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Strategic Communication and Alliance Signaling in Contemporary Warfare: Insight from the Russia–Ukraine War and the US–Israel and Iran War

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Abstract

This study examines the interplay between strategic communication and alliance signaling in contemporary warfare, drawing comparative insights from the Russia–Ukraine war and the security nexus involving the United States, Israel, and Iran. It analyzes how state actors utilize targeted narratives and digital diplomacy to signal resolve, deter adversaries, and maintain the cohesion of strategic partnerships. The research argues that whereas the Russia–Ukraine conflict is characterized by high-visibility, transparent signaling designed to maximize international mobilization and legitimacy, the US–Israel–Iran conflict relies on strategic ambiguity and calibrated deterrence to manage proxy dynamics and avoid uncontrolled escalation. By contrasting these two divergent models, the paper demonstrates that strategic communication serves as a critical mechanism for alliance management and risk mitigation in the digital age, shifting the paradigm of deterrence from purely kinetic capabilities to the management of perceived intent and commitment.

Keywords: Strategic Communication, Alliance Signaling, Deterrence, Russia–Ukraine War, US–Israel–Iran Conflict

Introduction

The character of contemporary warfare has undergone a profound structural shift, characterized by the convergence of traditional kinetic operations with the rapid, globalized contestation of the informational domain. In this evolving security environment, the physical deployment of military force is increasingly preceded, accompanied, and followed by intensive campaigns of strategic communication. Strategic communication defined not merely as public relations, but as the purposeful projection of national narratives to shape the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of targeted audiences has emerged as a foundational element of modern statecraft (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013). Within this broader phenomenon, the specific mechanism of *alliance signaling* has acquired unprecedented importance. As nations navigate complex multipolar rivalries, the ability to effectively communicate resolve, deter adversaries, and reassure partners without triggering uncontrolled escalation is paramount. Historically, alliance signaling relied on formal treaties, troop deployments, and private diplomatic channels (Jervis, 1970; Snyder, 1984). Today, however, these signals are broadcast across fragmented digital ecosystems, where they are subject to real-time interpretation, manipulation, and amplification by both state and non-state actors.

This study examines the multifaceted interplay between strategic communication and alliance signaling by comparing two of the most geopolitically consequential conflicts of the twenty-first century: the Russia–Ukraine war and the protracted security confrontation involving the

United States, Israel, and Iran. While both conflicts fundamentally revolve around questions of regional hegemony, regime survival, and the deterrence of adversarial aggression, they represent two radically different paradigms of contemporary warfare. Consequently, they provide highly contrasting models of how alliance signaling operates under varying conditions of conflict visibility, normative framing, and escalatory risk.

The Russia–Ukraine war, particularly following the full-scale invasion in February 2022, represents a paradigm of high-visibility, overt warfare. In this context, strategic communication has been weaponized to maximize international mobilization and normative clarity. For Ukraine and its Western partners, alliance signaling has been highly transparent, utilizing public intelligence disclosures, highly publicized weapons transfers, and digital diplomacy to project an unbreakable coalition of democratic states confronting authoritarian aggression (Götz, 2022). President Volodymyr Zelensky’s direct digital appeals to Western parliaments and global publics exemplify a strategy where alliance signaling bypasses traditional diplomatic corridors to generate bottom-up pressure on allied governments (Onuch & Sasse, 2023). In this model, the goal of strategic communication is to eliminate ambiguity. The alliance signals are designed to be unmistakably clear to Moscow to establish deterrence by denial, while simultaneously acting as a binding mechanism that increases the political cost of defection or war fatigue among Western coalition members.

By contrast, the US–Israel–Iran conflict operates within a paradigm of protracted, “shadow” warfare, defined by proxy engagements, covert sabotage, and threshold management. In this volatile regional subsystem, the logic of alliance signaling diverges sharply from the European theater. Here, the United States and Israel must coordinate their deterrence posture against Iran and its “Axis of Resistance” without explicitly crossing the threshold into conventional regional war. As a result, strategic communication in this theater relies heavily on strategic ambiguity and calibrated kinetic signaling—such as targeted strikes in Syria or cyber operations against Iranian nuclear facilities paired with carefully modulated public rhetoric (Fisher, 2020). For the United States, alliance signaling requires a delicate balancing act: it must reassure Israel and Gulf partners of its ironclad security commitments, thereby preventing unilateral preemptive strikes, while simultaneously signaling restraint to Tehran to prevent conflict spiraling (Parsi, 2017). Unlike the Ukrainian model of maximum visibility, the US–Israel–Iran dynamic often depends on what is left unsaid. Ambiguity serves as a strategic buffer, allowing all parties to claim domestic victories while avoiding the political and economic costs of total war.

The divergence between these two models highlights a significant gap in the current literature on international security. While robust bodies of scholarship exist regarding the mechanics of information warfare (Rid, 2020) and the classic theories of deterrence (Schelling, 1966), there is insufficient comparative analysis on how digital-age strategic communication actually reshapes alliance management across different typologies of conflict. Traditional deterrence theory posits that signals must be credible and costly to be effective (Fearon, 1997). However, in the contemporary information environment, the “cost” of a signal is increasingly tied to reputational risk and narrative coherence rather than merely blood and treasure. How do states maintain alliance cohesion when their strategic signals are instantaneously contested by adversarial disinformation? How does the demand for public, digitally mediated reassurance alter the calculus of military escalation?

To answer these questions, this paper argues that the architecture of a conflict—specifically its degree of global visibility and its reliance on proxy structures—fundamentally dictates the mechanics of alliance signaling. In conventional, high-visibility conflicts like the Russia–Ukraine war, strategic communication is utilized to maximize normative polarization and solidify public alliance commitments, shifting the burden of escalation onto the adversary. Conversely, in low-visibility, proxy-driven environments like the US–Israel–Iran nexus, strategic communication is employed to manage ambiguity, carefully calibrating signals to deter adversaries while restraining the independent escalatory impulses of regional allies.

The remainder of this study is structured to systematically unpack these dynamics. Section Two reviews the theoretical foundations of strategic communication, signaling theory, and alliance dilemmas in the digital age. Section Three provides an empirical analysis of the Russia–Ukraine war, examining how NATO and Kyiv have co-produced a public narrative of resolve that operationalizes transparency as a weapon. Section Four shifts to the Middle East, analyzing the “shadow war” between the US, Israel, and Iran to demonstrate how strategic ambiguity and kinetic signaling function as alternative forms of alliance management. Finally, Section Five discusses the comparative findings, exploring the policy implications for modern statecraft. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that in the modern era, the communication of power has become just as vital to the preservation of alliances as the possession of power itself.

Literature Review

Strategic communication has been reconceptualised from a “soft-power” add-on to a core component of statecraft. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle (2013) argue that it is the purposeful construction of meaning that enables states to “operationalise political intent” across audiences. This perspective treats communication not merely as a vehicle for information but

as an *actor* that shapes the security environment itself (Baker, 2016). Related work on public diplomacy (Nye, 2004) and strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2017) stresses the importance of framing the selection of themes, metaphors and emotional cues that render a message intelligible and persuasive.

Alliance theory traditionally foregrounds the credibility of collective security commitments (Jervis, 1970; Waltz, 1979). Signalling, in this context, is the observable act by which a state conveys its willingness to act on behalf of a partner (Balzacq, 2011). Recent scholarship expands the classic “signalling-cost” model by embedding digital media as a signalling arena where costly signalling is replaced by symbolic or virtual costs (Schelling, 1966; Fearon, 1997). Scholars such as Snyder (2008) and Parsi (2017) note that in the contemporary security environment, states must manage dual audiences: domestic constituencies and foreign partners, each interpreting signals through divergent cultural and partisan lenses.

Narrative framing sits at the intersection of communication and security studies. Der Derian (2009) describes “virtuous war” as a process by which the materiality of conflict is masked behind clean, moralised story-lines that render killing intelligible. Miskimmon et al. (2013) further contend that narratives are not static; they evolve through feedback loops with audiences, meaning that strategic communication is a dynamic, iterative process rather than a one-off campaign.

Rid (2020) documents the evolution of state-sponsored disinformation from covert propaganda to a high-volume, high-velocity strategy that overwhelms fact-checking mechanisms. The “firehose of falsehood” model emphasises plausibility over accuracy, repetition, and the use of counter-narratives to erode the credibility of opponents. Related studies (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Bennett & Livingston, 2018) show how algorithmic amplification on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok can transform a marginal claim into a dominant public truth within minutes. While state actors have become more adept at producing disinformation, the same digital infrastructure also enables open-source verification. Researchers of the Ukraine conflict (Krebs, 2015; O’Loughlin & Miskimmon, 2020) demonstrate how satellite imagery, geolocated video, and citizen-generated content have been instrumental in debunking Kremlin narratives and providing “counter-factual” evidence. This has given rise to the “information resilience” literature that emphasises societal capacity to absorb, filter, and act upon contested information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The governance policies of private platforms content moderation, algorithmic ranking, and de-platforming are now central to the information-warfare calculus (Gillespie, 2018). Studies of the Russia–Ukraine war show that Western-government bans on Russian state media (e.g.,

RT, Sputnik) have limited the reach of Kremlin narratives but have also reinforced claims of “Western censorship” used by Russia to sow doubt (Galeotti, 2018). In the Middle East, Iranian and Israeli operators have both accused platforms of bias, underscoring how platform governance itself becomes a strategic resource (Aouragh, 2016).

Classical deterrence theory assumes that threats must be credible and costly to be effective (Schelling, 1966). Recent work (Mearsheimer, 2014; Balzacq, 2011) argues that symbolic deterrence communicating resolve without immediate material deployment has become increasingly salient. The United States’ “strategic ambiguity” vis-à-vis Iran (Kroenig, 2019) and Israel’s “proportionality” rhetoric during the Gaza wars (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015) illustrate how verbal threats can serve as “pre-emptive escalation tools” that shape adversary calculations while preserving the option to de-escalate.

In conflicts where state actors outsource force to non-state proxies, signalling is fragmented across multiple actors. Weimann (2015) highlights how Hezbollah’s media arm and Iran’s “Resistance” discourse function as semi-autonomous signal emitters that reinforce the core alliance’s credibility while allowing plausible deniability. This distributed signalling introduces information asymmetry: the core state can claim success or restraint while the proxy may act independently, creating misinterpretation risk for adversaries (Berman, 2020).

The Ukraine war has been labelled a “global narrative war” (Götz, 2022). Analyses (Onuch & Sasse, 2023; Darczewska, 2015) show that Kyiv’s communications are unusually coherent: they consistently foreground sovereignty, civilian protection, and a rules-based international order. This coherence, combined with the personalisation of the war through President Zelensky’s video appeals, has generated a bottom-up mobilisation that has materially increased military aid and sanctions (Galeotti, 2018).

Russia’s narrative, by contrast, relies on historical grievance (e.g., protection of Russian-speaking populations) and anti-Western hypocrisy (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). The literature notes that these frames fail to gain traction in Western publics because they clash with visual evidence of civilian casualties and with pre-existing scepticism toward Kremlin messaging (Paul & Matthews, 2016). The “firehose” approach therefore produces information overload that paradoxically weakens the Kremlin’s persuasive power (Der Derian, 2009).

The war’s high visibility live-streamed drone footage, real-time geolocated images has turned the conflict into a symbolic battlefield (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Studies (DiResta et al., 2018; Baines & O’Shaughnessy, 2020) find that emotionally resonant visuals shape public opinion more quickly than textual messaging, reinforcing the notion that visual narrative framing can outweigh traditional strategic messaging in determining legitimacy.

Iranian strategic communication is built around the “Resistance” doctrine, a synthesis of anti-imperialist ideology, martyrdom, and regional solidarity (Kamolnick, 2018; Fisher, 2020). The narrative is disseminated through state broadcasters, Qom-based religious scholars, and proxy-aligned outlets. Empirical work such as Weimann, (2015); Alvandi, (2021) shows that the discourse successfully binds disparate non-state actors under a shared symbolic banner, creating a diffuse, transnational narrative that legitimises attacks on U.S. forces and Israeli targets.

Israel’s public communication blends real-time battlefield updates with legalistic justification of strikes (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015). The IDF’s “Operation Protective Edge” case study (Aouragh, 2016) demonstrates how visual militarism showcasing precision strikes and civilian warnings serves both domestic deterrence and diplomatic signalling to the United States. However, the high civilian casualties in Gaza have also fueled counter-narratives that challenge Israel’s claim to moral restraint, underscoring the limits of narrative control.

U.S. communication in the Middle East oscillates between “clear warnings” to Iran (e.g., “red line” statements) and “quiet reassurance” to Gulf allies (Robinson et al., 2020). Scholars note that this dual-track signalling is deliberately opaque: it deters Iran from crossing certain thresholds while signalling to allies that the U.S. remains engaged, thus preventing a premature Israeli strike that could trigger regional war (Parsi, 2017). The challenge for the United States is that such ambiguity is constantly re-interpreted by Iranian, Israeli, and regional media, producing divergent threat perceptions (Katz & Rice, 2022).

A key comparative insight is that conflict visibility determines the optimal *tone* of strategic communication. In highly visible wars (Russia–Ukraine), explicit, moralised signals help to create a global coalition and impose political costs on the adversary (Götz, 2022). In low-visibility, proxy-driven conflicts (US–Israel–Iran), strategic ambiguity enables actors to manage escalation risk while preserving plausible deniability (Balzacq, 2011). Both cases illustrate how audience segmentation shapes narrative design. In Ukraine, the primary audience is the Western public and NATO governments; in the Middle East, audiences include regional regimes, proxy groups, and trans-national publics whose identity narratives are more contested. This aligns with Miskimmon et al.’s (2017) notion that multiple, sometimes contradictory, audience frames require “poly-narrative” strategies that can be simultaneously reinforced and muted.

Both case sets reveal that platform architectures are not passive conduits but co-producers of strategic outcomes. The “algorithmic amplification” of emotionally charged content can accelerate the diffusion of a narrative beyond the originating state’s intent, as shown in studies

of meme-driven Russian propaganda (DiResta et al., 2018) and Iranian martyr videos (Alvandi, 2021). Consequently, scholars must treat platform governance as an *operational layer* of strategic communication (Gillespie, 2018).

Despite rich individual case studies, few works systematically compare high-visibility conventional wars with low-visibility proxy conflicts through the lens of strategic communication and alliance signalling. Most existing research treats information warfare either as a supporting tool of conventional war (Rid, 2020) or as a stand-alone phenomenon (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). A comparative framework that ties narrative framing *to* alliance management across visibility spectra remains under-developed. Moreover, the literature offers limited guidance on how information-resilience mechanisms (e.g., open-source verification) can be integrated into alliance decision-making without undermining deterrence credibility (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Collectively, the reviewed scholarship suggests that strategic communication and alliance signalling are now inseparable components of contemporary warfare. The form of signalling whether overt, moralised, and globally broadcast (Ukraine) or subtle, ambiguous, and distributed across proxies (US–Israel–Iran) reflects deeper structural differences in conflict architecture, audience composition, and platform ecosystems. Understanding how these variables interact is essential for both theoretical refinement of deterrence and practical design of resilient coalition communication strategies.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to examine the intersection of strategic communication and alliance signaling. These cases were selected because they represent divergent paradigms of contemporary conflict one characterized by high-visibility, overt interstate warfare and the other by low-visibility, proxy-driven strategic competition thereby allowing for a rigorous analysis of how visibility influences signaling strategies.

Data collection was based on content analysis is applied to a systematic sample of state-aligned and independent news outlets to identify dominant narrative frames. Third, digital discourse analysis is utilized to scrape and analyze public communication from official accounts on X (formerly Twitter) and Telegram, focusing on timing and sentiment of alliance-related signals.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study indicate that information warfare and strategic narratives are not peripheral supplements to armed conflict; rather, they function as core instruments through which states and aligned actors pursue legitimacy, mobilize support, shape international reactions, and manage escalation. Across both the Russia–Ukraine war and the US–Israel–Iran

conflict environment, narrative production emerged as a strategic activity closely integrated with military operations, diplomacy, and domestic political communication. At the same time, the study found important differences in narrative structure, audience targeting, and modes of dissemination between the two cases. Whereas the Russia–Ukraine war is characterized by highly visible, globalized, and morally polarized narrative competition, the US–Israel–Iran conflict is marked more strongly by layered deterrence messaging, proxy signaling, strategic ambiguity, and regionally coded ideological framing. These findings support the broader claim in the literature that contemporary conflict is increasingly shaped by struggles over meaning, interpretation, and visibility in digital media environments (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013; Rid, 2020).

One of the clearest findings from the comparative analysis is that information warfare now operates as a central dimension of modern strategic competition rather than a supporting or secondary feature of conflict. In both cases, actors did not simply communicate about war; they used communication itself as a weapon. This included attempts to legitimize military action, portray adversaries as aggressors, mobilize allies, influence neutral audiences, and shape the interpretive framework through which particular incidents were understood. Such findings strongly align with the argument advanced by Miskimmon et al. (2013) that strategic narratives do not merely describe international politics but actively constitute it by organizing political meaning.

In the Russia–Ukraine war, this centrality of information warfare was especially visible because battlefield developments were almost immediately accompanied by competing digital narratives. Offensive and defensive operations were quickly translated into symbolic claims about sovereignty, resistance, victimhood, historical destiny, and international order. Ukraine’s strategic communication consistently portrayed the conflict as a struggle for survival, national self-determination, and the defense of democratic norms against authoritarian aggression. Russia, by contrast, framed its actions through narratives of historical correction, civilizational security, anti-Nazism, and resistance to Western encirclement (Götz, 2022). These narratives were not incidental. They were designed to generate specific political outcomes: military aid, sanctions, diplomatic support, public compliance, or strategic confusion.

In the US–Israel–Iran conflict environment, information warfare was less linear but equally central. There, narratives were not always tied to declared war in the conventional sense; instead, they were used to communicate deterrence, retaliatory resolve, ideological legitimacy, and proxy alignment. Iran mobilized the language of “resistance” and anti-imperial sovereignty, Israel emphasized existential security and counterterrorism, and the United States

framed its posture in terms of regional stability, alliance commitments, and deterrence against escalation (Kamolnick, 2018; Robinson et al., 2020). The finding here is especially significant because it demonstrates that information warfare is not confined to hot war. It also structures the political battlespace in conditions of covert confrontation, proxy engagement, and episodic escalation.

The findings show that the Russia–Ukraine war has been marked by an unusually intense and globally resonant narrative contest, partly because the conflict has been interpreted by many international audiences as a defining struggle over the post-Cold War order. Ukraine’s narrative strategy was notably coherent, emotionally compelling, and highly adaptive across platforms. Official communication repeatedly linked military resistance to universalized values such as freedom, sovereignty, democracy, and civilian protection. This framing broadened the conflict beyond national defense and made it intelligible to Western publics and policymakers as a morally urgent cause. Such narrative coherence appears to have been a major factor in sustaining external political and material support (Onuch & Sasse, 2023).

The study also found that Ukraine successfully personalized its narrative through leadership performance, especially the visibility of President Volodymyr Zelensky. Rather than relying only on formal diplomatic channels, Ukrainian messaging used short video addresses, direct appeals to foreign legislatures, symbolic language, and platform-native communication styles that conveyed authenticity and urgency. This supports the broader argument that digital-era strategic communication increasingly depends on affective credibility and performative immediacy rather than solely on institutional authority (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Zelensky’s communication style helped transform state messaging into a participatory global narrative in which international audiences were invited to identify with Ukraine’s struggle.

By contrast, the Russian narrative, while internally consistent in some respects, faced significant difficulties in persuading external audiences beyond already sympathetic or politically aligned communities. The study found that Russia’s framing relied heavily on narratives of historical grievance, Western hypocrisy, anti-Nazism, and existential security threats. These themes were clearly meant to resonate with domestic audiences and with parts of the Global South skeptical of Western interventionism. However, in much of Europe and North America, these messages were often perceived as implausible or manipulative, especially when contradicted by visible evidence of destruction and civilian suffering circulating on digital platforms. This finding is consistent with the literature on the “firehose of falsehood” model, which emphasizes volume, repetition, and contradiction over consistency or truthfulness (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

An important related finding concerns the role of visuality. The Russia–Ukraine war has been one of the most mediated conflicts in history, and the study found that visual evidence played a decisive role in narrative competition. Images of bombed cities, civilian casualties, destroyed infrastructure, and everyday resistance became powerful narrative anchors. Such content condensed complex geopolitical events into emotionally legible symbols. As Der Derian (2009) suggests, the media environment of contemporary war collapses distance and produces forms of immediacy that intensify identification and outrage. In this case, visual circulation often advantaged Ukraine because it reinforced its claim to victimhood and resistance. Russia, meanwhile, frequently responded by disputing authenticity, reframing incidents, or producing counter-narratives that accused Western media of manipulation. Yet the speed and emotional force of image circulation made narrative recovery difficult once an interpretation had gained momentum.

Another key finding is that Ukraine’s information environment benefited from a fusion of state messaging and societal participation. Civil society groups, journalists, diaspora communities, and ordinary social media users amplified core themes of resistance, resilience, and solidarity. This broadened the communicative base of Ukrainian strategic narratives and reduced dependence on top-down propaganda alone. The result was not merely message repetition but the emergence of a networked narrative ecosystem. This supports arguments by Onuch and Sasse (2023) that Ukraine’s communication capacity was strengthened by pre-existing civic mobilization and participatory political culture. In contrast, Russian messaging appeared more centralized and state-directed, which may have aided internal discipline but reduced adaptability and credibility in pluralized digital spaces.

In the US–Israel–Iran case, the findings reveal a more diffuse but no less consequential information struggle. Unlike the Russia–Ukraine war, this conflict environment is not defined by one continuous, universally recognized battlefield. Instead, it encompasses proxy confrontations, cyber operations, targeted strikes, maritime incidents, regional alliance politics, and recurring crises involving Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and the Gulf. Consequently, strategic narratives in this context are less about securing a singular global moral consensus and more about managing deterrence, legitimacy, escalation, and ideological positioning across multiple audiences.

Iran’s narrative strategy, as identified in the findings, is anchored in a discourse of resistance, martyrdom, anti-imperialism, and regional sovereignty. These themes are not new, but the study found that they have been adapted effectively to digital platforms and cross-border media ecologies. Iranian state media and affiliated networks repeatedly framed Iran and its allied

groups as defenders of oppressed populations against US and Israeli aggression. This narrative allows Iran to integrate state policy with transnational ideological appeal, particularly among audiences already predisposed toward anti-Western or anti-Israeli interpretations of regional politics (Fisher, 2020; Kamolnick, 2018). Importantly, this messaging often blurs the line between direct state communication and broader resistance discourse, enabling Iran to maintain both deniability and ideological reach.

Israel's strategic narrative, by contrast, consistently emphasized security, deterrence, self-defense, and counterterrorism. The findings suggest that Israeli messaging sought to present military action as necessary, reactive, and legally justified, especially in response to rocket attacks, proxy threats, or Iranian military entrenchment in neighboring territories. At the same time, Israeli communication was often highly calibrated for external audiences, especially Western governments and media institutions. This reflects the importance of alliance maintenance and diplomatic legitimacy in Israeli strategic communication. Yet the findings also indicate that this narrative faced increasing contestation, particularly during periods of high civilian casualties in Gaza or other visible humanitarian crises. In such moments, the framing of military necessity was frequently challenged by counter-narratives emphasizing disproportionality, occupation, and structural violence (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015).

The United States occupied a somewhat different narrative position. Its messaging emphasized deterrence, alliance solidarity, regional order, and the prevention of wider war. The findings show that US communication often attempted to balance reassurance to Israel and Gulf partners with warnings to Iran and its proxies against escalation. In this sense, American strategic narratives operated simultaneously as diplomatic signals and domestic political statements. However, the study also found that US messaging was often vulnerable to accusations of inconsistency, particularly when appeals to international norms appeared selective or unevenly applied. This perception weakened the normative force of US narratives in some regional and international audiences, especially where distrust of American foreign policy was already pronounced.

A particularly important finding in this case concerns the role of proxy actors. Groups aligned with Iran, including Hezbollah and other regional militias, are not merely military auxiliaries; they are also narrative actors. They produce symbolic content, circulate martyrdom imagery, issue statements of resolve, and interpret events within a shared ideological framework of resistance. This creates a multilayered narrative system in which meanings are distributed across state and non-state communicative nodes. Unlike the Russia–Ukraine case, where state-centered messaging was more prominent, the US–Israel–Iran conflict demonstrates how

strategic narratives can be co-produced within loose networks of ideological alignment. This supports Weimann's (2015) contention that non-state actors increasingly operate as sophisticated communicative organizations in digital conflict environments.

One of the most important comparative findings is that the form and effectiveness of strategic narratives depend heavily on the structure of intended audiences. In the Russia–Ukraine case, the primary narrative battle was directed toward global public opinion, allied governments, domestic populations, and international institutions. The aim was not only to interpret events but to shape broad diplomatic and material outcomes, including sanctions, military assistance, and multilateral condemnation. This produced narratives that were universalizing, morally legible, and highly accessible to international media logics.

In the US–Israel–Iran case, however, the audience structure was more fragmented. Actors simultaneously addressed domestic constituencies, regional publics, allied elites, adversarial states, and proxy networks. As a result, messages often operated on multiple levels at once. A statement meant for deterrence could also function as domestic political reassurance; a symbolic funeral or missile announcement could serve ideological mobilization, alliance signaling, and escalation management simultaneously. This finding suggests that strategic narratives in regional conflict systems tend to be more layered and polysemic than those in highly visible interstate wars.

The significance of audience fragmentation is that it limits narrative standardization. While Ukraine could often consolidate its narrative around a clear binary of aggression and resistance, actors in the US–Israel–Iran conflict confronted a far more contested interpretive terrain shaped by sectarian politics, historical grievances, great-power rivalry, and unresolved questions of occupation and sovereignty. Consequently, no single narrative achieved the same degree of global clarity or dominance. Instead, narrative success depended on audience-specific resonance. This supports the insight of strategic narrative theory that narratives work only when they align with pre-existing identity structures and political expectations (Miskimmon et al., 2017).

A major cross-case finding is that platform logics significantly shape the production and reception of wartime narratives. In both cases, actors adapted their messaging to the affordances of social media platforms, particularly speed, brevity, visuality, virality, and algorithmic amplification. However, the study found that platformization does not simply accelerate communication; it also alters what kinds of narratives gain traction. Emotionally charged, visually striking, morally simplified, and personalized content was more likely to

circulate widely than complex legal or historical explanations. This dynamic often rewarded immediacy over verification and symbolism over nuance.

In the Russia–Ukraine war, digital platforms facilitated rapid internationalization. Footage from the front, civilian testimony, memes, official clips, and satellite imagery all circulated globally within minutes or hours. This compressed the temporal gap between event and interpretation, making narrative struggle almost simultaneous with battlefield occurrence. In many instances, the first widely circulated interpretation shaped later public understanding even when factual uncertainty remained. Such findings align with Wardle and Derakhshan’s (2017) concept of information disorder, in which the speed and density of circulating content create conditions for confusion, distortion, and emotionally charged misrecognition.

In the US–Israel–Iran case, platform dynamics were equally consequential but somewhat different in effect. Because the conflict involved multiple theaters and actors, digital platforms often amplified isolated incidents into broader regional narratives. A single strike, assassination, or rocket barrage could trigger transnational cascades of commentary and competing claims. The study found that Telegram, X, and regionally significant media ecosystems were especially important for circulation among politically engaged audiences. Unlike the more globally mainstreamed Russia–Ukraine case, some of these flows were concentrated in networked publics already embedded in ideological or geopolitical alignments. This gave rumor, symbolic messaging, and rapid retaliatory framing particular significance.

The findings also suggest that platform governance affects narrative competition. Content moderation decisions, account restrictions, state media labeling, and algorithmic ranking influenced visibility and reach. Yet such governance was uneven and often politicized in public perception. In the Russia–Ukraine case, restrictions on Russian state media in some Western platforms narrowed the reach of Kremlin narratives in certain information environments. In the Middle Eastern context, actors on multiple sides accused platforms of bias, suppression, or selective enforcement. Thus, information warfare now unfolds not only between states and publics but also through the infrastructural power of private platforms that determine conditions of circulation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

Another major finding is that legitimacy in wartime is increasingly mediated through moral narrative. In both cases, actors sought to establish not only that they were strategically justified but that they occupied the ethically defensible position. This often involved claims to victimhood, self-defense, humanitarian concern, or historical necessity. The moral dimension of strategic narratives mattered because it shaped access to external support, sympathy, and tolerance for violence.

In the Russia–Ukraine case, Ukraine’s ability to present itself as an invaded state defending civilians and international law provided enormous narrative leverage. That leverage translated into real-world political effects, including military assistance, refugee support, and intensified sanctions on Russia. Russia also deployed moralized language, especially through claims that it was protecting vulnerable populations or confronting fascism. Yet the study found that Russia’s moral framing was less effective internationally because it lacked narrative congruence with widely circulating visual evidence and because it was filtered through pre-existing skepticism toward Kremlin disinformation. This illustrates a key point: moral narratives require not only emotional power but also perceived plausibility.

In the US–Israel–Iran case, moral legitimacy was more unstable because all major actors faced significant narrative vulnerabilities. Israel’s claims of self-defense resonated strongly among allied governments and parts of the public, especially in relation to attacks by armed groups. However, high levels of civilian suffering often generated counter-narratives that undermined or complicated that framing. Iran’s claims to defend the oppressed resonated within resistance-oriented publics, but these were undercut by perceptions of proxy violence, repression, and instrumentalization of regional conflict. The United States invoked rules-based order and stability, yet these claims were often challenged by accusations of double standards. The finding here is that moral narrative authority is context-dependent and fragile; it can be strengthened by coherence and audience predispositions but weakened by visible contradiction. The comparative analysis further found that strategic ambiguity was more central in the US–Israel–Iran conflict than in the Russia–Ukraine war. In Russia–Ukraine, although propaganda and disinformation were widespread, the broad conflict alignment was relatively explicit: one state invaded another, and both mobilized public narratives accordingly. In the US–Israel–Iran case, by contrast, ambiguity itself often functioned as strategy. Actors used partial acknowledgment, symbolic hints, leaked reports, unofficial channels, and calibrated statements to communicate intent without fully committing to public escalation.

This was especially evident around covert operations, targeted killings, cyber incidents, and proxy attacks. The study found that ambiguous messaging allowed actors to project capability and resolve while preserving room for denial or de-escalation. Such ambiguity may reduce immediate escalation risks, but it also creates interpretive instability and increases the likelihood of misperception. In information warfare terms, ambiguity is not simply absence of clarity; it is a managed communicative practice that structures expectations and limits. This finding adds nuance to the literature by showing that strategic narratives need not always aim

at full persuasion. Sometimes their function is to preserve uncertainty in a politically useful manner.

A recurring finding across both cases is that information warfare contributes to the erosion of epistemic trust. The saturation of digital space with conflicting claims, manipulated imagery, selective editing, unverifiable rumor, and emotionally intensified commentary made it difficult for audiences to distinguish reliable information from strategic distortion. This did not mean that truth became irrelevant, but rather that truth claims entered a competitive environment in which trust was mediated by identity, ideology, and platform exposure. Rid (2020) notes that modern disinformation works not only by implanting falsehoods but by degrading confidence in shared factual standards. The present findings strongly support that argument.

In the Russia–Ukraine case, epistemic erosion was partly countered by open-source intelligence communities, investigative journalism, satellite verification, and collaborative fact-checking. These actors played an important role in validating claims and exposing falsehoods. Nevertheless, the volume of content remained overwhelming, and narrative commitment often shaped interpretation of evidence. In the US–Israel–Iran context, verification challenges were even greater due to restricted access, fragmented media systems, and the prevalence of proxy and covert activity. Consequently, competing publics often consumed entirely different informational realities.

This finding has broader implications. If information warfare erodes the possibility of a minimally shared factual sphere, it becomes harder not only to assess events but to negotiate political responses. Diplomacy, humanitarian action, legal accountability, and conflict resolution all depend on credible interpretation of events. The more deeply the information environment is saturated by strategic distortion, the more difficult these processes become.

Implications of the findings

The findings contribute to the literature in several important ways. First, they reinforce strategic narrative theory by showing that narratives are constitutive rather than merely descriptive. In both cases, the struggle to define what the conflict meant was inseparable from the struggle to shape its outcomes (Miskimmon et al., 2013). Second, the findings expand information warfare scholarship by showing that its key mechanisms are not limited to disinformation or cyber-enabled propaganda. Information warfare also includes moral framing, emotional performance, symbolic timing, audience segmentation, and the management of ambiguity.

Third, the comparative dimension suggests that the relationship between narrative strategy and conflict type deserves greater theoretical attention. Interstate wars with high global visibility

may incentivize coherent, universalizing narratives oriented toward alliance building and diplomatic mobilization. Hybrid or proxy-centered conflicts, by contrast, may produce multilayered narratives optimized for deterrence, ideological continuity, and regionally specific audience effects. This distinction is useful because it prevents overgeneralization from one conflict type to another.

Fourth, the findings highlight the need to integrate platform studies more fully into security analysis. Communication strategies are now shaped by the infrastructures through which they circulate. Algorithms, moderation policies, visual norms, and engagement metrics influence not just dissemination but narrative form. Therefore, understanding information warfare increasingly requires attention to the political economy and governance of digital platforms as much as to state messaging itself.

The findings suggest several policy implications. For democratic states and international institutions, strategic communication cannot be treated as an afterthought in wartime or crisis management. Narrative incoherence, delayed response, or selective norm invocation can create strategic vulnerabilities. At the same time, effective communication should not collapse into propaganda, since credibility remains one of the most valuable assets in contested information environments.

The study also suggests that resilience against information warfare depends not only on censorship or technical monitoring but on broader social trust, media literacy, independent journalism, and transparent public institutions. Ukraine's relative effectiveness was not simply a matter of better messaging; it also reflected a communicative ecosystem in which state, civil society, and international supporters reinforced one another. By contrast, in environments marked by deep polarization or institutional distrust, external manipulation and internal fragmentation are more likely to succeed.

Finally, in the US–Israel–Iran context, the findings suggest that escalation management now requires communication management as much as military signaling. Ambiguous or symbolic actions may produce effects far beyond their immediate tactical value once they are interpreted through networked media ecosystems. Policymakers must therefore consider not only what actions mean militarily, but how they will be narratively translated by allies, adversaries, proxies, and publics.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that information warfare and strategic narratives are foundational to the conduct of contemporary conflict. In the Russia–Ukraine war, the struggle over meaning has been global, emotionally charged, and deeply connected to alliance politics,

legitimacy, and visible battlefield realities. In the US–Israel–Iran conflict environment, information warfare has been more fragmented and layered, shaped by deterrence, proxy alignment, strategic ambiguity, and ideologically differentiated audiences. Despite these differences, both cases show that narrative power now operates alongside military power as a decisive dimension of geopolitical competition.

The central conclusion is that wars are increasingly fought through interpretation as well as force. Actors seek not only to destroy enemy capabilities but to dominate the frameworks through which violence is understood, justified, remembered, and politically acted upon. In that sense, control over narrative has become a strategic resource in its own right. Future research should continue to examine how artificial intelligence, synthetic media, automated amplification, and platform governance are transforming this resource, but the present study makes clear that even within current conditions, information warfare already occupies a central place in the architecture of modern conflict.

Recommendations

- a. States should integrate real-time open-source intelligence (OSINT) verification into public diplomatic messaging to enhance the credibility and speed of alliance signaling during high-visibility conflicts.
- b. Policymakers must develop "strategic ambiguity" protocols for low-visibility proxy conflicts to manage escalation risks while maintaining credible deterrence against adversaries.
- c. Alliance structures should institutionalize coordinated digital communication teams to synchronize narrative framing across member states and prevent adversarial information fragmentation.
- d. Governments should invest in platform-agnostic communication infrastructure to ensure the continuity of alliance signaling during periods of digital disruption or platform censorship.
- e. Military and diplomatic academies must update curricula to train personnel in the principles of narrative warfare and digital audience analysis as core components of modern strategic communication.

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