

Ancient Indian Strategic Communication and Its Relevance to Modern Warfare: Insights from the Mahābhārata

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Abstract

Strategic communication has emerged as a decisive instrument in contemporary warfare, often shaping outcomes prior to the deployment of kinetic force. While modern strategic studies largely attribute the systematic articulation of communication strategies to twentieth-century military and political doctrines, this paper assumes that many foundational principles of strategic communication were already conceptualized and operationalized in ancient Indian thought. The Mahābhārata, as a civilizational epic, offers a sophisticated and multi-layered framework of communication employed across diplomacy, psychological operations, deception, alliance formation, and post-war legitimacy.

The central problem addressed in this study is the marginalization of ancient Indian strategic knowledge within modern warfare discourse, particularly in the domains of information warfare, narrative control, and psychological deterrence. Existing scholarship tends to treat the Mahābhārata primarily as a literary or ethical text, thereby overlooking its function as a practical manual of statecraft and strategic communication.

The objective of this research is to systematically identify, classify, and analyze major instances of strategic communication in the Mahābhārata—including doctrines such as Sāma–Dāna–Bheda–Daṇḍa, psychological deterrence (bhaya-pradarśana), narrative framing of dharma, selective disclosure, deception (māyā-yuddha), symbolic signaling, and moral coercion—and to examine their functional parallels in modern warfare practices such as diplomatic escalation, psychological operations (PSYOPS), alliance signaling, operational security, and coercive diplomacy.



Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative textual analysis of selected Parvas of the Mahābhārata, mapping strategic communication episodes to contemporary military and political communication doctrines. The paper argues that the epic presents a coherent and context-sensitive model of communication where truth, timing, symbolism, and silence function as strategic tools.

By bridging Indian Knowledge Systems with modern strategic studies, this research contributes to a decolonized and interdisciplinary understanding of warfare, demonstrating the continued relevance of ancient Indian strategic communication paradigms in contemporary global conflict environments.

Content

Diplomatic escalation ladder (UN negotiations, sanctions → force)

Śrī Kṛṣṇa's peace mission to Hastināpura presents a classical and operational illustration of the Sāma–Dāna–Bheda–Daṇḍa doctrine as a graduated model of strategic communication preceding warfare. Initially, Kṛṣṇa adopts sāma (conciliation) by appealing to dharma, reputation, and collective welfare, emphasizing that peace is morally legitimate and universally beneficial: “धर्म्यं यशस्यमायुष्यं स्वर्ग्यं कीर्तिकरं महत् । त्रैलोक्यस्य हितं राजन् कुरु पाण्डवकौरवैः ¹ ॥” When persuasion fails, he advances to dāna (concession), offering a minimal and symbolic compromise to prevent bloodshed, famously requesting only five villages: “पञ्च ग्रामान् महाबाहो देहि मे नृपसत्तम । अवध्यास्ते भविष्यन्ति मा स्म गाः पापमित्युत ² ॥” Upon Duryodhana's rejection, Kṛṣṇa employs bheda by exposing the moral illegitimacy and instability of power gained through injustice, thereby creating ethical and political fissures within the Kaurava court: “न राज्यं न सुखं लोके न कीर्तिर्न च धर्मता । अधर्मेण जितं पार्थ न कालेनावतिष्ठते ³ ॥” Finally, having exhausted all diplomatic avenues, Kṛṣṇa resorts to daṇḍa, issuing a clear warning of destruction as a consequence of continued adharmā: “अहं हि सर्वभूतानां गतिर्योगेन पार्थिव । मया विनाश्यसे मूढ न चेद् धर्मं करिष्यसि ॥⁴” This sequential escalation closely parallels modern diplomatic escalation ladders, wherein negotiation, incentives, narrative pressure, and coercive deterrence precede armed conflict, demonstrating the enduring relevance of ancient Indian strategic communication frameworks in contemporary warfare doctrines.

Shock & Awe doctrine (Iraq War 2003)

Mahābhārata presents one of the most profound instances of psychological deterrence (bhaya-pradarśana) through Śrī Kṛṣṇa's revelation of the Viśvarūpa to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra, an act of strategic communication aimed at overwhelming the warrior's psychological hesitation before combat. When Arjuna is paralysed by moral doubt, Kṛṣṇa deliberately transcends verbal persuasion and employs visual and existential overawing, declaring his cosmic identity and inevitability of destruction: “कालोऽस्मि लोकक्षयकृत् प्रवृद्धो लोकान् समाहर्तुमिह प्रवृत्तः⁵” This declaration reframes war as an irreversible cosmic process rather than a personal ethical choice, thereby neutralizing Arjuna's fear and resistance. The terror-inducing visual magnitude of the Viśvarūpa is further emphasized in the celebrated verse, “दिवि सूर्यसहस्रस्य भवेद्युगपदुत्थिता

¹ Udyoga Parva (33–35)

² (Udyoga Parva 33)

³ (Udyoga Parva 34)

⁴ (Udyoga Parva 35)

⁵ (Bhīṣma Parva 23 / Gītā 11.32)



। यदि भाः सदृशी सा स्याद्भासस्तस्य महात्मनः⁶ ॥” where the blinding brilliance of a thousand suns rising at once symbolizes absolute dominance and annihilative power. This is not violence enacted but violence communicated, producing deterrence through awe, fear, and inevitability. The psychological objective is achieved without immediate physical force: Arjuna submits, regains composure, and resumes his role as a warrior, demonstrating the effectiveness of fear-based strategic communication. A striking modern parallel can be observed in the United States–led invasion of Iraq in 2003, particularly the military doctrine termed “Shock and Awe,” which sought to incapacitate the adversary’s will to resist through overwhelming displays of precision bombing, rapid strikes, and total air dominance in the opening days of the conflict. The strategy was designed not merely to destroy infrastructure but to psychologically paralyze Iraqi leadership and forces by projecting inevitability, technological supremacy, and total control mirroring the Mahābhārata’s principle of achieving submission through cognitive domination rather than prolonged engagement. Just as the Viśvarūpa dissolved Arjuna’s inner resistance by revealing the futility of opposition to cosmic will, the Shock and Awe campaign aimed to collapse enemy morale by making resistance appear meaningless. This convergence demonstrates that the Mahābhārata articulates an early and sophisticated model of psychological deterrence, where awe, fear, and narrative framing function as decisive instruments of warfare principles that continue to shape modern military doctrines.

Psychological operations (PSYOPS)

In the Mahābhārata, one of the most debated yet strategically revealing instances of information warfare occurs through the deliberate deployment of a half-truth to neutralize an otherwise invincible commander, Droṇācārya, exemplifying early psychological operations (PSYOPS). Bound by an uncompromising adherence to truth and emotionally anchored to his son, Aśvatthāmā, Droṇa becomes strategically vulnerable, a fact fully understood by Kṛṣṇa. When conventional combat fails to halt Droṇa’s devastating advance, Kṛṣṇa orchestrates a cognitive strike rather than a physical one, instructing Bhīma to kill an elephant named Aśvatthāmā and proclaim loudly, “अश्वत्थामा हतः⁷” Crucially, the statement is factually true yet contextually misleading, as it omits the qualifier “iti gajaḥ,” thereby exploiting Droṇa’s emotional bias and auditory limitation amid battlefield chaos. To secure credibility, Yudhiṣṭhira renowned for absolute truthfulness confirms the statement in a deliberately ambiguous manner, ensuring Droṇa’s belief without an explicit falsehood. Overcome by grief and moral collapse, Droṇa lays down his weapons and enters meditation, rendering himself vulnerable and leading directly to his death. This episode demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of information warfare: victory is achieved not by superior force but by manipulating perception, trust, and emotional dependency. The ethical discomfort embedded in this act is acknowledged within the epic itself, highlighting that such strategies are effective yet morally costly an insight strikingly relevant to modern warfare. Contemporary military doctrines similarly employ half-truths, selective disclosures, and narrative ambiguity to degrade enemy morale and decision-making. During the Vietnam War, psychological operations disseminated misleading troop movement information to induce withdrawal and confusion. In the 1991 Gulf War and later conflicts, coalition forces used controlled leaks, deceptive broadcasts, and misinformation about invasion timings and axes of attack to paralyze adversary response. More recently, information operations in hybrid warfare such as selective intelligence releases, ambiguous official statements, and manipulated narratives in conflicts involving Ukraine, West Asia, and cyber domains

⁶ (Bhīṣma Parva 23 / Gītā 11.12)

⁷ (Droṇa Parva 191)



demonstrate the continued relevance of half-truth deployment as a force multiplier. Just as Droṇa's fall resulted from the collapse of belief rather than physical defeat, modern PSYOPS aim to break the adversary's will to fight by targeting cognition rather than capability. The Mahābhārata thus anticipates contemporary information warfare by recognizing that in conflict, perception can be as decisive as power, and that a carefully engineered truth strategically incomplete can determine the outcome of war.

Timing of intelligence leaks

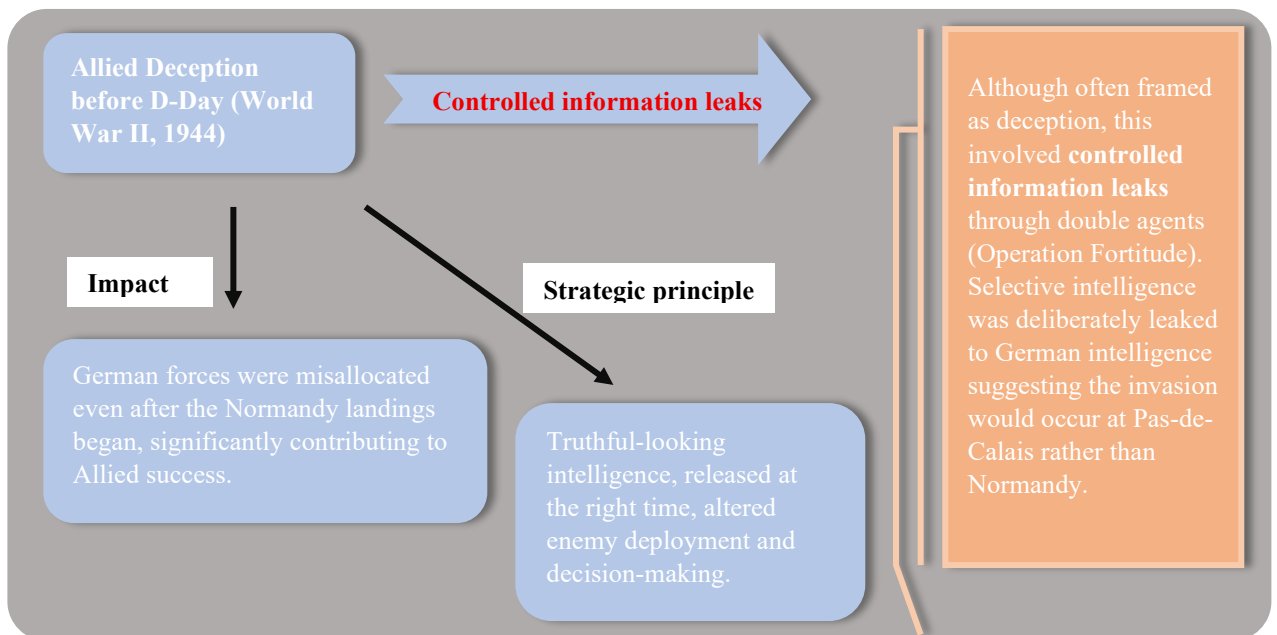
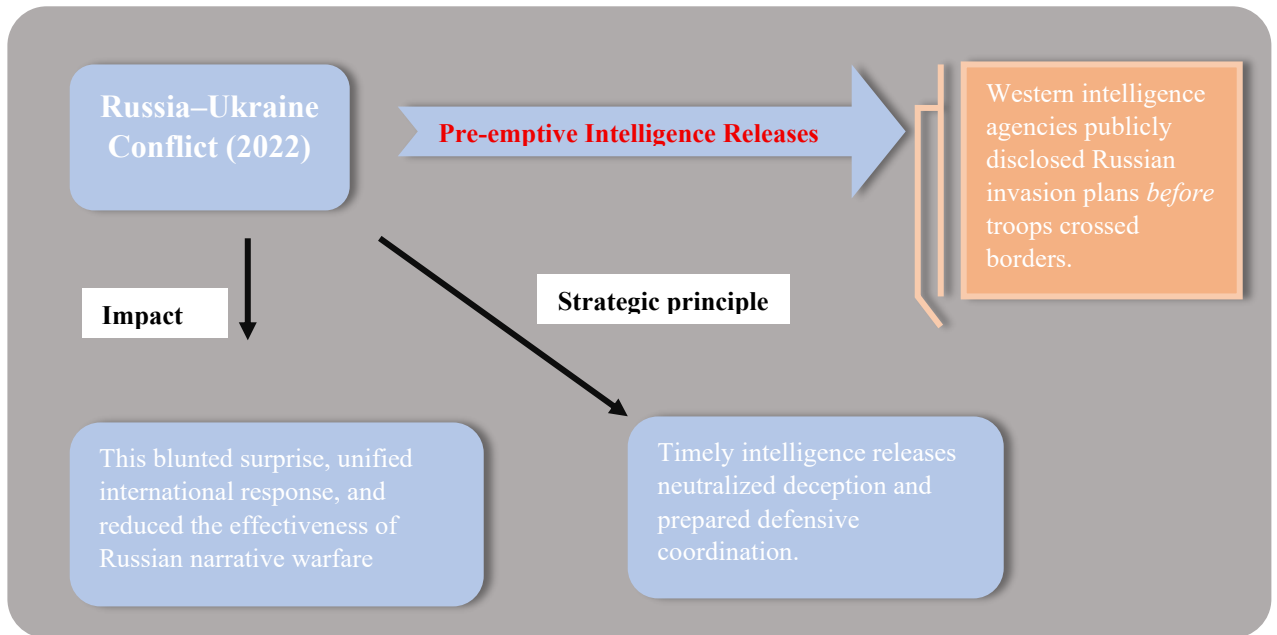
Śrī Kṛṣṇa's interaction with Karṇa represents a classic case of selective disclosure or controlled truth, wherein information is intentionally revealed at a precise moment to influence decision-making without altering objective reality. On the eve of Karṇa's final battle, Kṛṣṇa discloses the long-concealed truth of Karṇa's birth, informing him that he is in fact the eldest son of Kuntī and thus a Pāṇḍava by blood: “त्वं हि कुन्तीसुतो वीर ज्येष्ठः पाण्डव एव च⁸” This revelation is neither false nor manipulative in content; rather, its strategic potency lies entirely in its timing. By revealing this truth when Karṇa's loyalties, vows, and battlefield commitments are already fixed, Kṛṣṇa aims to induce cognitive dissonance, emotional turmoil, and moral hesitation in Karṇa, thereby weakening his psychological resolve. Karṇa's response marked by inner conflict yet steadfast loyalty to Duryodhana demonstrates that selective disclosure does not guarantee behavioral change but reliably imposes psychological cost. Kṛṣṇa further emphasizes the consequences of Karṇa's past choices, reminding him of the irreversible alignment he has chosen: “न हि शक्यं कृतं कर्म कालेन प्रतिनिवर्तितुम्⁹” Strategically, this episode illustrates that truth, when released at a critical juncture, can function as a weapon by reshaping perception, morale, and ethical certainty without requiring deception. Modern warfare and statecraft employ similar techniques through the timed release of intelligence leaks, such as the selective declassification of intelligence dossiers prior to military action, strategic leaks during electoral or diplomatic crises, or controlled disclosures revealing adversary intentions to influence global opinion and internal morale. Instances include pre-conflict intelligence releases to justify military interventions, exposure of covert programs to erode legitimacy, and calculated leaks

in cyber and hybrid warfare to destabilize leadership confidence. As in Karṇa's case, the effectiveness lies not in fabrication but in precision timing, underscoring the Mahābhārata's early articulation of information control as a decisive strategic instrument.

⁸ (Śalya Parva 9)

⁹ (Śalya Parva 9).





Strategic alliance signaling (NATO commitments)

Śrī Kṛṣṇa executes a masterful act of alliance signaling by publicly structuring his support in a manner that communicates strategic intent, balance of power, and moral positioning to both sides prior to the outbreak



of war. When approached by both the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas seeking his assistance, Kṛṣṇa offers a deliberately asymmetric choice: his unarmed personal presence (Nārāyaṇa) on one side, and his fully armed Yādava army (Nārāyaṇī Sena) on the other. This offer is articulated as: “एकोऽहं नायुधो युद्धे भविष्यामि नराधिप । अन्ये च यादवाः सर्वे युद्धाय समुपस्थिताः ¹⁰ ॥” By placing the choice openly before both parties, Kṛṣṇa transforms alliance formation into a signaling mechanism rather than a covert negotiation. Duryodhana’s selection of the Nārāyaṇī Sena and Arjuna’s choice of Kṛṣṇa himself communicate contrasting strategic philosophies; numerical strength versus strategic counsel, while simultaneously broadcasting to all kingdoms the alignment of moral authority with the Pāṇḍavas. Kṛṣṇa further clarifies his non-combatant yet decisive role: “न हनिष्यामि कञ्चन युद्धेऽस्मिन् भारतर्षभ¹¹” reinforcing that his presence functions as a strategic multiplier rather than direct force. In modern warfare, similar alliance signaling is evident in NATO’s Article 5 commitments, where the explicit declaration that an attack on one member constitutes an attack on all serves to deter aggression through clarity rather than secrecy. Comparable signaling occurred during the Cold War through visible troop deployments and joint military exercises, and more recently through public defense guarantees and multinational military coalitions. As in the Mahābhārata, the effectiveness of alliance signaling lies not merely in force projection but in the transparent communication of commitment, credibility, and consequence, demonstrating that strategic clarity itself can shape the course of conflict before combat begins.

Tactical deception & camouflage

Śrī Kṛṣṇa employs māyā-yuddha, strategic deception as a decisive form of battlefield communication to enable Arjuna to kill Jayadratha, who was protected by a boon that he could be slain only before sunset. As the day nears its end and Jayadratha retreats behind enemy lines, Kṛṣṇa creates an illusion of sunset by covering the sun with his Sudarśana Chakra, inducing a false perception of time across the battlefield. Believing that sunset has occurred and that Arjuna can no longer kill him, Jayadratha emerges triumphantly, at which point Kṛṣṇa withdraws the illusion and commands Arjuna to strike. The epic records this moment with emphasis on deliberate illusion: “ततोऽन्तरिक्षे तमसा संवृते रविमण्डले । अपश्यत् सर्वभूतानि रात्रिमायान्तमिव ¹²” The verse underscores that darkness was artificially produced, altering enemy cognition rather than physical conditions. This act does not violate the law of war as understood within the epic’s framework; instead, it reveals that deception aimed at perception rather than direct falsehood is a legitimate strategic instrument. The objective is psychological and temporal miscalculation, not brute force. Modern warfare employs similar techniques through tactical deception, camouflage, and electronic warfare. During World War II, Operation Fortitude used dummy tanks and false radio traffic to mislead German forces about Allied invasion locations. In the 1991 Gulf War, coalition forces used decoy maneuvers and false signals to conceal the main ground assault route. More recently, modern militaries employ electronic spoofing, radar deception, and cyber camouflage to manipulate enemy perception of time, space, and intent. As in the Jayadratha episode, success is achieved not by overpowering the enemy’s strength but by controlling what the enemy believes to be real. The Mahābhārata thus anticipates modern doctrines of tactical deception, demonstrating that mastery over perception can decisively shape battlefield outcomes.

¹⁰ (Udyoga Parva 6)

¹¹ (Udyoga Parva 7)

¹² (Droṇa Parva 164)



Operational security (OPSEC)

Śrī Kṛṣṇa's counsel to the Pāṇḍavas illustrates the strategic value of silence (mauna) as a deliberate communicative act, aligning closely with the modern concept of operational security (OPSEC). At a moment when emotions run high and the urge to disclose intentions is strong, Kṛṣṇa advises restraint, emphasizing that premature revelation of plans benefits the adversary rather than allies. This principle is encapsulated in the warning: “न हि सर्वं प्रकाश्यं स्यात् कार्याणामिह पाण्डव¹³”, indicating that not all actions or intentions should be made public. Silence here is not indecision but calculated concealment, preserving strategic surprise and denying the enemy actionable intelligence. Kṛṣṇa's communication strategy recognizes that information leakage whether intentional or inadvertent can compromise outcomes before conflict even begins. By withholding full plans, he ensures flexibility, protects internal deliberations, and prevents the Kauravas from anticipating Pāṇḍava moves. This mirrors modern OPSEC doctrine, where controlling information flow is considered as vital as troop strength or weaponry. Contemporary warfare provides multiple parallels: the secrecy surrounding the Normandy landings (D-Day, 1944) ensured surprise against German forces; the covert planning of the 1991 Gulf War's “left hook” maneuver relied heavily on silence and misdirection; and in recent conflicts, militaries enforce strict communication blackouts before major operations to prevent intelligence leaks via media, cyber surveillance, or open-source intelligence. Just as Kṛṣṇa's strategic silence preserved the Pāṇḍavas' operational advantage, modern military success often depends on what is deliberately left unsaid. The Mahābhārata thus anticipates a core principle of modern warfare: silence itself can function as a powerful strategic signal, safeguarding intent until the decisive moment of action.

Backchannel diplomacy

In the Mahābhārata, proxy messaging emerges as a refined instrument of strategic communication, wherein Śrī Kṛṣṇa deliberately avoids direct engagement with Karṇa and instead activates Kuntī as a trusted intermediary, recognizing that emotional credibility and relational authority often surpass formal diplomacy. Kṛṣṇa instructs Kuntī to approach Karṇa privately, leading to the poignant disclosure of his birth identity: “त्वं हि कुन्तीसुतो वीर ज्येष्ठः पाण्डव एव च¹⁴” This backchannel communication bypasses public scrutiny, allowing truth to be conveyed without political provocation, while preserving deniability for Kṛṣṇa himself. A second instance appears earlier in Udyoga Parva, where Vidura acts as a moral and diplomatic proxy between the Pāṇḍavas and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, cautioning him against adharma through indirect counsel: “विदुरवाक्यं धर्म्यं च हितं च मधुरं च यत्¹⁵”, illustrating how intermediaries soften hard truths that rulers may resist if delivered openly. A third instance is found in Mahabharat, where Kṛṣṇa uses Draupadī's public humiliation—relayed through elders and witnesses—as an indirect moral indictment of the Kaurava regime, culminating in the declaration: “नायं धर्मः सभायां यः स्त्रीणां वर्तते बलात्¹⁶”, which reverberates through intermediaries rather than direct royal confrontation. Across these cases, proxy messaging enables sensitive communication, preserves relationships, and influences decisions without escalating conflict. Modern diplomacy frequently mirrors this ancient technique. During the Cold War, backchannel negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union such as the Kennedy–Khrushchev communications via trusted envoys during the Cuban Missile Crisis prevented nuclear escalation. The Oslo Accords (1993) relied

¹³ (Udyoga Parva 90)

¹⁴ (Udyoga Parva 131)

¹⁵ (Udyoga Parva 130)

¹⁶ Sabhā Parva (72),



on unofficial Norwegian intermediaries to facilitate Israeli–Palestinian dialogue when formal talks were impossible. More recently, backchannel diplomacy through third-party states has been used in negotiations involving Iran’s nuclear program and U.S.–Taliban talks in Doha. In both ancient and modern contexts, proxy messaging functions as a strategic tool that balances discretion, trust, and influence, demonstrating that indirect communication can decisively shape outcomes where direct confrontation would fail. The Mahābhārata thus anticipates a core principle of modern diplomacy: that the path to resolution often runs through trusted intermediaries rather than official declarations.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Mahābhārata is not merely an epic of moral reflection or literary grandeur but a sophisticated treatise on strategic communication embedded within the praxis of war, diplomacy, and statecraft. Through a systematic examination of key episodes, the research has shown that ancient Indian strategic thought articulated a nuanced understanding of communication as a force multiplier capable of shaping perception, morale, legitimacy, and decision-making long before kinetic engagement. Far from being incidental, communication in the Mahābhārata operates as an integrated doctrine where persuasion, silence, symbolism, deception, fear, and moral narrative are calibrated according to context, audience, and timing.

The analysis of doctrines such as Sāma–Dāna–Bheda–Daṇḍa, bhaya-pradarśana, māyā-yuddha, selective disclosure, alliance signaling, operational silence, and proxy messaging reveals a coherent strategic logic that closely parallels contemporary concepts of diplomatic escalation, psychological operations, information warfare, operational security, and coercive diplomacy. Crucially, the epic recognizes that wars are often decided in the cognitive and moral domains before they are fought on the battlefield—a principle that lies at the heart of modern strategic communication and hybrid warfare. Whether through Kṛṣṇa’s graduated peace mission, the awe-inducing Viśvarūpa, the engineered half-truth that neutralized Droṇa, or the controlled revelation of Karṇa’s identity, the Mahābhārata consistently foregrounds perception management as decisive.

Equally significant is the ethical self-awareness embedded within these strategies. The epic does not present strategic communication as morally neutral; instead, it openly acknowledges the psychological cost, ethical ambiguity, and long-term consequences of deception, fear, and manipulation. This internal critique distinguishes the Mahābhārata from purely instrumental war manuals and aligns it with contemporary debates on the moral limits of information warfare, psychological coercion, and narrative control. The tension between dharma and strategic necessity, repeatedly negotiated in the text, offers a valuable framework for rethinking modern doctrines that often prioritize effectiveness over legitimacy.

By situating the Mahābhārata within the discourse of modern strategic studies, this research contributes to a decolonized understanding of warfare theory, challenging the assumption that systematic strategic communication is a modern or exclusively Western innovation. Instead, it demonstrates that ancient Indian Knowledge Systems anticipated many core principles of contemporary military and diplomatic practice, articulating them in a culturally grounded yet universally applicable form. In an era characterized by information saturation, psychological warfare, and narrative (contest), the Mahābhārata remains profoundly



relevant, offering enduring insights into how communication shapes conflict, constrains violence, and ultimately determines victory and defeat.

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