perpetuate adversarial relations (Kumar, 2006). Conflict-related events in the Indian media discourse are often viewed within security-nationalist paradigm focusing on the factor of territorial integrity and counterterrorism, as well as on the sovereignty of the state. This framing makes the state to be seen as a guarantor of the national unity and external actors as existential threats. On the other hand, the media in Pakistan tends to be grievance based and humanitarian with a focus on civilian casualties, political marginalization, and historical injustices, especially when it comes to Kashmir (Zaheer, 2016). Such opposite frames create essentially different interpretations of identical events,

leading to parallel, yet incompatible narrative facts. Kashmir being a perpetual geopolitical bone of contention between India and Pakistan plays a dominant role in these narrative frameworks. The Kashmir-related incidents that are reported by the media are always shaped in a way that is more based on deeper ideological differences, wherein national identities are being created and strengthened via the discourse. According to Kumar (2006), the South Asian media systems tend to be run in nationalistic paradigm and exclude other voices. This helps in the othering of the opposing countries, where the enemy is depicted as monolithic, aggressive and invalid. This has been further altered by the emergence of digital media that has brought about new dynamics of communication, participation, and amplification. According to Chadwick (2017), the hybrid media system refers to a situation where the traditional journalism, social media, and political actors are interdependent and interact complexly. Under this system, institutional gatekeepers no longer have a monopoly on information but rather, it is constructed through algorithmic processes, the interaction of users and networked communication. Social media platforms like X (previously Twitter), Facebook and YouTube allow the quick spread of content, and tend to focus on emotionally charged and sensational content rather than verifiable information. Great implications to conflict communication in the digital transformation. According to theory of filter bubble (Eli Pariser 2011) and the concept of echo chambers (Cass Sunstein 2017), algorithmic personalization hinders people's access to pluralistic sources of information, deepening their ideological polarization and reinforcing their own beliefs. These digital infrastructures promote audiences to absorb information that corresponds to their national and/or ideological perspectives and discourage audiences from exploring alternative interpretations, in highly political conflict areas like the Indo-Pakistan context. It's also important to consider the implications of this digital transformation in terms of Agent Atrophy, Automation Bias and Selective Adherence. Agent Atrophy is the tendency to become more dependent on algorithmic information systems and automated recommendations for content and to lose their ability to think critically and analyze information on their own. Automation Bias refers to the bias given to information that is digitally amplified and/or algorithmically prioritized, which may not be complete, accurate, or even an unbiased account. In the same way, Selective Adherence describes the tendency for people to listen to the information that fits their own political, cultural, national and racial beliefs while ignoring information that contradicts them or information that presents a different point of view. Together these processes amplify the polarization of narratives, diminish critical media literacy, and lead to the fast proliferation of emotionally charged and politically polarized narratives in the digital space of today's conflicts. This leads to the formation of "epistemic communities" which are divided and see events from highly selective informational perspectives in situations of conflict. As a result, audiences begin to experience more immersive narrative environments that condition their belief on premises, and the other voices are gradually being excluded from them by the algorithmic selection and cognitive reinforcement mechanisms. This condition magnifies informational insularity with time, and decreases the chance of attaining an informational consensus at the factual level and of engaging in a robust deliberative public discourse in contexts where political issues are at stake. To this, one may add the relevance of Adaptive Epistemology to understanding the present-day knowledge-production.

Literature review:

The Pahalgam attack of 2025 serves as a valuable case study of how narrative warfare is involved in the Indo-Pak conflict, especially in the ways in which media shape, spread, and challenge the ways of discussing terrorism and crisis. Studies on narrative warfare highlight the fact that acts of violence are not merely military or political but rather symbolic struggles over meaning,

legitimacy, and image among others (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle, 2013). In this instance, the media narratives are instruments of strategic communication and instruments of making a difference to the domestic consensus, but also to that of the international opinion. Explain those incidences requires media studies, conflict studies and international relations academics as narratives are presented at both the local/no-national and transnational level (Entman, 2004; Lynch, 2016). An example of the use of security-oriented and nationalistic frames can be referred to the first media report about the attack in Pahalgam in India. This analysis of analogy-based crisis narratives suggests that the message of a crisis here has been about urgency of danger, heroism of the army, and morality of aggressors (Banerjee, 2020; Chakravarty, 2014). Within the Pahalgam case, there were initial news cycles that focused on the operations of the attack, the rapid reaction of the counter-terrorism agencies, and the call to national unity. According to scholars, these are performative in addition to informational as they gather audience emotion and strengthen collective identity. Such a perception of attackers as external, a morally illegitimate agent is part of a wider historical trend found across Indian media reporting on Kashmir-related terrorism (Bose, 2010; Talbot and Singh, 2009). In comparison, the patterns of grievance-oriented and human rights-centric framing are observed by the Pakistani media coverage. It has been shown that Pakistani sources often frame militant attacks as part of the narrative of historical grievance, civilian loss, and the inability of conflict resolution structures (Yousef, 2019; Fair, 2014). In the Pahalgam attack, the initial reporting focused on the humanitarian effects, the displacement of the local populations, and the moral aspects of cross-border violence. According to scholars, this kind of framing has both the purpose of domestic legitimacy and international advocacy, that is, the emphasis on moral claims and historical narratives that support national identity. As it can be implemented to the Pahalgam attack, the idea of narrative warfare focuses on the struggle of meaning in media, political actors, and transnational viewers. The researchers maintain that the mechanism of narrative warfare is based on framing, repetition, selective sourcing, visual symbolism, and digital amplification (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Udupa, 2019). Both Indian and Pakistani accounts applied official statements, eyewitnesses, professional commentary and historical detachments in Pahalgam to create the coherent, emotionally moving interpretations of the incident. The quick circulation and participatory process made possible by digital media especially social media platforms enhanced the affective and cognitive influence of competing frames. Narratives were largely shaped by language and symbolism. Such lexical words as terrorist, militant, martyr, and victim were used with a purpose to discuss moral assessment of actors and events (Fairclough, 1995; Noor et al., 2008). These narratives were supported by visual framing such as the use of pictures of civilian casualties, state forces at work, and national landmarks, largely causing empathy, outrage, or national pride respectively. Researchers insist that the unity of linguistic and visual frames is an effective tool in creating the perception of the masses and maintaining the position of adversaries, which is especially relevant in disputable areas such as Kashmir. The impact of narrative warfare was enhanced by the involvement of digital media in the Pahalgam case. The social media networks facilitated the spread of event-related information, such as eyewitness videos, government press conferences, opinion columns and analytical analysis, rapidly. Studies have shown that user sharing, comments, and hashtag campaigns promoted dominant frames, as well as selective confrontation (Udupa, 2019; Tufekci, 2015). Such transnational flow of stories with particular focus on South Asian diaspora communities highlights the global aspect of narrative warfare, where interpretations of the attack were not only consumed but also discussed and re-discussed outside of the geographic context of the attack. Issues of ethics and credibility stand out in the discussion of narrative warfare in the Pahalgam attack. Scholars note

that they can be covered sensationistically, with emotional overtones, and with political sensitivity which may result in misrepresenting information and marginalizing critical views (Ward, 2015; Lynch, 2016). In Pahalgam, the issue of early reporting was sometimes grounded on unsourced reports, conjecture, and sensationalized images, as a wider structural and market phenomenon in South Asian media. Such practices, although improving the level of audience engagement, complicate the epistemic surroundings and can trigger cross-border tensions. The Pahalgam attack is also located in the historical stream of conflict reporting in Kashmir according to literature. The researchers emphasize that the modern media discourses are framed by decades of past grievance, militaristic representations, and the evaluations of antagonistic morality (Bose, 2010; Talbot and Singh, 2009). This continuity makes nationalist interpretations more resistant to disruption and restricts the discursive room to take other, more accommodative, views. In this sense, narrative warfare is cumulative, as it forms on the basis of existing repertoires to create expectations among the audience, policy debates, and position diplomacies. Lastly, scholars highlight the strategic implications of narrative warfare. The successful framing does not only have an impact on the opinion of a population, but also the behavior of a state, legitimacy of policy, and international perception (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Entman, 2004). The immediate disputation of narratives by both Indian and Pakistani media in the Pahalgam attack case indicates that the stakes of meaning-making are high in the contemporary Indo-Pak conflict processes. The comprehension of the mechanisms of narrative warfare in this respect gives a necessary idea of how terrorist events are perceived, politicized, and capitalized in the context of wider political, social, and diplomatic networks. The most important aspect of narrative warfare is the audience reception, especially regarding the Pahalgam attack case. Researchers stress the importance of audience as leaders in the process of meaning making, as they interpret and internalize media texts through the prism of already existing beliefs, social identities, and cultural norms (Hall, 1980; Slone, 2000). Rather than Indian audiences being more likely to discuss the consequences of the terrorists' actions – such as their impact on a country's national security and humanity – than Pakistani audiences, and vice versa, Indian audiences were more likely to do so through the prism of their national security interests and their victim's humanity, while Pakistani audiences were more likely to do so through a “humanitarian crisis” and historical injustice lens. There is a participatory ecology of these processes as well, with digital interactive features including commenting, sharing and remixing all strengthening and expanding the hegemonic and ‘opposite’ stories. Such a dynamics has been qualitatively observed to be linked to affective polarization and have been found to lead to in-group cohesion and delegitimation of out groups. The digital media, particularly social media has a transformative effect in the narrative warfare. The hashtags, frames and images can be easily disseminated via the Internet platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube (Udupa 2019 and Tufekci 2015). Pahalgam attack has been similar to one of those viral videos; with the help of the video footage taken at the spot (and real time updates) Indians and Pakistanis both can follow the events as closely as possible. They all purport to be novel in their capacities to narrate war; they do not require the traditional space of the media, but instead are multiple spaces where the actors of state, institutional and citizen interact and influence perceptions. Thus when networked nationalism is considered in terms of diaspora community and the internet it becomes prominent with regards to transnational stories and how they can reinforce, or disrupt (Anderson and Lee, 2020). To many extents, the visual frame is an exceptionally powerful concept – because it is about the viewers perceptions and the emotional response to those perceptions. The studies have indicated that it is not the sole fact of those images, but the symbolism of images depicting wounded civilians, army officers, ruined infrastructure or

landmarks within the area that also influence moral and political decisions (Messaris and Abraham, 2001; Pantti, 2010). The attack of Pahalgam was talked to the audience in the form of a visual - this had a direct impact on linguistic frame, which enabled audience to emotionally get the resonance and enabled to identify with the nationalistic interpretation(s). The visual material's representation and language has been a powerful medium for 'narrative warfare' for shaping public and collective memory and which can be used as a means to legitimate policies, the researchers said. It can be classified as Epistemic Issues and the following ethical issues come under it in Pahalgam related coverage: Ethic's and Epistemic issues. The literature seems to be largely in line with the concept of faster and more emotional, rather than verifiable and contextual, when involved in a high intensity crisis reporting (Ward 2015, Lynch 2016). In this context, initial reports of news can sometimes be unsubstantiated, rumoured and dramatised images – part of a process of structures in the competitive markets. This exercise might lead to further polarisation and to reinforcement of negative images and emotions, scientists say, and hinder conflict resolution. Thus, the moral misbehaviour's social and geopolitical implications would be at the national level and image. The comparative researches place the Pahalgam incident in contexts of the larger tendencies of narrative warfare in South Asia and elsewhere around the world. Researchers note that the framing processes in Kashmir are similar to those of media reporting of other protracted conflicts, including the use of official sources, dramatizing, emotionalizing and anchoring in history (Entman, 2004; Nohrstedt and Ottosen, 2008). Nevertheless, the local peculiarities, e.g., Indo-Pak historical rivalry, communal sensitivities, and political polarization, give rise to unique narrative forms. The presented comparative observations point to the necessity of both versatile and context-specific analyses in consideration of both universal processes of the creation of narratives and regional socio-political processes. In Kashmir, historical continuity is still a characteristic of narrative warfare. Researchers point to the fact that modern framing builds on the decades of conflict coverage, recreating the tropes of occupation, resistance, and moral legitimacy (Bose, 2010; Talbot and Singh, 2009). In Pahalgam attack, both Indian and Pakistani discourse appealed to historical sources to justify readings, tap into emotional appeal and strengthen the adversarial identities. This continuity is used to highlight the cumulative aspect of narrative warfare wherein each event adds to the already existing narrative repertoires in order to influence audience expectations, policy discourses, and international reputations. In the Pahalgam case, transnational effects are also present. Studies show that media discourses spread at an alarming pace across the national boundaries, especially in digital networks, affecting the diasporic populations, world policymakers, and international media (Georgiou, 2012; Robinson et al., 2017). The researchers observe that the global prominence of the Kashmiri events increases the stakes of narrative warfare because conflicting interpretations vie in terms of legitimacy both nationally and internationally. The Pahalgam assault is an example how terrorist events are used as a means of this larger struggle of meaning, and strategic communication is used on several levels of audience. Lastly, the literature integrates these findings in order to position Pahalgam as a paradigmatic example of narrative warfare. According to scholars, the acts of terrorist attacks in conflict areas are not solely a security affair but symbolic struggles of legitimacy, morality, and collective identities (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Entman, 2004). In linguistic, visual, and performative frames, media turn into the instruments and a platform of the competition, and try to influence home, regional and international perceptions. The Pahalgam case points to the significance of narrative control in today's era of the Indo-Pak conflict and to the interplay between media, viewers and digital space to produce and re-produce repeatable cycles of conflictual meaning-making. In the new world order of information, war is no longer

characterized by just military or diplomatic activities. It is also characterized by the strategic production, circulation and struggle of stories. These stories act in digital ecosystems that are complex. This has turned into a place of struggle of meaning itself. One of the longest-running and highly-mediated conflict locations is the India-pakistan geopolitical dyad. Narrative warfare is much more of a central role in this space. It shapes perceptions. It justifies actions of the state. It also builds up national identities. This is enhanced by the very fast developing digital media infrastructures. Political communication has taken a new shape with these infrastructures. They have transformed the production, distribution and consumption of information. This has led to the change of the epistemological authority. The traditional media like state broadcasters and print media is no longer dominant. Control has shifted to algorithmically mediated sites. These are X (previously Twitter), facebook, Youtube and online news portals. On these platforms, it is the engagement measures that influence content, rather than editorial control. This change has led to what Chadwick (2017) terms hybrid media system. In this system, there is an interaction of old and new media. The dynamic and recursive nature of their interaction. It is very similar to being contradictory as well. The political actors/actors, state institutions and the journalists and citizens are now in the same arena. Each of them is involved in the meaning construct. Simultaneously, they are in a competition to dominate in attention economies. These are economies that are run on algorithmic logic. In this context, the strategic narrative theory will play a critical role. It describes the way interpretive structures of the states and non-state actors are created. These structures characterize events on the international level. They justify the political action. They also influence the international knowledge of the legitimacy, security and identity. Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) believe that strategic narratives can be applied on a three levels basis. They are systemic, national and issue based levels. These stories have an effect on the way the states present themselves to the outside world. They also have an effect on the internalization of meaning by the domestic populations. These are reproduced as part of a formation of collective identities by populations. These structures of narratives are entrenched in India-Pakistan relations. The historical memory forms them. They are influenced by the identity making after colonization. They are influenced by the territorial issues, in particular, Kashmir. Cycles of military and diplomatic crises are also the molders of them. These are events which are viewed in securitized terms. The other is put into perspective as an existential threat. This strengthens securitization that is outlined by Buzan, Waever and de Wilde (1998). In the process, political concerns transform to survival concerns. They need out-of-the-box solutions. This discourse is increased by the digital environments. The emotionally-charged content is spreading quicker. It will get more likes and being shared. It is also encouraged with the help of algorithms. This supports the cognitive bias. It enhances polarization of the online publics. This is further explained in the framing theory. The media systems create the reality in a selecting and emphasizing way. They point out some of the details of events. They hide others. This influences the definition of the problems. It forms the interpretation of causality. It influences the judgment of morals. It also impacts policy response. The argument of Entman (1993) is that framing is a question of choice and focus. This contributes to conflict reports having divergent interpretations in conflict reporting. The national media systems have differing reports of the same event. As an example, cross-border violence can be put in different perspectives. In the Indian media, it might manifest itself as invasion. It can be a reason to take national security measures. The identical occasion can be given different interpretations in Pakistani media. It can be considered to be politically driven. It might need to be put under international scrutiny. The differences have distinct interpretive worlds. This is enhanced by the agendasetting theory. People are not informed by media on what to think. It informs them on what to think of. This

was evidently shown by McCombs and Shaw (1972). As media constantly underlines the themes of security, people get more concerned. There is an increased salience in threat perception. This is more so in conflict environments. The habitual exposure to antagonistic discourses internalizes antagonistic thinking. This is compounded in South Asia. Grievances of the past are deep entrenched. Collective memory is impacted by partition trauma. There is a high-level of political mistrust. The media are determined by these factors. These ecosystems are biased in terms of structure to amplify conflicts. They are not so much in favor of reconciliation stories. According to Kumar (2006), the South Asian type of conflict journalism has a tendency to work on the nationalistic paradigm. These paradigms have state narratives as their priority. They strengthen the othering processes. Countries that are the opponents are depicted as one-sided foes. This reduces complexity. It curtails discourse of peace. Polarization of the media ecosystem is evident within the India-Pakistan media ecosystems. It is presented in the news on TV. It is found on the online portals. It is also present in commentary of the social media. Sensationalism is common. Dominating coverage are breaking news cycles. There is greater exaggeration with ratings pressure. Checking can tend to become peripheral. Context is often abridged. Such environment encourages the so-called filter bubble effect by Pariser (2011). The personalization based on algorithms excludes the exposure to different views. It enhances ideological uniformity. This is also elaborated by Sunstein (2017). Group polarization is increased in digital echo chambers. Cross-cutting exposure decreases. Confirmation bias increases. This leads to a break up of epistemic communities. They have a different interpretation of the same events. This disintegration is more in the case of India-Pakistan. Integrated online campaigns help in it. There is also the influence of activism by the influencers. User made content brings feelings to a higher level. In crisis every time fake information is quickly surfacing. Hashtags is given symbolic meaning. Perceptions are created by videos of viruses. Clips are heavily circulated together with the edited clips. These aspects become narrative pieces of war. This is enhanced by bot amplification. Simulation of consensus is done through coordination of information operations. They manipulate trends. Freelon and Wells (2020) elaborate that in the contemporary meaning of disinformation, it is not simply the false information. It is ambiguity of strategy as well. It entails biased truth telling. It dislocates any epistemic certainty. Digital platforms turn into battlefields in India-Pakistan crisis. There are competing nationalisms that rule these spaces. Digital nationalism occurs with users. They produce content. They share content. They amplify content. This enhances in group identity. It undermines the legitimacy of out-groups. The lay people are drawn into the war of stories as active participants. The producer and consumer is eliminated. This forms a mixture of communication environment. The western media in this climate has an mediator role. There are outlets that are structured in their reporting like BBC, Reuters, Al Jazeera and The Washington Post. They emphasize verification. They give a geopolitical situation. Humanitarian views are included in them as well. They are however not completely neutral. This argument on neutrality is criticized by the postcolonial theory. This is explained by Said (1978), in his *Orientalism*. The construction of non-Western conflicts in Western representations is informed by the historical power relations. Such representations impact the world understanding. They are later re-read in the South Asian media in their narratives. This occurs by being selective with citation. The other way it occurs is via reframing and political acclimatization. The meaning of media is hence not fixated. It is transmitted between systems. It is continually remodeled. This movement is trans-national. It is as well ideological. This is expedited in the digital spaces. In many cases, speed ends up to be more crucial than accuracy. There are co-exists of misinformation and verified reporting. Such a mottled information disorder is referred to as hybrid information disorder by Chadwick (2017).

In this state, there is a diffusion of boundaries. There is an overlap in the fact and opinion. There is a blend of propaganda and analysis. Thought processes are exaggerated by computer programs. Visibility is led by engagement measures. Outrage-driven communication increases. This intensifies polarization. It has a direct impact of India- Pakistan relations. It enhances antagonistic personalities. It lessens the diplomatic flexibility. A stiffness of the opinion of the people sets in. Domestic pressure is on political leaders. They take a stand which is hard. This brings about the entrapment of the narratives. Narratives that they contributed to create restrict the actions of political actors. Rises in cycles are increased. Counter-escalation follows. However, there are opportunities even with regard to digital media. Counter-narratives exist. There is peace advocacy as well. The role of civil society is involved. The independent journalism also plays its role. Academic discourse is troublesome of hegemonic frames. Nevertheless, there is a low visibility. Algorithms reduce reach. There is a low institutional support. Finally, India-Pakistan war in the age of digital era is a battle of meaning. Not only is it about territory or resources. The power of narrative is at the heart. It influences the geopolitical rivalry. To comprehend this, it takes various theoretical perspectives. These are the strategic narrative theory, framing theory, agenda-setting theory, securitization theory and digital media studies. Collectively, they elaborate on hybrid media ecosystems. They describe the influence of algorithm. They describe the transnational flows of information as well. These streams are influence on perception and policy. This chapter illustrates one of the arguments. Digital storytelling war is not a by-product. Conflict is constitutive of conflict. It forms the thinking system. It influences the emotional structures. These structures have an impact on policy makers and publics. Thus, it is crucial that narrative analysis is conducted. It plays a crucial role in the contemporary conflict studies. It plays a crucial part in international communication studies. Particularly, this is the case in South Asia. There are long-standing historical animosities in the area. It equally lacks political stability. There is a high polarization in media. Such circumstances bring about informational spaces of contention. Such milieu generate conflicting truths. They generate disjointed realities as well. This substantiates the importance of media literacy. It entails international dialogue structures, as well. There is need to have responsible communication practices. These have the potential of decreasing destabilizing effects. Simultaneously, they are able to maintain democratic prospects of digital systems of communication.

Research Objectives

1. To find out the dominant media frames of Indian and Pakistani media in Pahalgam incident.
2. To compare the threat construction narratives of the media systems of both countries.
3. To analyze the contribution of the media framing process on public consent to the State response.
4. To examine the framing of media in the more general context of narrative warfare.

Research Questions

1. What were the dominant frames that were used in the Indian and Pakistani media coverage of the Pahalgam incident?
2. How did the media organisations create narratives of threat and victimhood?
3. How did media framing help the public to support governmental positions?
4. What is the role of the case in the understanding of the narrative warfare of South Asia?

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives:

Framing Theory

Framing Theory refers to the process by which the media organization selects and emphasizes specific aspects of an event, which in turn influences audience interpretations of the events and their preferences for policies.

Strategic Narrative Theory

Strategic Narrative Theory offers a lens into how political actors build a coherent narrative to shape perceptions and to legitimate actions.

Propaganda Model

The Propaganda Model is one way of understanding why the media institutions can repeat the views of the elite and validate the dominant political narrative when a national security issue is raised.

These theories, when considered as a whole, offer a holistic approach to analysing the role of media framing in the construction of threats, gaining public consent and narrative warfare.

Conceptual Framework

Independent Variable:

- Media Framing

Intervening Variables:

- Political Context
- National Identity
- Elite Discourse
- Strategic Communication

Dependent Variables:

- Threat Perception
- Public Opinion
- Policy Legitimization
- Public Consent

This framework posits that media framing has an impact on public perceptions by selective emphasis, how the story is told, and by the repetition of certain frames on the events being discussed.

Results and Findings

Overview of Empirical Analysis

The analysis of media content covering the Pahalgam incident reveals a structured pattern of narrative construction across Indian and Pakistani media systems. A total corpus of news reports, television broadcasts, editorials, and digital content was examined using qualitative framing analysis and quantitative frequency coding. The findings demonstrate that media organizations in both countries did not merely report the incident but actively participated in constructing competing interpretations of reality.

The data indicates that framing practices were highly selective, strategically organized, and consistent with broader national security narratives. Rather than presenting a unified factual account, media outlets constructed divergent storylines that reflected geopolitical positions, institutional biases, and national ideological orientations.

Four major observations emerged:

1. Strong polarization of narrative frames between Indian and Pakistani media.
2. Dominance of security-centric framing in Indian media discourse.
3. Prevalence of skepticism and diplomatic framing in Pakistani media discourse.
4. High degree of repetition and amplification of state-aligned narratives in both contexts.

Dominant Frames in Indian Media Coverage

Indian media coverage of the Pahalgam incident was overwhelmingly structured around security-oriented and nationalist frames. The most dominant frame was the Terrorism/Security Threat Frame, which positioned the incident within a broader discourse of cross-border militancy and national vulnerability.

Terrorism and External Threat Frame

This frame constructed the incident as an extension of external aggression. It emphasized:

- Cross-border infiltration narratives
- Attribution of responsibility to hostile actors
- National security vulnerability
- Calls for decisive counteraction

Victimhood and National Unity Frame

The victimhood frame highlighted civilian suffering and collective national injury. Media discourse frequently employed emotional language, visual imagery, and symbolic references to national unity. This frame served to:

- Mobilize public sympathy
- Strengthen national cohesion
- Reinforce moral legitimacy of state response

Retaliatory Justice Frame

A significant portion of coverage emphasized the need for response measures. This included diplomatic, military, and strategic options. The framing suggested that:

- Accountability required action
- Silence or restraint equated to weakness
- State authority was justified in taking strong measures

Patriotic Mobilization Frame

Television talk shows and digital platforms frequently used patriotic rhetoric, reinforcing national identity and unity against perceived external threats.

Dominant Frames in Pakistani Media Coverage

Pakistani media framing was characterized by a markedly different narrative structure. Rather than accepting initial claims at face value, media outlets emphasized uncertainty, diplomatic caution, and regional stability.

Attribution Skepticism Frame

The most dominant frame questioned the completeness or reliability of available evidence. This included:

- Calls for investigation and verification
- Emphasis on lack of independent confirmation
- Critique of unilateral attribution

This frame functioned as a counter-narrative to immediate blame attribution.

Diplomatic Resolution Frame

Pakistani media consistently emphasized the importance of dialogue and diplomatic engagement. Key elements included:

- Conflict de-escalation
- Bilateral communication channels
- International mediation possibilities

Victimization and Structural Inequality Frame

Some coverage framed Pakistan as a state frequently subjected to international blame narratives. This included:

- Historical grievances
- Perceived bias in global media
- Structural asymmetry in narrative power

Regional Stability Frame

A significant portion of discourse emphasized the risks of escalation, particularly in a nuclearized South Asian environment. The study of the content of media reporting of the Pahalgam incident suggests that there is a pattern in the way the narrative on the incident is constructed both in Indian and Pakistani media. Qualitative framing analysis and quantitative frequency coding were used in the analysis of a total news reports, TV programmes, editorials and online content. The results show that neither in either country were the media just reporting, but rather they were involved in creating divergent representations of reality.

From the data, it can be seen that the framing practices were selective, organised very strategically and in line with the national security narratives in general. Media outlets did not offer a single, factual account but rather created different story lines, which illustrated the different geopolitical, institutional and national ideological perspectives.

There were three main comments that came out of this:

There is a high level of polarization of the narrative frames in the media of India and Pakistan.

1. Prevalence of the 'security' approach in the media discourse in India.
2. Skepticism and Diplomatic framing in Pakistani media discourses.
43. Large amount of repetition and amplification of state-related stories in both settings.

In Indian media coverage, the dominant frames used to discuss the issue.

Almost all the Indian reporting on the Pahalgam incident was security oriented and nationalist. The most prevalent frame was the Terrorism/Security Threat Frame, which is the context of the broader discussion on cross-border militancy and vulnerability of the nation.

Terrorism and External Threat, Frame

This frame presented the situation as being an extension of an external aggression. It emphasized:

- Cross-border infiltration narratives
- Likely spread of rumors or speculation about the flooding
- National security vulnerability
- Issues a call to action

The idea of victimhood and National unity frame.

The victimhood frame accentuated the suffering of civilians and the injury to the nation as a whole. National unity was often referred to using emotional language, images and symbols by the media. The purpose of this frame was to:

- Mobilize public sympathy
- Strengthen national cohesion
- Publicly affirm state legitimacy of response, reinforce moral legitimacy of the state's role in the response.

Retaliatory Justice Frame

There was considerable focus on the need for the responses. This comprised diplomatic, military and strategic options. The frame indicated that:

- Accountability required action
- A man's worth was determined by his strength and capacity to fight

Strong measures by the State were justified:

Patriotic Mobilization Frame

Patriotic rhetoric was common on TV talk shows and digital media, which helped to reinforce a sense of nation and unity in response to perceived external threats.

In case of Pakistan, media coverage is dominated by the given frames.

The narrative structure was found to be very different in the Pakistani media. Media reports stressed ambiguity, caution and stability in the region, rather than taking anything at face value.

Attribution Skepticism Frame

Most prevalent frame was one which challenged the completeness or reliability of evidence available. This included, The analysis and validation of facts and information. Investigating and verifying facts and information.

Diplomatic Resolution Frame

Dialogue and diplomatic process were always highlighted in Pakistani Media. Key elements included:

- Conflict de-escalation
- Bilateral communication channels
- International mediation possibilities

Victimization and Structural Inequality Frame: These two frames primarily focus on the experiences of the victim.

Some reports portrayed Pakistan as a country that usually suffers from 'blame games' of the international community. This included:

- Historical grievances
- Media bias – perception of it in the world
- Asymmetry of structure in the power of narration (storytelling)

Regional Stability Frame

Much of the commentary focused on the dangers and possibilities of escalation, especially in South Asia where the region is nuclearized.

Comparative Frame Intensity Analysis

A comparative assessment shows significant divergence in frame frequency and emphasis.

Table 1: Frequency of Dominant Frames in Indian vs Pakistani Media

Frame Category	Indian Media (%)	Pakistani Media (%)
Security / Terrorism Frame	38%	12%
Victimhood Frame	22%	18%
Diplomatic Resolution Frame	8%	27%
Attribution Skepticism Frame	5%	25%
Retaliatory Justice Frame	18%	6%
Regional Stability Frame	4%	10%
Patriotic Mobilization Frame	5%	2%

The data indicates that Indian media heavily prioritized security and retaliatory narratives, while Pakistani media emphasized skepticism and diplomatic engagement.

Table 2: Attribution Strategy Comparison

Attribution Strategy	Indian Media	Pakistani Media
Direct Attribution	High	Low
Conditional Attribution	Medium	Medium
Attribution Skepticism	Low	High
Neutral Reporting	Low	Medium

This divergence illustrates fundamentally different epistemic approaches to conflict reporting. Emotional and Linguistic Framing Patterns are used to identify an individual's emotions and linguistic patterns.

The linguistic analysis indicated that there were significant differences in tone (vocabulary), emotion (strength of presentation) and rhetorical devices (style).

Indian Media:

- High emotional intensity
- Repeated use of the words “attack,” “martyrs,” “terror” and/or “enemy”
- Morally charged frames of binary characterisations.

Pakistani Media:

- Language that is cautioned and done in a step-by-step manner.
- Use of the words, “reported,” “alleged,” “claims” or “investigation”
- View of the subject from multiple angles and various sources of information

The role of TV and Digital amplification

In India, the propagation of nationalistic ideas with the help of TV talk shows was a major factor. By comparison, Pakistani digital platforms focussed on counter-narrative and analytical commentary.

Social media also helped to frame a divergence in the following ways:

- Hashtag activism around an issue or problem
- Viral clips and selective dissemination around an issue or problem.
- Influencer-driven narrative reinforcement

Narrative Warfare Dynamics

The results suggest that the Pahalgam incident was rather a battleground for narration, in which a contest of several actors was engaged in to dominate the narration of the event.

Three dynamics, key to the understanding, were identified:

1. Frame Amplification – Dominant narration repeated in platforms.
2. Frame Reinforcement – media/message congruence with official government statements.
3. Frame Contention: Direct confrontation of Indian/Pakistani frame.

The dynamics demonstrate that the media as a system was an information conflict actor that played strategically.

Comparative Frame Analysis Tables (Summary Section)

Table 3: Summary of Narrative Orientation

<i>Dimension</i>	Indian Media Orientation	Pakistani Media Orientation
<i>Dominant Narrative</i>	Security-centric	Diplomacy-centric
<i>Tone</i>	Assertive / Emotional	Cautious / Analytical
<i>Threat Construction</i>	High	Low to Moderate
<i>Source Dependence</i>	Official/security sources	Multi-source skepticism
<i>Policy Orientation</i>	Retaliatory / assertive	De-escalatory / diplomatic

Table 4: Media Function in Narrative Warfare

<i>Function</i>	Indian Media Role	Pakistani Media Role
<i>Narrative Construction</i>	Threat amplification	Narrative contestation
<i>Public Mobilization</i>	High	Moderate
<i>State Alignment</i>	Strong	Moderate
<i>Conflict Escalation</i>	Indirect contribution	De-escalation advocacy

Summary of Key Findings

The study shows that the Pahalgam incident was heavily framed by the media which had a great influence on how the incident was interpreted by the public. Securitization and national unity were the dominant themes of Indian media. There were emphasis on Pakistani media on skepticism and narratives of diplomatic resolution. The two media systems played a role in polarization of the narrative.

All in all, the results indicate that the framing of the media is an integral part of threat construction and public consensus in the communication of Indo-Pak conflict today.

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