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DONALD TRUMP'S STRATEGIC NARRATIVES IN U.S.–IRAN GEOPOLITICAL CONTESTATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstrak

Kontestasi geopolitik Amerika Serikat–Iran melibatkan persaingan dalam mendefinisikan ancaman, keamanan, dan legitimasi kebijakan luar negeri. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis konstruksi narasi strategis Donald Trump, menjelaskan strategi legitimasi kebijakan Amerika Serikat, dan mengembangkan model konseptual kontestasi narasi. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan analisis narasi strategis yang mencakup dimensi narasi sistem, identitas, dan isu. Bahan analisis meliputi pidato, pernyataan resmi, dokumen kebijakan, dan materi media periode 2025–2026, disertai perspektif diplomatik, akademik, dan masyarakat sipil. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa narasi Trump merepresentasikan Iran sebagai ancaman terhadap keamanan regional, sedangkan Amerika Serikat diposisikan sebagai penjamin stabilitas melalui tekanan maksimum dan perdamaian melalui kekuatan. Strategi legitimasinya menggabungkan konstruksi ancaman, polarisasi identitas, personalisasi kepemimpinan, serta ancaman koersif dan tawaran negosiasi. Analisis mengidentifikasi tiga bentuk kontranarasi: diplomatik negara, akademik geopolitik, dan normatif masyarakat sipil. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, penelitian mengusulkan Model Narasi Geopolitik Trump yang menghubungkan konstruksi narasi, legitimasi kebijakan, kontranarasi, penangkalan balasan, dan umpan balik. Model ini menawarkan kerangka interpretatif untuk memahami hubungan antara komunikasi politik dan kontestasi geopolitik, tanpa mengasumsikan bahwa narasi secara langsung menentukan penerimaan audiens atau keberhasilan kebijakan.

Kata Kunci: Narasi strategis; komunikasi politik; hubungan Amerika Serikat–Iran; kontranarasi; diplomasi koersif; legitimasi kebijakan.

Abstract

U.S.–Iran geopolitical contestation involves competing attempts to define threats, security, and the legitimacy of foreign policy. This study examines Donald Trump's strategic narratives, analyzes their role in legitimizing U.S. policies, and develops a conceptual model of narrative contestation. It adopts a qualitative approach informed by strategic narrative analysis across system, identity, and issue dimensions. The analysis examines speeches, official statements, policy documents, and media materials from 2025–2026 alongside diplomatic, academic, and civil

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society perspectives. The findings indicate that Trump's narratives portray Iran as a threat to regional security while positioning the United States as a guarantor of stability through maximum pressure and peace through strength. Legitimation strategies combine threat construction, identity polarization, personalized leadership, and coercive threats with negotiation offers. The analysis identifies three forms of counternarrative: state-diplomatic, academic-geopolitical, and normative-civil society. Building on these findings, the study proposes the Trump Geopolitical Narrative Model, linking narrative construction, policy legitimation, counternarratives, counterdeterrence, and feedback. The model provides an interpretive framework for examining political communication within geopolitical contestation without assuming that narratives directly determine audience acceptance or policy success.

Keywords: Strategic narratives; political communication; U.S.–Iran relations; counternarratives; coercive diplomacy; policy legitimation.

INTRODUCTION

U.S.–Iran geopolitical contestation raises questions about how political leaders define threats, justify coercion, and claim authority over regional security. These questions became particularly relevant when Donald Trump restored the maximum pressure campaign through National Security Presidential Memorandum 2 on February 4, 2025. The memorandum presented Iran's nuclear activities, missile capabilities, and regional networks as threats requiring coordinated economic, diplomatic, and legal measures (The White House, 2025). Its significance extends beyond the measures prescribed: the document connects representations of danger with a justification for U.S. action. This connection makes political communication an important object of analysis rather than merely a record of policy announcements. A strategic narrative perspective directs attention to how policymakers organize events, assign identities, and describe desirable outcomes to make their preferred policies intelligible and legitimate (Roselle et al., 2014). Accordingly, examining Trump's narratives can clarify how his administration presents U.S. power and Iran's regional role to different audiences.

Existing scholarship provides substantial foundations for examining this relationship. Nuruzzaman (2020) analyzed the objectives and limitations of maximum pressure alongside Iran's counterpressure responses, demonstrating the importance of considering the targeted state's strategic choices. Akdoğan and Adıgüzel (2022) examined official statements concerning Iran's nuclear program and identified issue, identity, and system narratives through which the first Trump administration sought to legitimize its policies. These studies establish that neither Iranian resistance nor narrative legitimation constitutes an unexplored subject. The present study therefore addresses a more specific analytical problem: how Trump's narrative construction can be examined together with different forms of contestation during the 2025–2026 study period. Rather

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than locating novelty solely in a later presidential term, it considers the relationship between dominant narratives and diplomatic, academic, and civil society interpretations. The proposed contribution concerns how these perspectives challenge the definitions of threat, sovereignty, and peace on which claims to policy legitimacy depend.

Against this background, the study pursues three interconnected objectives. First, it examines how Trump's strategic narratives represent the regional order, construct U.S. and Iranian identities, and frame specific policy issues. Second, it investigates how these representations support attempts to legitimize pressure, deterrence, and negotiation within U.S. policy toward Iran. Third, it develops an interpretive model connecting narrative construction and policy legitimation with counternarratives and possible feedback. These objectives are pursued through qualitative analysis of speeches, official statements, policy documents, and media materials, considered alongside diplomatic, academic, and civil society perspectives. The distinction between constructing legitimacy and securing acceptance is central to the inquiry. Identifying a justificatory pattern in political discourse does not establish that audiences endorse it or that it produces the intended policy outcome. The study consequently focuses on the organization and contestation of meaning, while treating claims about persuasion, behavioral change, and policy effectiveness as separate questions requiring additional evidence.

The central argument is that Trump's strategic narratives should be understood as attempts to connect representations of insecurity with a preferred account of legitimate political action. From this perspective, threat construction, identity differentiation, and promises of stability become analytically significant through their relationships rather than their isolated occurrence. Strategic narrative scholarship provides the conceptual basis for examining these relationships across accounts of international order, political identity, and particular issues (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle et al., 2014). Building on this foundation, the study proposes that counternarratives deserve explicit attention because competing actors may question the identities, causal explanations, and moral assumptions embedded in dominant accounts. The resulting Trump Geopolitical Narrative Model is presented as a synthesis of the study's interpretations, rather than a validated causal model. Its intended contribution is to make the relationship between geopolitical communication and contested legitimacy more explicit, while preserving the distinction between discursive claims and demonstrated effects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic narrative theory examines how political actors connect interpretations of international order, collective identity, and policy choices within accounts of the past, present, and anticipated future. Miskimmon et al. (2013) provide the foundational

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framework for investigating these relationships, while Roselle et al. (2014) explain its relevance to understanding communication and international influence. A strategic narrative consequently extends beyond a slogan or isolated assertion: it organizes actors, events, causal explanations, and proposed outcomes into an intelligible political account. Research on regional order further demonstrates that apparently inclusive descriptions of international cooperation can embody competing political priorities and visions of legitimate authority (Barthwal-Datta & Chacko, 2020). Narratives also generate expectations that may persist despite changes in political circumstances, making their continuity and interpretive durability important analytical questions (Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2019). Together, these contributions support examining Trump's communication through the relationships among representations of regional insecurity, American responsibility, and desirable political outcomes. They also suggest that narrative construction, persistence, and influence require separate investigation rather than being treated as interchangeable indicators of communicative success.

The distinction among system, identity, and issue narratives provides the principal framework for examining these relationships. System narratives describe international order, identity narratives allocate political roles and attributes, and issue narratives connect specific problems with proposed responses. Akdoğan and Adıgüzel (2022) demonstrate how the first Trump administration employed these dimensions to legitimize maximum pressure against Iran. Related research identifies the discursive reproduction of Iranian enmity in justifications for withdrawing from the nuclear agreement (Balkan-Şahin, 2020). Nourani et al. (2020) further show how moral evaluation and rationalization supported attempts to delegitimize the agreement in Trump's tweets. These studies establish that the connection between communication and policy justification is already well developed. Comparative scholarship also illustrates how constructing another state as sufficiently compatible with American identity can expand the boundaries of acceptable nuclear cooperation (Barthwal-Datta, 2021). A complementary critical communication perspective directs attention to dominant power, ideology, and the construction of social reality (Baharuddin et al., 2025). For the present study, these contributions support distinguishing legitimation—the communicative attempt to justify action—from legitimacy understood as its acceptance by relevant audiences. Identifying justificatory discourse alone cannot establish that such acceptance occurred.

Coercive diplomacy scholarship explains why threats, pressure, negotiation, and assurances may coexist within the same policy discourse. Cebul et al. (2021) argue that coercion requires credible threats of punishment for defiance alongside credible assurances of restraint following compliance. Pauly (2024) develops this relationship

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through the assurance dilemma, showing how actions intended to strengthen threats may undermine confidence that punishment will cease. Research on Iran provides contrasting assessments that discourage treating coercion as uniformly effective or ineffective. Harris (2021) emphasizes the contribution of coordinated pressure to negotiations during an earlier phase of the nuclear crisis, whereas Kamel (2024) examines limitations surrounding the Trump administration's unilateral coercive approach. Nuruzzaman (2020) highlights Iranian counterpressure, while Azizi et al. (2020) explain resistance through anti-containment and asymmetric deterrence. The differing contexts and policy configurations examined in these studies are analytically important. They indicate that the communication of strength must be interpreted alongside demands, incentives, coalition arrangements, and the target's available responses. Accordingly, the present study distinguishes deterrent messages intended to discourage action from compellent messages intended to induce change, while treating their actual effectiveness as an empirical question beyond the identification of threatening language.

Research on narrative reception challenges the assumption that projecting a coherent message necessarily secures audience agreement. Schmitt (2018) shows that political myths within a receiving community shape how externally produced strategic narratives are interpreted. Szostek (2017) similarly demonstrates the importance of cross-border linkages when assessing the power and limits of competing narratives. Her subsequent research distinguishes confidence in particular media organizations from acceptance of the broader narratives those organizations circulate (Szostek, 2018a). Another study identifies how news consumers assess credibility through personal priorities, experiences, memories, and relationships rather than factual judgments alone (Szostek, 2018b). Wagnsson and Lundström (2023) extend attention to the persuasiveness of strategic narratives, reinforcing the importance of examining audiences directly. These contributions establish a methodological boundary for the present research: official documents and speeches reveal narrative production, but cannot independently demonstrate reception. An endorsement selected for publication by a government also cannot represent the distribution of opinion across an entire political community. Claims concerning intended audiences, observed audience interpretations, and demonstrated behavioral effects must therefore remain analytically distinct when examining Trump's geopolitical communication.

Narrative contestation also involves actors and channels beyond direct communication between governments. Deverell et al. (2021) demonstrate how state-sponsored media organize representations of foreign societies through particular storytelling strategies. Wagnsson and Hellman (2018) identify tensions between claims to normative authority and antagonistic representations of opponents in strategic

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communication. Barthwal-Datta (2023) further distinguishes narrative disruption from contestation, explaining how locally produced counternarratives can complicate a state's preferred international self-representation. These contributions support examining diplomatic, academic, and civil society perspectives without assuming that they perform identical political functions. Research on digital religious identity provides a complementary account of how symbolic representations emerge through relationships among content creators, audiences, and platform mechanisms (Mitra & Efendi, 2026). Although its empirical setting differs from geopolitical confrontation, it sensitizes analysis to the mediation of identity rather than establishing effects in the present case. The resulting analytical task is to determine whether a supplementary account challenges the dominant narrative's identities, causal explanations, proposed solutions, or normative assumptions. Critical commentary is therefore assessed for its substantive relationship to the dominant account rather than automatically classified as a counternarrative.

The reviewed literature supports an integrated framework linking narrative construction, policy legitimation, coercive signaling, and competing interpretations. Grzywacz (2020) contributes a useful distinction between coherence within narratives and coherence across narratives, directing attention to how political accounts may contain or generate tensions. This perspective helps formulate questions about the relationship between threats, negotiation offers, and claims to peaceful leadership without presuming that their coexistence necessarily constitutes incoherence. Research on Islamic policy communication offers an additional, context-specific comparison by emphasizing transparency, participation, responsibility, and feedback in governance (Tumanggor et al., 2026). These principles inform questions about communicative accountability, although mechanisms identified in village governance cannot be assumed to operate identically in international conflict. Building on these insights, the present study examines diplomatic, academic, and normative accounts as distinct interpretive positions and proposes a case-specific synthesis of their relationships with Trump's narratives. Its contribution lies in integrating established concepts within a common analytical framework. Counterdeterrence and feedback remain relationships requiring appropriate evidence, while audience acceptance and policy outcomes remain separate questions. This formulation preserves the distinction between interpreting contested geopolitical meaning and establishing its causal consequences.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach informed by strategic narrative theory to examine Donald Trump's communication concerning U.S.–Iran

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geopolitical contestation. Its substantive scope covers the 2025–2026 period identified in the manuscript. The analytical materials comprise speeches, official statements, policy documents, and media materials concerning Iran's nuclear program, sanctions, regional security, and diplomatic negotiations. The unit of analysis is a narrative segment connecting representations of political actors, an identified problem, a proposed response, and an anticipated outcome. System, identity, and issue narratives provide the principal analytical dimensions (Akdoğan & Adıgüzel, 2022). Official communication is examined as evidence of how the administration represents and justifies its policies, rather than as independent confirmation of the accuracy of its claims. Media accounts provide contextual material, with direct statements distinguished from journalistic interpretation. Diplomatic, academic, and civil society perspectives attributed to FJM, QM, and SAH provide supplementary interpretive positions rather than a representative sample of public opinion.

The analytical framework connects narrative construction with policy legitimation and competing interpretations. Analysis focuses on how the materials define regional order, assign political identities, identify threats, and connect policy instruments with promised outcomes. Particular attention is given to the relationship between coercive threats and negotiation offers, including whether demands are accompanied by assurances of restraint following compliance (Cebul et al., 2021). Supplementary accounts are examined for agreement with, qualification of, or opposition to these narrative elements; critical commentary is not automatically classified as a counternarrative. Interpretation also distinguishes discursive challenges from claims about retaliatory capabilities and actual deterrent effects. Cross-source comparison supports consideration of competing explanations, while differences in institutional position and proximity to the conflict inform the assessment of each account. The resulting model synthesizes the relationships identified through interpretation. It does not establish causal effects on audience acceptance, decision-making, or policy outcomes, which would require additional reception data, behavioral evidence, or a different research design.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Construction of System, Identity, and Issue Narratives

The analysis identifies a narrative structure connecting representations of regional insecurity with justifications for U.S. intervention. At the system level, the administration presents the Middle East as an environment in which Iranian activities threaten an order that the United States and its partners seek to preserve. National Security Presidential Memorandum 2, issued on February 4, 2025, connects Iran's nuclear activities, missile

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development, and regional networks with a coordinated program of economic restrictions, diplomatic isolation, and enforcement measures (The White House, 2025a). The document consequently does more than announce policy instruments: it places those instruments within an account of danger and necessary response. The analytical finding concerns this justificatory relationship. The memorandum presents pressure as an obligation arising from the administration's diagnosis of insecurity, rather than as one policy choice among several possible responses. This observation describes the administration's representation of regional order without independently establishing the accuracy of its security assessments.

At the identity level, the materials construct an asymmetrical relationship between the United States and Iran. American power is associated with protection, resolve, and the capacity to restore security, while the Iranian government is represented through aggression and responsibility for regional danger. Trump's June 21, 2025, address illustrates this differentiation through the description of Iran as "the bully of the Middle East" and the demand that it "must now make peace" (Trump, 2025). These expressions assign Iran responsibility for changing the situation while positioning the United States as the actor authorized to demand that change. The speech also links presidential decision-making with military competence and cooperation with Israel. Its narrative structure therefore combines national identity, alliance solidarity, and leadership authority. The finding is an oppositional construction of political roles; it does not demonstrate that domestic or international audiences accepted those roles.

At the issue level, the materials connect nuclear capabilities with wider concerns about missiles, armed networks, and regional security. This combination gives the narrative a broader scope than a technical disagreement about nuclear activities. The June 22, 2025, White House compilation of administration statements associates military action with protection, diplomatic opportunity, and presidential resolve (The White House, 2025b). A subsequent March 2026 release again places military action within a peace-through-strength framework (The White House, 2026a). Across these examples, distinct policy issues are organized around a common claim: American strength is presented as the means of overcoming a danger attributed to Iran. This connection allows economic pressure, military capability, and negotiation to appear within a shared narrative. The identified continuity concerns the organization of official communication, rather than an assertion that every statement or policy decision across the study period follows an identical pattern.

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Narrative Strategies of Policy Legitimation

The first identified strategy is the construction of a restricted choice between compliance and further punishment. In the June 2025 address, Trump presents an opportunity for peace alongside warnings of additional attacks. The narrative gives Iran agency to avoid punishment, while defining the acceptable outcome through U.S. demands. Within this formulation, further escalation is represented as a consequence of Iranian refusal rather than solely as another American decision. This is an attribution of responsibility embedded in the communication itself. The statement supports identifying a conditional threat, but it does not establish that Iran regarded the proposed alternative as credible or acceptable. The distinction matters because the presence of an announced choice does not reveal how the targeted actor evaluates its terms. The finding is therefore a communicative pattern linking demands, consequences, and responsibility for the next stage of confrontation.

The second strategy combines the personalization of leadership with the institutional amplification of presidential messages. The June 2025 White House compilation presents administration officials explaining military action through Trump's resolve and willingness to enforce stated demands. The communication portrays the president as an actor whose decisions distinguish the administration from its predecessors. A June 2026 White House release similarly collects supportive statements associating an announced agreement with presidential leadership and American strength (The White House, 2026b). These materials demonstrate how the executive communication apparatus organizes endorsements around a preferred interpretation of policy. They provide evidence of message amplification and the construction of leadership authority. They do not provide a representative measure of political agreement, because the publication selects supportive voices. The analytical distinction is between the visibility of endorsement within an official communication product and the distribution of support across the broader political environment.

The third strategy links the justification of pressure with the subsequent attribution of diplomatic achievement. The March 2026 White House release presents military action through the language of restoring security, while the June release frames an announced agreement through American interests and presidential effectiveness (The White House, 2026a, 2026b). Read together, these documents illustrate how coercion and accommodation can be incorporated into a continuing account of strong leadership. The narrative can justify the application of pressure and later present negotiation as evidence that the same approach has worked. This finding concerns the administration's explanation of events. It does not establish that military pressure caused the announced diplomatic outcome, that all stated objectives were achieved, or that the arrangement

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produced lasting stability. Those questions require evidence concerning negotiations, implementation, and alternative explanations. The observed pattern is the retrospective incorporation of diplomatic developments into the administration's preferred account of policy success.

Competing Interpretations and the Proposed Narrative Model

The supplementary accounts summarized in the research materials introduce two different ways of questioning the dominant narrative. The account attributed to FJM emphasizes sovereignty, international obligations, and the peaceful use of nuclear technology. Its central disagreement concerns the grounds on which an external actor may define another state's activities as requiring coercive intervention. The account attributed to QM emphasizes bargaining, resistance, retaliatory capacity, and the continuing relevance of diplomacy. Its analytical focus differs from a direct diplomatic defense: it questions whether pressure can secure the desired outcome when the targeted state retains options for imposing costs or sustaining resistance. These accounts are retained as paraphrased perspectives reported in the original manuscript. Their interpretation does not establish the legal correctness of every diplomatic claim or independently verify military capabilities. Their contribution is to expose competing assumptions about authority, agency, and the feasibility of imposing a preferred political settlement.

The normative perspective associated with SAH evaluates peace claims through justice, consistent standards, and the implementation of commitments. This position also appears in a publicly accessible MUI report dated April 9, 2026, which records support for a ceasefire initiative alongside concerns about compliance and the need for international monitoring (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 2026). The statement supports deescalation while questioning whether an agreement will be implemented consistently. Its significance lies in the distinction between announcing peace and satisfying the conditions under which peace becomes credible. The account therefore cannot be reduced to unconditional opposition to diplomacy or to a simple reversal of the American narrative. It introduces a different evaluative standard: the quality of a settlement depends on conduct, oversight, and justice. This is evidence of an institutional communication position expressed through MUI's publication, rather than a measure of Indonesian public opinion or the views of all Muslim communities.

Taken together, the findings support an interpretive model connecting geopolitical context, narrative construction, attempted policy legitimation, and competing accounts. The Trump Geopolitical Narrative Model identifies system, identity, and issue narratives as interconnected dimensions through which policy is explained and justified. It then

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places diplomatic, academic, and normative interpretations alongside those justificatory claims. Counterdeterrence enters the model as claims about resistance and retaliatory costs, which remain analytically distinct from verified military effects. Feedback represents a possible relationship through which reactions may become relevant to subsequent communication. The materials examined here do not demonstrate a complete causal sequence from narrative production to audience acceptance, policy change, or escalation and deescalation. The model consequently organizes relationships for interpretation and further investigation. Its purpose is to clarify how claims to security and legitimate action encounter alternative accounts of sovereignty, strategic constraint, and acceptable peace.

Table 1. Analytical Components of the Trump Geopolitical Narrative Model

Component	Pattern identified in the materials	Interpretive scope
System narrative	Regional insecurity is connected with a claimed U.S. responsibility to restore stability.	Representation of regional order.
Identity narrative	American resolve and protection are contrasted with Iranian aggression and danger.	Construction of political roles.
Issue narrative	Nuclear activities, missiles, and regional networks are connected with pressure and diplomatic demands.	Organization of policy problems and responses.
Policy legitimation	Coercive measures are presented as necessary, while diplomatic developments are incorporated into claims of success.	Attempts to justify policy.
Diplomatic interpretation	Sovereignty, international obligations, and peaceful nuclear activity are emphasized.	Perspective attributed to FJM in the manuscript.
Academic interpretation	Bargaining, resistance, retaliatory costs, and diplomatic alternatives receive emphasis.	Perspective attributed to QM in the manuscript.
Normative interpretation	Justice, monitoring, and consistent implementation qualify claims to peace.	Perspective associated with SAH, also documented in MUI communication.

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Counterdeterrence and feedback	Claims about resistance and reactions qualify the dominant account of control.	Interpretive relationships requiring further evidence for causal evaluation.

Table 1 summarizes the analytical components of the Trump Geopolitical Narrative Model and clarifies the evidentiary scope of each component. System, identity, and issue narratives connect representations of regional insecurity with political roles and proposed policy responses, while policy legitimation captures attempts to justify those responses. The diplomatic, academic, and normative perspectives introduce different grounds for questioning the dominant account, including sovereignty, strategic feasibility, justice, and the implementation of commitments. These perspectives represent situated interpretations rather than comprehensive measures of institutional or public opinion. Counterdeterrence and feedback identify potential relationships between claims of resistance, competing interpretations, and subsequent communication. Accordingly, the table presents an interpretive framework rather than a verified chronological or causal sequence: it organizes the relationships identified in the materials without establishing that narrative production generated audience acceptance, policy change, or particular conflict outcomes.

Discussion

Strategic Narratives as Relationships Among Order, Identity, and Policy

The findings reinforce the value of examining system, identity, and issue narratives together. Akdoğan and Adıgüzel (2022) demonstrated that the first Trump administration connected these dimensions when legitimizing policy toward Iran's nuclear program. The present analysis identifies a comparable relationship in the materials examined from the subsequent period. An account of regional disorder provides the setting, opposing identities allocate responsibility, and issue narratives connect the diagnosis with proposed action. The contribution is therefore a contextual extension and integration of an existing framework. Identifying familiar narrative dimensions in later materials does not itself establish theoretical novelty. The more specific contribution concerns how these dimensions organize a justificatory relationship that is challenged from different institutional positions. This interpretation is consistent with Roselle et al. (2014), who direct attention to the relationship between communication and influence. Here, however, the evidence supports conclusions about narrative construction and contestation, while leaving the extent of influence open to further investigation.

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Coercive Communication and the Credibility of Peace Offers

The coexistence of threats and negotiation offers becomes more intelligible when considered through scholarship on coercive assurances. Cebul et al. (2021) argue that successful coercion requires a credible expectation of punishment for defiance and restraint following compliance. Pauly (2024) shows why strengthening one expectation may weaken the other: demonstrations of coercive power can increase uncertainty about whether punishment will stop. The present findings identify the communicative form of this problem. Official messages define peace as an available alternative while retaining the possibility of further force. The analytical question is consequently whether the conditions for avoiding punishment are clear and credible to the target. An assertion of peaceful intent cannot resolve that question by itself. Equally, a threatening statement does not establish that diplomacy is absent. Reading both elements together permits a more precise interpretation than treating threats and negotiation as mutually exclusive strategies or assuming that their combination necessarily produces agreement.

Iranian Agency and the Limits of Narrative Control

The competing accounts also qualify the assumption that a powerful state controls the meaning and direction of confrontation. Nuruzzaman (2020) examines Iranian counterpressure as an active response to American demands, while Azizi et al. (2020) explain resistance through asymmetric deterrence and an anti-containment strategy. These studies help contextualize the emphasis on bargaining and retaliatory costs in the account attributed to QM. The relationship is one of analytical compatibility, rather than independent confirmation of particular military assessments. The discussion therefore distinguishes three matters: a claim that Iran can resist, evidence of capabilities supporting resistance, and evidence that those capabilities changed an opponent's behavior. The present narrative analysis principally addresses the first. This distinction prevents counterdeterrence from becoming an unsupported explanation of policy outcomes. Its value within the proposed model lies in identifying how assertions of retaliatory agency contest representations of unilateral control, while maintaining a separate evidentiary requirement for evaluating actual deterrence.

Counternarratives and Competing Standards of Legitimate Action

The diplomatic and normative perspectives challenge different foundations of the dominant narrative. The diplomatic account questions the authority to define and respond to a security problem, whereas the normative account evaluates whether proposed solutions meet standards of justice and consistent conduct. This differentiation matters because narrative contestation does not require every actor to offer the same alternative story. Barthwal-Datta (2023) shows how locally produced accounts can

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complicate a state's preferred international self-representation and create resources for subsequent contestation. The present findings suggest a related interpretive possibility: religious civil society communication can question the relationship between an announced commitment to peace and the practices undertaken in its name. The MUI material illustrates this possibility through its combination of support for deescalation and concern about implementation. This interpretation does not establish a unified religious position or demonstrate policy influence. It identifies an additional institutional site at which geopolitical claims are evaluated and challenged.

Contribution and Scope of the Trump Geopolitical Narrative Model

The proposed model brings these relationships into a common analytical structure. Its contribution is to connect the construction of threats and identities with the grounds on which policies are justified and questioned. Diplomatic, academic, and normative accounts identify different sources of disagreement: authority, strategic feasibility, and acceptable political conduct. These distinctions make the model useful for organizing evidence without treating all opposition as equivalent. The model also separates attempted legitimation from accepted legitimacy and distinguishes claims about strength from demonstrated coercive effectiveness. This approach is compatible with the broader argument in Azhar et al. (2026) that narrative struggles operate alongside historical, economic, geographical, and military conditions. Communication gives those conditions political meaning, but it does not replace them. The model should consequently be understood as a case-specific synthesis that generates questions for further research. Its wider applicability would require comparative analysis across leaders, conflicts, institutional settings, and audiences rather than inference from the present case alone.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

The interpretation remains bounded by the available evidence. Official publications reveal how the administration presents its policies, but their selection of claims and endorsements does not establish representative audience responses. Likewise, the supplementary accounts provide situated perspectives rather than a basis for generalizing about Iranian society, academic opinion, or Indonesian Muslim communities. The documentary corpus and the provenance of interview-based material require fuller reporting before the analysis can be independently reproduced. These limitations affect the strength of conclusions about recurrence, variation, and change across the study period. Further research could examine dated narrative sequences alongside negotiation records, interviews with decision-makers, and audience reception evidence. Such evidence would help determine whether competing accounts prompted

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identifiable revisions in official communication or affected policy choices. The present study's defensible contribution is therefore interpretive: it explains how security, strength, sovereignty, and justice organize competing accounts of U.S.–Iran relations and identifies the additional evidence needed to evaluate their consequences.

CONCLUSION

This study identifies an interconnected structure of system, identity, and issue narratives in Donald Trump's communication concerning U.S.–Iran geopolitical contestation. The materials examined portray Iran as a source of regional insecurity while positioning the United States as a protective power whose strength enables stability. Threat construction, opposing political identities, personalized leadership, and the combination of coercive warnings with negotiation offers support attempts to justify U.S. policy. These findings establish patterns of narrative construction and policy legitimation without demonstrating that the messages secured audience acceptance or produced the outcomes claimed by the administration.

The supplementary perspectives reveal different grounds for questioning this dominant account. The diplomatic perspective emphasizes sovereignty and international obligations; the academic perspective considers bargaining, resistance, and the limits of coercion; and the normative civil society perspective evaluates peace through justice, consistent standards, and credible implementation. Their differences demonstrate that narrative contestation involves competing judgments about political authority, strategic feasibility, and acceptable conduct. These situated accounts broaden the interpretation of geopolitical communication while providing no basis for generalizing about entire institutions, national populations, or religious communities.

The proposed Trump Geopolitical Narrative Model synthesizes the relationships among narrative construction, attempted legitimation, competing interpretations, and claims about resistance. Its contribution is a case-specific interpretive framework rather than a validated causal explanation of geopolitical outcomes. Fuller documentation of the analytical corpus and supplementary accounts remains necessary to strengthen reproducibility. Future research should combine narrative analysis with audience reception evidence, negotiation records, and comparative cases to examine whether and how competing narratives affect communication and policy decisions. Within these boundaries, the study clarifies how security, strength, sovereignty, and justice become organizing principles in the struggle to define legitimate action in U.S.–Iran relations.

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