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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AS TOOL FOR NATION BRANDING: PAKISTAN'S THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND FUTURE IMPERATIVES IN THE MIDDLE EAST NORTH AFRICA REGION

¹Zahid Yaqub, ²Muhammad Hassan, ³Shifa Ullah Malik, ⁴Sobia Andleeb

¹PhD Scholar, Department of International Relations, University of Karachi, Pakistan;
Visiting PhD Research Fellow, New York University, USA

²Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Balochistan University of Information
Technology, Engineering & management Sciences (BUIITEMS Quetta)

³PhD Scholar, Department of International Relations & European Studies, IBU University
Sarajevo, Bosnia

⁴Research Associate, South Asia Times, Islamabad, Pakistan

zahidyaqub@nyu.edu

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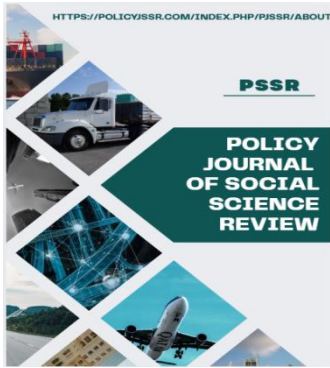
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ABSTRACT

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is undergoing a geopolitical transformation, marked by the US-Iran-Israeli standoff, geo-political alliances and security paradigms. Amidst this volatile backdrop, Pakistan has emerged as an unlikely peace negotiator, deploying its geopolitical and nuclear advantages and historical relations to play a role in bringing adversaries together. This article offers a comprehensive theoretical framework of strategic communication for Pakistan, as a middle power in the MENA region. The study uses qualitative research methods (15 semi-structured interviews of International Relations students from New York University and immigrants from MENA living in USA, conducted in March-May 2026), policy papers and literature reviews, and offers the "Responsive Narrative Resilience Model" (RNRM) for branding in war zones. The research concludes that Pakistan's strategic communication challenges of mixed messaging, underutilization of its diaspora and reactive communication in times of crisis can be resolved through institutional reforms, diaspora diplomacy and narrative realignment. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for Pakistan's decision makers on how to convert its "diplomatic momentum" to soft power.

Keywords: Strategic communication, nation branding, Pakistan foreign policy, Middle East, Iran-US conflict, diaspora diplomacy, narrative analysis



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1. Introduction

In the 21st century, it is not just the control of territory and economic influence that are at stake, but narratives, perceptions and information. In the context of middle powers like Pakistan, which do not have the hegemonic power of a great power, strategic communication provides a force multiplier in terms of influence, discourse and protecting national interests without violence (Anholt, S. 2007).

Pakistan is at a geopolitical juncture. The escalating tensions between the US, Israel and Iran have created a volatile situation in the Middle East. In this backdrop, Pakistan has found an opportunity to play a mediator role, leveraging its position as a country that has ties with Washington, the Gulf and Tehran (Ahmed, S., & Bashir, 2026). This opportunity is fraught with potential. This time around Pakistan can shake off its "security state" label and become a state that practices strategic communication and responsible foreign policy.

But strategic communication is not only about public relations, it is about having a sound theoretical background, institutional coordination and government-to-government coordination and co-operation in foreign policy. (Pamment, 2016) This article aims to answer three research questions:

Q1. Which theories explain Pakistan's strategic communication issues and opportunities in the MENA region?

Q2. How does the emergence of new geopolitical realities, like the US-Iran-Israel rivalry and Israel's approaches, affect Pakistan's nation branding?

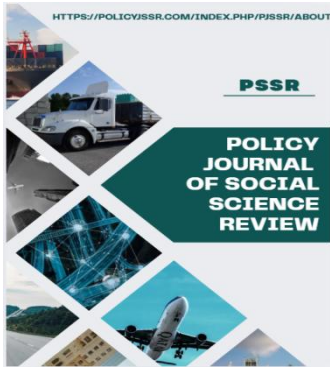
Q3. What strategic communication strategy can Pakistan adopt to build resilience, connect its diaspora and prepare for the new geopolitical realities?

The current research adopts a mixed-method approach, including thematic analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews of Middle Eastern and European students of Oxford University (conducted in January-February 2026), document analysis of Pakistan policy statements and literature review. This enables contextual understanding of the opinions of the key international audiences on Pakistan's communication strategy and how it needs to change.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Conceptualizing Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is a recent addition, combining aspects of public relations, international relations and marketing (Park, 2107). It is defined by Hallahan et al. as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission" For nations, strategic communication encompasses public



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diplomacy, nation branding, digital diplomacy and crisis communication, and is used to support diplomatic objectives. (Hallahan, et al., 2007)

Lim (2024) takes the field to the next level by linking quantitative and qualitative methods with digital technologies, and proposes that current strategic communication strategies need to be adapted to the data ecosystem enabled by artificial intelligence and social media. For Pakistan, this requires a transition from statements to platform strategies that appeal to Gen Z, the platform generation. (Siddique, Qaiser, 2024).

2.2 Nation Branding and Soft Power

Simon Anholt's (2011) nation branding theory considers countries as brands competing for investment, tourism and people. Nation branding is a six-dimensional theory and comprises the dimensions of exports, governance, culture and heritage, people, tourism and immigration and investment. Pakistan has poor scores on these dimensions, with the Global Soft Power Index ranking Pakistan last for international influence and governance. (Yaqub, Shah, Andleeb, 2025)

Joseph Nye's (2019) soft power concept has three attractions: culture, political values and foreign policies. Pakistan can capitalise on cultural soft power (Sufi movement, food, music), but governance issues and military intervention hinders legitimacy,

critical to soft power. (Warrach, et al., 2023)

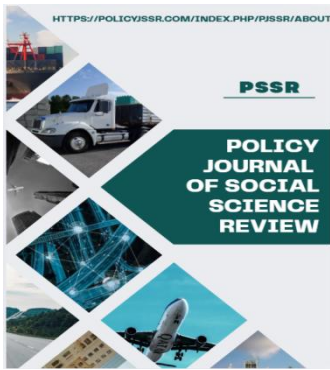
2.3 Narrative Spinning and Analysis

Strategic narratives, and the stories that states tell about themselves, their region and the international system, are crucial to soft power strategies, according to Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin (2014)). Countries compete for "narrative dominance" where their stories about events become the default narratives for the international audience. (Hinck, et al., 2019).

Pakistan has historically been on the receiving end of narrative dominance. India's well-coordinated disinformation, exposed by the EU Disinfo Lab, has labelled Pakistan as a terror state. To counter it, we must not only reactively debunk the narrative, but also proactively tell a positive story about Pakistan's position in the region, its development agenda and culture. (Arain, 2020).

2.4 The MENA's Geopolitics: Pakistan's New Home

The recent literature has highlighted Pakistan's foreign policy and defence presence in the MENA region. Foreign Policy calls Pakistan's strategy a "dashing arms offensive", which includes military and defence, arms sales (approximately \$1.5 billion to Sudan and nearly \$4 billion to Libya) and peace brokerage. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (September 2025) is



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the most significant defence deal in decades, and is a military "seal of approval" for the Gulf (Alkhafaji, 2026).

Pakistan has been critical to US-Iran relations. It has been reported that Pakistan has delivered a 15-point US peace proposal to Iran, and offered to host direct negotiations, which have been touted as "the most coordinated regional initiative aimed at bringing Washington and Tehran to the negotiating table to date". Pakistan's role is due to its proximity to Iran, military agreements with the US and its acceptability to Muslim states. (Ijaz & Irshad, 2026)

Pakistan is not an ally of Israel and public opinion is opposed to normalization. However, Israel's role in the region - its covert nuclear capability (80-100 warheads), its policy of preemption (seen in Iraq and Syria) and its proximity to India - is an indirect but relevant factor for Pakistan. (Ayeni & Silas, 2026)

The concept of Israel's "Samson Option" (nuclear deterrence as a last resort) implies the implications of escalation. (Youvan, 2026). Pakistan's challenge is to avoid open war and exercise its credibility in relation to the US (Israel's friend) and Iran (Israel's foe).

The United States' expectations from Pakistan regarding the Abraham Accords are generally viewed through the broader lens of regional stability, economic cooperation, and diplomatic engagement

in the Middle East.(Xinhua, 2026). United States has publicly demanded that Pakistan and many other states should join the Abraham Accords. American policymakers have often expressed interest in expanding the framework to include more Muslim-majority countries. From a US perspective, Pakistan's participation or gradual engagement could contribute to regional dialogue, reduce political polarization, and create opportunities for economic, technological, and diplomatic cooperation with countries that have normalized relations with Israel.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative design, which is appropriate to the contextual and complex nature of its subject, strategic communication and nation branding. The design has three components:

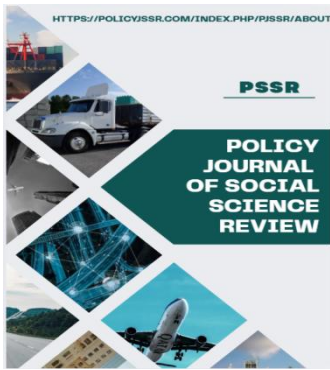
Primary Data: Semi-structured interviews of 15 International Relations students from Oxford University, conducted from January 15 to March 15, 2026.

Secondary Data: Pakistan Foreign Affairs statements, UN voting records and think tank briefings.

Secondary Data: Journal articles on strategic communication, nation branding, and South Asian/Middle Eastern geopolitics.

3.2 Interviewing Sample & Protocol

The sample (n=15) comprised: 8 women and 7 men from University of Oxford,



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Department of Politics and International Relations. By region: Middle East (5: 2 Egypt, 1 Jordan, 1 UAE, 1 Saudi Arabia) and Europe (10: 4 UK, 2 Germany, 2 France, 1 Italy, 1 Sweden).

A 12 question semi-structured questionnaire was administered to ask questions around: Pakistan's international image, knowledge of Pakistan's mediation role, effectiveness of online diplomacy, views on the engagement with the diaspora, and recommendations for bettering Pakistan's communication strategy.

3.3 Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed and thematically analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps: familiarization, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Themes were coded and categorized using NVivo.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Participants gave their consent. Participants' identities were protected and names were removed from the interviews.

4. Interview themes

The 15 interviews revealed four major themes that show key features of Pakistan's strategic communication environment.

Theme 1: Awareness-Perception Gap

An insight was the awareness-perception gap in the international recognition of Pakistan's diplomatic achievement. Although all 15 interviewees knew about the US-Iran-Israel crisis, and knew Pakistan

was hosting negotiations. One Egyptian respondent said: "I know that Pakistan is close to Saudi Arabia, but I didn't know they will be credible for hosting US-Iran talks. One German respondent said: "Every time I see the word 'Pakistan' on the news it's about political unrest and terrorism. The mediation story seems a different place" (P-08, German).

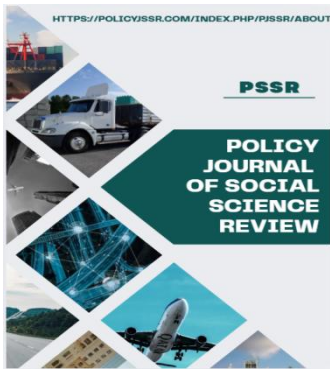
Insight: The discrepancy between awareness and perception suggests Pakistan needs to communicate better to the world. Although there is a lot of diplomatic efforts, the story is still blurred. This must be rectified with regard to both the volume of communication, and media influence.

Theme 2: Credibility Gap

Respondents identified a lack of credibility as Pakistan's primary soft power weakness. A Saudi respondent commented: "Pakistan, they say they are a democracy, but then you have the military doing so much. So it's hard to trust the message that they're sending out" (P-12, Saudi).

An Egyptian interviewee explained: "In the Middle East, we admire Pakistan's military, they have a nuclear program, and have fought wars. But we respect and admire, we don't trust. And to earn trust you have to be consistent and Pakistan's not there yet" (P-05, Egyptian).

Interpretation: The lack of trust is due to the apparent discrepancy between Pakistan's "claim" to democracy and moderates and the reality of the situation



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in Pakistan (military, political and human rights). This can only be addressed by more than just improved communication, it must be accompanied by improved governance.

Theme 3: The Diaspora's Potential

Respondents recognized the potential of the Pakistani diaspora but also its untapped potential. A British-Pakistani student said, "There are millions of British Pakistanis but you don't see organized lobbying like the Indian diaspora. We have the numbers but not the organization" (P-07, UK).

A French respondent compared the diaspora with other groups: "If you compare the Pakistani diaspora to the Jewish diaspora in the US or the Turkish diaspora in Germany, the Pakistani diaspora is unknown in the policy-making circles. They send money, but they don't do much else" (P-09, French).

Implications: Diaspora is an untapped resource, marginalized by a deficit of institutional mechanisms to mobilize the diaspora (AIPAC, Jewish Federations in Israel), Pakistan is on the other end of the corridor. This needs to be developed.

Theme 4: Emotional resonance deficit

Interviewees noted that Pakistan's communication is descriptive and defensive but not emotional. A Jordanian respondent said: "When Israel communicates, even if people don't agree with its policies, they remember its

narrative, from the Holocaust to being innovative, the 'Start-up Nation'. What is Pakistan's narrative? Pakistani appearance on India Media is more abusive than logical. India media is not responsible but I don't know what it is the role of Pakistani analysts on Indian media?" (P-02, Jordanian).

A Swede added: "Pakistan's social media is reactive - countering Indian propaganda, responding to crises. There is no positive message. No 'why Pakistan matters'" (P-11, Swedish).

Interpretation: Nation branding should appeal to emotions. Pakistan is currently responding to crises and negating myths. Pakistan needs to shift from reactive to proactive mode.

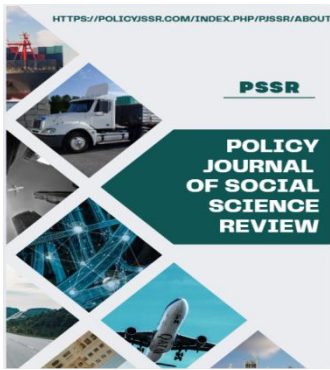
5. Findings and Analysis

5.1 Strategic Communication Gaps

A combination of thematic analysis and documentary data highlights four related gaps in Pakistan's communication strategy:

The Coherence Gap: Pakistan lacks a national narrative. Government communication lacks consistency across ministries, embassies and social platforms, leading to confusion.

The Channel Gap: Pakistan lacks a strong online presence compared to neighbors (Turkey, UAE, Saudi Arabia). The national social media strategy is ineffective in reaching target audiences.



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The Diaspora Gap: Pakistan has no large-scale diaspora political mobilization and public relations like Israel and India.

The Governance Gap: Communication cannot fix governance issues. Political turmoil and human rights challenges in Pakistan reduce the effectiveness of communication.

5.2 A Crisis Opportunity

Despite these challenges, the current Middle East and North Africa (MENA) crisis presents opportunities:

Mediation as Story-Anchors: Pakistan's peace initiatives can be leveraged to tell a story of responsible and good statecraft that counterpoints negative images.

Economic Integration: CPEC and Gulf investment models demonstrate Pakistan's economic development.

Cultural Resources: Sufi tradition, cultural & territorial diversity, religious tourism, food and the young, creative population are emotive branding resources that don't only depend on official narratives.

6. Proposed Model: Responsive Narrative Resilience Model

This article proposes the Responsive Narrative Resilience Model (RNRM) of communication strategies in conflict based on the theoretical and empirical lessons

6.1 Core Principles

The RNRM is grounded on four principles:

Truth: Stories need to be true; there is no better virtue.

Adaptability: Messages must be resilient to crisis evolution but maintain the storyline.

Resonance: Messages must be about engaging with audiences, not informing.

Institutionalization: Crises need to be met with strategies, not ad-hockery.

6.2 Model Components

RNRM has five components:

Narrative Architecture: Messages from core narrative (fixed) to tactical messages (crisis-specific).

International Audience Mapping: Mapping of key international audiences and channel strategies.

Digital Ecosystem: Platform strategies to synergise platform-specific messages.

Diaspora Engagement: Diaspora narrative amplification and political mobilisation.

Learning and Agility: Monitoring and analytics for feedback.

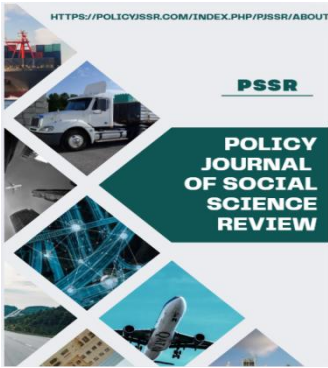
6.3 Implementation Recommendations

To implement RNRM in Pakistan, it is recommended to:

Short-term: Set up a National Narrative Task Force in the Foreign Affairs Ministry; launch a social media campaign on mediation role; train diplomats on social media.

Medium-term: Set up a Diaspora Engagement Authority; build cultural diplomacy (increase cultural centres, exchange programs); build digital forensic skills for countering disinformation.

Long-term: Align domestic governance and foreign policy messaging; build education

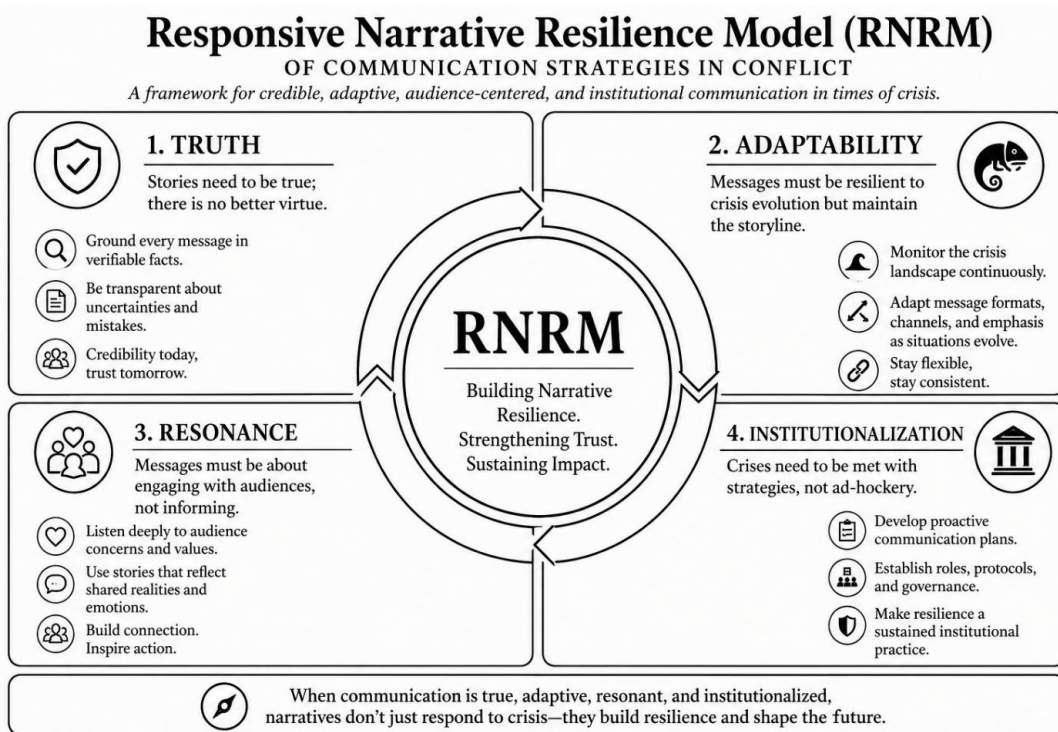


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sector to develop human capital that generates soft power.



7. Future: Diaspora, Mediation and the Future

7.1 Diaspora Engagement Strategy

In exploiting the potential of the diaspora (like Israel, India, Turkey), Pakistan needs a four-fold strategy:

Political Mobilization: Establish diaspora "consultative councils" in key capitals (London, Washington, Riyadh, Kuala Lumpur) with direct links to the government.

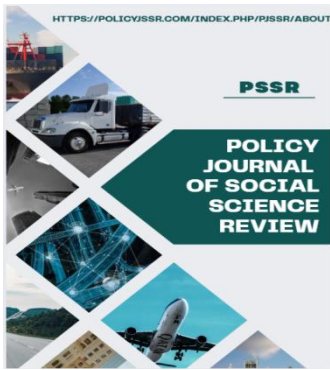
Economic Investment: Set up investment forums for diaspora in CPEC and special economic zones.

Cultural Heritage: Facilitate diaspora cultural festivals, language schools and media.

Youth Engagement: Set up leadership academies and cultural trips for second- and third-generation young diaspora.

7.2 The Iran-US-Mediation Challenge

Pakistan's mediation role is risky. As some have put it, "Even if Pakistan is able to broker a rapprochement between the



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United States and Iran, the deal may be fragile if it does not address Israeli intentions/ ambitions in the region". Pakistan's lack of influence over Israel is a vulnerability. Therefore, it is recommended that Pakistan quietly work with its Gulf allies that have Israeli connections, maintain neutrality in public statements, and plan for different scenarios: success, partial success or failure.

7.3 Israel in Pakistan's Strategy

Pakistan has no formal ties with Israel but Israel's position in the region impacts Pakistan in three ways:

India-Israel Partnership: Pakistan is affected by the India-Israeli defence cooperation (Israel and India have jointly developed and supplied several defense systems, including: Barak 8 (also known as MRSAM/LRSAM). A major India-Israel joint development project. Designed to intercept aircraft, drones, and missiles. Developed by India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Israel's Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI).

Gulf Normalization: The Arab rapprochement with Israel also impacts Pakistan domestically and in the Gulf region.

Nuclear Dynamics: Israel's secret nuclear policy and pre-emptive strike doctrine impacts Pakistan's security environment. Pakistan's communication strategy needs to walk the tightrope. The optimal strategy

appears to be to show that Pakistan's commitments to Palestinian rights (in line with the Muslim world) while not engaging Israel where there is no leverage.

7.4 Futuristic Challenges

By 2030 Pakistan will be facing three challenges in its strategic communication environment:

Narrative Fragmentation: In the digital era, narratives will be contested at prompt pace; it will be difficult to maintain them.

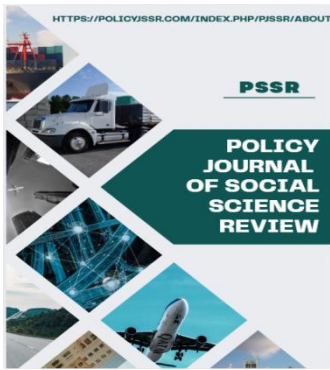
Synthetic Media Disinformation: Disinformation will be driven by AI-based deepfake videos; Pakistan must learn how to identify and counter them.

An Ageing Global Audience: Younger people are less respectful of traditional diplomatic narratives; to engage with them, Pakistan needs to craft compelling and relatable digital stories.

8. Conclusion

Pakistan is at a pivotal moment in history. A triangular US-Iran-Israel war coincides with Pakistan's increasing military collaboration and diplomatic engagement to provide a chance to rebrand. Opportunity lost is opportunity wasted.

The Responsive Narrative Resilience (RNR) model offers a way to convert foreign policy success stories into nation branding. Authenticity, adaptability, resonance and institutionalization - the four principles of its model - resonate with the issues we identified in our thematic analysis of the awareness-perception gap, credibility deficit,



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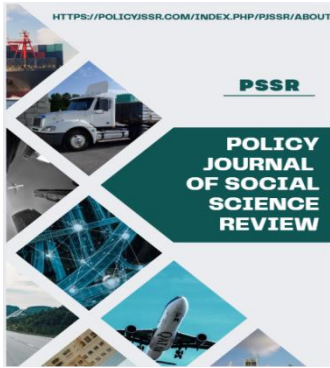
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diaspora underutilization and emotional resonance deficit.

For Pakistan's foreign policy establishment, the key is to switch from crisis to narrative. It is not to treat strategic communication as an adjunct to foreign policy but as part of foreign policy; a skill that needs financial and human resources, and training. Too much is at stake. In the age of information warfare, narrative warfare and digital diplomacy, whoever communicates best, wins best. Pakistan has the cards, leverage i.e geographical, demographical, cultural and diplomatic. It is essential for Pakistan to use them strategically.

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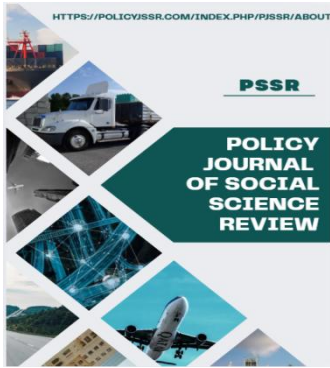


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