COMMENTARIES

Narrative Warfare as a Security Concern: Cognitive Dimensions of Contemporary Conflict

Author: Charani Lakna Charithma Matara Patabendige • **Published:** May 31, 2026 • **Source:** Centre for New Age Warfare Studies



EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

Narrative warfare has emerged as one of the significant dimensions of modern conflict, within the broader architecture of cognitive and information warfare. This article examines how narratives function as strategic instruments that shape perception, influence decision-making, and potentially alter conflict outcomes. Drawing on recent literature and relevant case studies, the author analyses how narratives are constructed, disseminated, and contested, with particular attention to digital amplification, memetic communication, and state-led psychological defence strategies. The author argues that narrative control is an increasingly important element of modern strategic power, requiring states to strengthen cognitive resilience and media literacy as components of national security.

At present, the way of waging war has changed drastically, and cognitive warfare has become a major dimension. According to Paziuk et al. (2025), cognitive warfare marks a new stage in how conflict evolves, with the human mind becoming the central arena. Rather than relying on conventional kinetic force, it operates through psychological and informational means, leveraging weaknesses in cognition to shape beliefs, steer emotions, and influence decision-making. Therefore, Paziuk et al. (2025) identify narrative framing as one of the core operational methods used to pursue these objectives. When cognitive warfare paves the way and fuels the conflict, the physical war waged becomes

escalated as well as a success. In other words, cognitive warfare has a significant impact on outcomes, determining victory, failure, and withdrawal in conflicts.

Narrative, Information, and Cognitive Dimensions

Possessing a critical piece of information enables an actor to circulate it to an audience, shape audience attitudes, divert attention, or disclose it selectively, each of which can carry significant societal consequences. Beyond information alone, narratives can more profoundly influence how people think. This is because once a narrative takes hold, emotional appeal and rational argument often operate at the same time.

Hypothetically, if a person knows a key witness to a trial, the person who has access to the witness can remove him or her from the scene, or else intimidate or coerce the witness to lie, or at times provide a platform for the witness to be safe and divulge the truth. Now, as per this hypothetical scenario, it is evident that the person with information has the upper hand, since he or she has control over the witness, which is the very same reason possessing information gives the power to make decisions and alter consequences. For example, this person can be a corporate actor, a key stakeholder, a politician, or an influencer. Moreover, such a person can be a state authority, a non-state group, or a media institution. On the other hand, if a narrative is built and is in the process of dissemination, certain other parties will also come into play. It can take the form of a rebuttal, a denial, a deviation, or, at times, conformity which will keep the narrative being disseminated, further argued, diluted or challenged.

Digital Amplification and Memetic Warfare

According to Mariia Hirniak (2025), the digital age has intensified narrative battles. Social media and Artificial Intelligence (AI) amplify disinformation, reinforce echo chambers, and reward sensationalism, while information overload and declining journalism contribute to social fragmentation. In addition, memetic warfare can further magnify and accelerate narratives. Memes have become influential tools, circulating emotionally resonant messages that can boost morale, foster solidarity, and shape public opinion. As per Dr Tine Munk (2026), “Memes are the modern equivalent of wartime propaganda posters. Like posters in the First and Second World Wars, they simplify complex political realities, appeal to emotion, and reinforce ideas of identity, unity, and opposition. Ordinary users now create, remix, and spread content alongside institutions, altering traditional power dynamics in political communication.”

Emine Çelik (2026) states that the “AI systems utilised by the US in its military and intelligence operations against Iran constitute a significant part of this transformation. Systems such as Maven, developed within the US Department of Defence, play a significant role in intelligence analysis concerning Iran’s military infrastructure, nuclear facilities and regional militia networks.” This **shows** how artificial intelligence systems contribute to contemporary information environments by processing and structuring large-scale datasets, thereby shaping the informational conditions that influence how narratives emerge and circulate, rather than generating narratives themselves.

Strategic Applications in State Behaviour

The Kargil War is another example where the “narrative” component was used strategically. This example becomes important because in 1999, the Kargil war was India’s first televised conflict. The war happened during an era when technology was not as sophisticated as now. Yet, the role of the media had a lasting impact on public opinion. The media coverage during the war had a significant impact on the sentiments of Indian citizens, building an emotional connection with the soldiers. By raising national awareness about the conflict, the challenges faced by soldiers, and the sacrifices made, the media was able to fuel nationalistic sentiment and bolster public support for Indian troops. The live reporting from the battlefront significantly changed the way the public viewed and perceived war, galvanising strong domestic support for India’s actions towards Pakistan. (Amrita Jash, 2024)

According to Cissé & Pihl (2025), “Beijing’s narrative warfare operates across multiple domains, each employing specific mechanisms to foster an environment conducive to the adoption of Chinese narratives while discouraging open opposition. The goal is to achieve perception dominance – the ability to influence and control how situations, events, and narratives are interpreted by others.” From a country’s perspective, China’s strategy is to maintain its narrative and discourage opposition, which is a prudent tactic. It is similar to disagreeing with a person, but in a digital context, it is well planned, coordinated, and targeted.

Countries, recognising the seriousness of information warfare, have increasingly acknowledged the need to reduce vulnerability to manipulation, emotional appeals, and distraction. According to Andreas Ventse (2025), “Estonia's national defence strategy is based on a comprehensive approach to security, one key component of which is psychological defence. The primary objective of psychological defence is to prevent panic, counter hostile influence operations and misinformation and maintain public trust in the state and its defence efforts.” Central to this approach is the concept of “Cognitive Resilience”, defined as a population’s ability to recognise and resist narrative manipulation. Achieving this requires strong situational awareness and a high level of media literacy.

Narrative Framing and Conflict Interpretation

(Ben Heap, 2025) quotes scholars and presents as follows: “One of the main reasons Ukraine’s story has resonated in the West is its unusual degree of moral clarity, a rare conflict where the roles of aggressor and aggrieved are unmistakable.” Ukraine frames the war as a contest between ‘light and darkness’, drawing on familiar tropes such as ‘David versus Goliath’, the brave defender against overwhelming odds. Such imagery lets audiences project their own histories onto Ukraine’s struggle, seeing not a distant regional war but a defence of the post-1945 order and its values.

Conclusion

The control of narratives, in fact, defines modern power. In present-day conflicts, the battlefield is no longer limited to physical space as it extends into perception, belief, and emotion. Those who shape the stories have the capacity to make people accept and/or influence decisions, and guide societal reactions, which will have an impact on outcomes. Narrative warfare is therefore not just a tool of communication, but a decisive instrument of strategic advantage. Therefore, governments across the world have a role in navigating challenges emanating from such warfare.