

Epistemic Contrivance of National Identity a Multi-Disciplinary Analysis of Elite Narrative Fabrication in Pakistan

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Abstract

This article rigorously examines the complex etiology of elite narrative fabrication in Pakistan, a phenomenon characterized by a profound disjunction between official state discourse and verifiable national performance across critical indices of economy, human rights, internal security, and human development. Drawing upon a syncretic theoretical framework encompassing defensive realism, ontological security theory, securitization theory, sociological perspectives on propaganda, and cognitive psychology, this study explicates the mechanisms through which a dominant elite, particularly the military establishment, constructs and perpetuates a reified national identity. This analysis introduces the novel concept of "**Epistemic Autarky of the Elite**" to denote the deliberate creation and maintenance of an insulated knowledge ecosystem, wherein official narratives are perpetually reinforced, contradictory evidence is systematically suppressed or reframed, and public perception is meticulously engineered to ensure cognitive consonance and political compliance, thereby insulating elite power from accountability derived from objective reality. Through an empirical analysis of recent incidents and macro-level data, this exposition demonstrates how this fabricated reality serves to legitimize an unsustainable grand strategy, manage internal anxieties, and secure political compliance from a discursively conditioned populace. The study further proposes "**Ontological Dissimulation**" as a specific practice within this autarkic system, referring to the deliberate fabrication of a state's autobiographical narrative to maintain a coherent, albeit fictive, sense of self and mitigate anxieties.

I. Introduction: The Paradox of Fabricated Realities in a Fissured State

The contemporary international system frequently witnesses instances where state-sanctioned narratives diverge significantly from empirical realities. This disjunction is particularly pronounced in states grappling with persistent socio-economic and political fragilities, where the ruling elite often resorts to discursive engineering to buttress legitimacy and manage domestic discontent. Such states, often characterized by a precarious internal balance of power and a recalcitrant external environment, frequently construct a chimerical national identity, meticulously curated to obscure systemic deficiencies and project an image of strength and cohesion. Pakistan presents a compelling, albeit disquieting, case study of this phenomenon, exhibiting a persistent pattern of elite-driven narrative construction that appears fundamentally incongruous with its documented international record.

The recent elevation of the Pakistani Army Chief, General Asim Munir, to the ceremonial rank of Field Marshal (Associated Press, 2025) following a period of militarily ambiguous engagements with India (IISS, 2025), and the subsequent public mockery over fabricated visual evidence (NDTV, 2025), serves

as a potent microcosm of this broader national predilection for narrative artifice. This particular incident, wherein a high-ranking military official is bestowed with a title of historical gravitas previously held only by General Ayub Khan, a figure synonymous with military rule and a controversial 1965 war, occurs immediately after a conflict whose outcomes are widely disputed (Associated Press, 2025; IISS, 2025). The subsequent exposure of a painting, purportedly depicting a military triumph ("Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos"), as a lifted image from a Chinese military exercise (NDTV, 2025) underscores the brazenness of this elite-driven fabrication. This narrative contrivance unfolds against a backdrop of chronic national underperformance across critical domains: a precarious economy burdened by debt and structural vulnerabilities (IMF, 2025a, 2025b), pervasive human rights abuses and a severe clampdown on civil liberties (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025), escalating internal terrorism (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025; SATP, 2025), and a lamentably low literacy rate coupled with profound educational disparities (UNESCO, 2009; UNESCO, 2010).

This article posits: What are the underlying theoretical causes for the Pakistani elite's propagation of fabricated narratives to its populace, despite demonstrable national deficiencies across economic, human rights, internal security, and human development indicators? To address this multifaceted query, this analysis synthesizes insights from International Relations (defensive realism, constructivism), Security Studies (securitization theory), Sociology (propaganda, banal nationalism, elite control), Ontological Security Studies, and Cognitive Psychology (cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias, groupthink, obedience to authority). This interdisciplinary approach is crucial for dissecting the complex interplay between elite agency, state identity, discursive power, and public reception, moving beyond a superficial indictment of "fake news" to a deeper understanding of its systemic roots.

This study contributes to the extant literature by proposing the concept of "**Epistemic Autarky of the Elite**." This novel paradigm elucidates how a ruling elite systematically constructs and maintains a self-referential knowledge environment, thereby insulating its power and legitimizing its actions through the deliberate manipulation of perceived reality. This autarkic system functions as a hermetically sealed cognitive domain, where information is rigorously filtered and reinterpreted to align with a predetermined narrative, irrespective of external veridicality. Furthermore, we introduce "**Ontological Dissimulation**" as a specific practice within this autarkic system, referring to the deliberate fabrication of a state's autobiographical narrative to maintain a coherent, albeit false, sense of self and mitigate anxieties arising from a disjuncture between aspirational identity and empirical performance. These conceptual tools offer a more granular understanding of the mechanisms underpinning elite narrative control in states like Pakistan.

II. The Unvarnished Canvas: Pakistan's Systemic Deficiencies

This section meticulously delineates Pakistan's verifiable performance across key indicators, providing the empirical counterpoint to the elite's fabricated narratives and establishing the objective reality against which the elite's discursive machinations are measured.

A. Geopolitical Contestation and the Perpetuation of Military Narratives

The May 2025 military conflict between India and Pakistan serves as a stark illustration of the profound divergence in official state narratives, a phenomenon central to understanding Pakistan's elite-driven discourse (IISS, 2025). India asserted a strategic shift from "symbolic retaliation to decisive military targeting," claiming "escalation dominance" achieved through air superiority and successful neutralization of Pakistani aerial and missile assets. Its narrative emphasized targeting the "heartland of

Pakistan" in contrast to previous engagements confined to Pakistan-controlled Kashmir (IISS, 2025). Conversely, Pakistan's official discourse propagated a narrative of "strong and robust defence" against an "unlawful strike," asserting non-compromise on its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Pakistan also claimed successful targeting "beyond Indian-controlled Kashmir for the first time" and the "internationalisation" of the Kashmir dispute, suggesting a re-hyphenation of India and Pakistan in the eyes of the global community (IISS, 2025). This fundamental epistemic schism highlights the strategic deployment of information warfare, with Pakistan's "increasingly aggressive information efforts" noted as creating significant risks for miscalculation in future crises (Paul, 2019).

The symbolic implications of military self-aggrandizement are particularly salient in this context. General Asim Munir's promotion to Field Marshal, a rank of immense historical weight, immediately following these skirmishes, is a highly symbolic act (Associated Press, 2025). This rank was previously held only by General Ayub Khan, a figure deeply entrenched in Pakistan's military-political history and the 1965 war (Associated Press, 2025). Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's commendation for a "befitting response" to the Indian airstrike further entrenches this narrative of military triumph (Associated Press, 2025). However, this self-aggrandizement was publicly ridiculed when a painting presented by General Munir to Prime Minister Sharif, purportedly depicting a military triumph ("Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos"), was exposed as a lifted image from a Chinese military exercise (NDTV, 2025). This incident underscores the elite's willingness to employ outright fabrication to bolster its image, even at the risk of widespread mockery.

The elevation of General Munir to Field Marshal, a rare and historically significant honor, functions as a performative act of legitimation rather than a mere recognition of objective military success. By bestowing such a high-status rank, the military establishment is not simply acknowledging a victory; it is actively *creating* a narrative of triumph in the public consciousness. This symbolic assertion of power and competence is designed to reinforce the military's indispensable role as the ultimate guarantor of national honor and survival, irrespective of the actual outcomes of the conflict. The fact that this "triumph" is predicated on fabricated visuals, such as the Chinese military image presented as "Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos" (NDTV, 2025), indicates that the *narrative itself* is the primary objective, rather than verifiable military achievement. This performative legitimation is a strategic investment in a desired public image, aimed at securing the military's preeminent position and deflecting scrutiny from any operational shortcomings. The public ridicule following the exposure of the fake painting further highlights the disjuncture between the elite's desired narrative and the emergent, albeit suppressed, counter-narratives within the populace.

Table 1: Divergent Narratives and Reported Outcomes of the May 2025 India-Pakistan Conflict

Category	Indian Narrative Claims	Pakistani Narrative Claims	Reported Outcomes/Critiques
Tactical/Operational Objectives	Successfully met	Successfully met	Disputed, significant misinformation/disinformation (IISS, 2025).
Nature of Indian	Decisive	Unlawful strike, no	India's new doctrine: shift from

Strike	military targeting, counter-terror objectives	complicity in Pahalgam attack	symbolic retaliation to decisive military targeting (IISS, 2025).
Targeting Scope	Heartland of Pakistan targeted (Rawalpindi, Lahore, Karachi), beyond Kashmir	Successfully targeted beyond Indian-controlled Kashmir for the first time	India claims effective targeting of Pakistani air bases and neutralization of assets (IISS, 2025; NDTV, 2025).
Escalation Dominance	India claims air dominance, neutralised Pak assets	Pakistan claims strong/robust defence, no compromise on sovereignty/integrity	India claims escalation dominance at all times through air dominance (IISS, 2025).
Casualties (India)	5 soldiers, 16 civilians, 100+ terrorists killed	N/A	N/A
Casualties (Pakistan)	N/A	13 military personnel, 40 civilians killed	N/A
Kashmir Dispute	Indian response to terror attack	'Internationalized' dispute, 're-hyphenated' countries	Pakistan claims internationalization of Kashmir dispute (IISS, 2025).
Military Leadership Status	Modi seeking strategic change in Pakistan	Gen. Asim Munir emerged stronger/more popular	Munir's promotion to Field Marshal (Associated Press, 2025). Fake painting of 'Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos' exposed as Chinese origin (NDTV, 2025).

Footnote: Data compiled from IISS Online Analysis (2025) and NDTV (2025) reports on the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict.

This table serves to visually underscore the profound "differing and disputed narratives" (IISS, 2025) that characterize the Indo-Pakistani military engagements. By juxtaposing the claims of both nations against documented critiques, particularly the revelation of fabricated visual evidence (NDTV, 2025), it provides concrete empirical grounding for the assertion that Pakistan's elite engages in deliberate narrative artifice. This immediate visual anchor demonstrates the extent to which official discourse can

deviate from objective reality, setting the stage for a theoretical exploration of the underlying motivations and mechanisms.

B. Macroeconomic Precarity and Developmental Stasis

Pakistan's macroeconomic landscape, while exhibiting intermittent signs of stabilization, remains characterized by profound structural vulnerabilities that belie any elite narratives of sustained prosperity. Recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) reports highlight "significant progress in stabilizing the economy" and a sharp decline in inflation to a "historic low of 0.3 percent in April" (IMF, 2025a, 2025b). This progress facilitated the disbursement of approximately \$1 billion under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) and the approval of a \$1.4 billion Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF) (IMF, 2025a, 2025b). These positive indicators are often selectively emphasized by the elite to project an image of economic competence and successful governance.

However, a deeper examination of the IMF's own assessments reveals persistent and elevated risks. The reports explicitly state that the "risks to the outlook remain elevated, particularly from global economic policy uncertainty, rising geopolitical tensions, and persistent domestic vulnerabilities" (IMF, 2025a, 2025b). Pakistan's per capita GDP remains strikingly low at US\$1,566.0 for FY2023/24, with a poverty rate of 21.9 percent (IMF, 2025b). The nation continues to grapple with a substantial total general government debt, projected at 73.6% of GDP for FY25, and external general government debt at 24.0% of GDP for the same period (IMF, 2025b). The IMF further recommends crucial structural reforms, including mobilizing greater revenue from "undertaxed sectors and the noncompliant" and decisively strengthening "governance and anti-corruption institutions" (IMF, 2025a). These recommendations implicitly point to systemic issues deeply embedded within the elite's purview, such as entrenched tax evasion and corruption, which actively undermine long-term economic stability.

The elite's public narrative frequently emphasizes the "progress" and "stabilization" reported by international financial institutions, such as the lower inflation rates and the successful acquisition of IMF disbursements. This selective emphasis serves to project an image of astute economic management and success. Conversely, the underlying "elevated risks" and the imperative for structural reforms—which often directly impinge upon the interests of the elite, such as taxation of previously exempt sectors or anti-corruption measures—are either strategically downplayed or conveniently attributed to external, uncontrollable factors like "global economic policy uncertainty" or "geopolitical tensions." This discursive strategy constructs a narrative of "conditional stability," wherein any positive economic outcomes are framed as direct achievements of elite stewardship and prudent policy, while persistent fragilities and systemic issues are externalized or presented as unavoidable global challenges. This functions as a form of elite absolution, effectively deflecting blame for chronic systemic failures, including pervasive poverty, burgeoning national debt, and endemic corruption. By controlling the interpretation of economic data, the elite legitimizes its continued control over economic policy and resource allocation, reinforcing its position as the indispensable architect of national survival and prosperity, even when objective reality suggests a more precarious situation.

Table 2: Pakistan's Macroeconomic and Social Indicators (FY2024-FY2026 Projections)

Indicator	FY2024	FY2025 (Proj.)	FY2026 (Proj.)	Source
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Population (Millions)	236.0 (2023/24)	N/A	N/A	(IMF, 2025b)
Per Capita GDP (US\$)	1,566.0 (2023/24)	N/A	N/A	(IMF, 2025b)
Poverty Rate (%)	21.9 (FY2019 national line)	N/A	N/A	(IMF, 2025b)
Real GDP at factor cost (% change)	2.5	2.6	3.6	(IMF, 2025b)
Unemployment Rate (%)	8.3	8.0	7.5	(IMF, 2025b)
Consumer Prices, period average (%)	23.4	5.1	7.7	(IMF, 2025b)
Budget Balance, including grants (% GDP)	-6.8	-5.6	-5.1	(IMF, 2025b)
Total General Government Debt excl. IMF (% GDP)	67.9	71.2	69.2	(IMF, 2025b)
External General Government Debt (% GDP)	22.7	24.0	22.2	(IMF, 2025b)
Gross Reserves (Millions US\$)	9,390	13,921	17,682	(IMF, 2025b)
Months of next year's imports	1.6	2.3	2.8	(IMF, 2025b)
Current Account Balance (% GDP)	-0.5	-0.1	-0.4	(IMF, 2025b)

Footnote: Data sourced from IMF Press Release No. 25/137 (2025a) and IMF Country Report No. 25/001 (2025b).

This table is instrumental in providing a quantitative overview of Pakistan's complex economic situation. By presenting both positive trends, such as declining inflation and improving gross reserves, alongside persistent challenges like high debt-to-GDP ratios and a low per capita GDP, it visually corroborates the argument of "precarious stability." This data-driven exposition allows for a critical assessment of elite narratives that selectively highlight economic "progress" while obscuring deeper structural issues and the nation's fundamental developmental stasis. It serves as a robust empirical foundation for analyzing

the elite's selective representation of economic realities and its broader implications for public perception and policy legitimization.

C. Human Rights Abrogations and Gendered Disparities

Pakistan's human rights record is characterized by systemic abrogations of fundamental freedoms and pervasive gendered disparities, as meticulously documented by international organizations. Reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International detail a "widespread clampdown on freedom of expression and association" (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025). This suppression manifests through various mechanisms, including the intermittent blocking of social media platforms like X (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025), the arbitrary detention of activists and journalists (e.g., Asad Ali Toor and Syed Farhad Ali Shah) for critical reporting (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025), and the enactment of vague and overbroad defamation laws that threaten media freedom (Human Rights Watch, 2025). A particularly egregious violation of international law is the trial of civilians in military courts (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025), with reports indicating that 85 participants in the May 2023 protests were sentenced to lengthy imprisonments in secret trials (Amnesty International, 2024). Furthermore, protests by opposition parties and Baloch activists have been repeatedly attacked and restricted, often with excessive and unnecessary use of force, leading to fatalities (Amnesty International, 2024).

Religious persecution remains a grave concern, with blasphemy-related violence against religious minorities intensifying, often fostered by government persecution and discriminatory laws (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Documented incidents include attacks on Ahmadiyya places of worship and graveyards, with tombstones destroyed and graves desecrated (Amnesty International, 2024). The authorities have also failed to ensure accountability for blasphemy-related killings and riots against Christian communities (Amnesty International, 2024).

Gendered disparities are deeply entrenched, reflecting a systemic failure to uphold women's rights. A new International Labour Organization (ILO) policy brief highlights a significant gender pay gap (GPG) of 25% when measured by hourly wages and 30% monthly (International Labour Organization, 2025). This gap widens for women over 35, particularly those returning to work after maternity leave, who often face lower wages for demanding workplace flexibility (International Labour Organization, 2025). Weak enforcement of labor laws, especially in the informal and private sectors, is identified as a major contributing factor (International Labour Organization, 2025). UN reports further warn of "growing, unprecedented threats" to women's and girls' rights worldwide, including higher levels of discrimination and weaker legal protections (United Nations, 2025). Nearly one in four adolescent girls who have been married or partnered globally have experienced intimate partner violence, and 50 million girls alive today have experienced sexual violence (United Nations, 2025). The digital realm also presents new threats, including online harassment and exploitation, exacerbating the digital gender gap (United Nations, 2025). Despite Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's acknowledgment that Pakistan's journey towards true gender equality is "far from over," the empirical data suggests a pervasive and systemic challenge (United Nations, 2025).

The pervasive persecution of religious minorities and the systematic suppression of dissent, coupled with the promotion of a dominant, often masculinized, national narrative, function as a sophisticated diversionary tactic employed by the elite. This strategy aims to consolidate power and deflect public scrutiny from the elite's own failures in governance, economic management, and human rights. By creating internal "others"—whether religious minorities, political dissidents, or even women challenging

patriarchal norms—the ruling apparatus can rally the populace against a perceived common enemy. This fosters a false sense of national unity and cohesion, redirecting societal anxieties and frustrations away from the elite itself and towards these marginalized groups. The "internal othering" process, therefore, serves a dual purpose: it legitimizes repressive actions against these groups under the guise of national security or cultural preservation, and simultaneously inoculates the elite from accountability by providing convenient scapegoats for the nation's multifaceted challenges. This dynamic reinforces the elite's control by manufacturing consent through fear and division, rather than through genuine progress or inclusive governance.

D. Escalating Internal Security Threats and Educational Deficits

Pakistan faces a dire and escalating internal security crisis, juxtaposed with profound and persistent educational deficits, creating a perilous nexus that further enables elite narrative control. According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2025 report, Pakistan has ascended to the unenviable position of the world's second-most terrorism-affected country, a significant rise from its previous fourth-place ranking (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025; SATP, 2025). The nation experienced a dramatic 45% increase in terrorism-related fatalities, with deaths surging from 748 in 2023 to 1,081 in 2024, marking one of the highest increases globally. Concurrently, the number of terrorist attacks more than doubled, jumping from 517 incidents in 2023 to 1,099 in 2024—the first time attacks have surpassed the 1,000 mark since the GTI's inception (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025; SATP, 2025). This troubling rise is explicitly linked to the influence of the Afghan Taliban and the intensified operations of militant groups, particularly the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which remains the deadliest group, responsible for 52% of all terrorism-related deaths in Pakistan (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025; SATP, 2025). Baloch militant groups, such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), have also significantly increased their activity, exploiting ongoing instability (SATP, 2025).

Concurrently, Pakistan's educational sector remains in a profound and protracted crisis. While literacy rates have nominally risen from 13% in 1947 to a current rate of 54-55% for the 10+ age group (UNESCO, 2009; UNESCO, 2010), the absolute number of illiterate people has paradoxically increased, now accounting for over 50 million individuals (UNESCO, 2009). A significant gender disparity persists, with male literacy at 67% compared to 42% for females (UNESCO, 2010). Pakistan ranks among the bottom fifteen countries worldwide in terms of educational performance, with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Education Index placing it 171st out of 185 countries (UNESCO, 2009). This dismal performance is attributed to a lack of political will, scarcity of resources, and low capacity, with the present resource gap for literacy exceeding 80% (UNESCO, 2010). The public education system, which serves the majority, is widely criticized for its low performance and poor quality, while a separate, parallel sector of elitist English-medium schools caters to the civil and military elites, offering high-quality education at prohibitive costs (UNESCO, 2009).

The "security-literacy paradox" in Pakistan highlights a profound and self-serving dynamic within the elite. The persistent and escalating internal security threats, despite significant military expenditure, suggest a failure of the state's security apparatus to genuinely address the root causes of militancy. Simultaneously, the chronic underinvestment in education, which results in a largely illiterate or poorly educated populace, is not merely an oversight but appears to serve a strategic purpose for the elite. A less educated population is inherently more susceptible to simplistic, emotionally charged, and nationalistic narratives propagated by the elite, particularly those that frame complex issues in terms of

existential threats and require unquestioning loyalty. This susceptibility stems from a reduced capacity for critical thinking, information discernment, and independent analysis. The prioritization of military spending and the perpetuation of a powerful military-centric narrative, even as internal threats escalate and educational standards plummet, suggests a deliberate choice to maintain a populace amenable to securitized discourses. This arrangement reinforces the elite's control by ensuring a continuous supply of individuals who are more easily swayed by official narratives and less likely to challenge the established order, thereby entrenching the elite's power at the expense of genuine human development and long-term national stability.

III. Theoretical Exegesis: Unpacking the Elite's Narrative Imperative

The pervasive phenomenon of elite narrative fabrication in Pakistan can be systematically analyzed through a multi-disciplinary theoretical lens, revealing the complex interplay of strategic imperatives, identity construction, discursive power, and psychological conditioning.

A. Defensive Realism and the Elite's Strategic Distortion

Defensive realism, a prominent theory within International Relations, posits that states primarily seek security rather than maximum power, and that the anarchical structure of the international system encourages moderate and reserved policies to attain national security (Waltz, 1979, as cited in Wikipedia, 2023). States are not intrinsically aggressive; their first concern is to maintain their position within the system, learning from historical precedents that often demonstrate the unsustainability of unchecked aggression and expansion (Wikipedia, 2023). However, this theoretical ideal is frequently disrupted by internal dynamics, particularly the perceptions and beliefs of the ruling elite.

Defensive neorealists contend that elite perceptions and beliefs are a crucial "structural modifier" that can precipitate conflict and distort grand strategy (Wikipedia, 2023). When these perceptions are dominated by groups with expansionist ideologies, such as the military establishment, they can lead to a state's overexpansion and the propagation of unsustainable policies (Wikipedia, 2023). Specifically, elites may inflate existing threats to mobilize domestic resources and justify expansionist policies (Wikipedia, 2023). Conversely, these perceptions can also inhibit leaders from acknowledging or rectifying a decline in their state's power within the international system, often due to the prioritization of domestic concerns over international standing (Wikipedia, 2023). In a centralized system where multiple groups, particularly the military, hold differing and often expansionist aims, effective restriction and balancing of expansion become difficult or are simply ignored (Wikipedia, 2023). This unchecked expansion, driven by dominant elite perceptions, can result in vast territorial gains that are not effectively consolidated, populations not integrated into the state's narrative, and resources not effectively exploited, ultimately rendering the rapid expansion unsustainable (Wikipedia, 2023).

In the Pakistani context, the military elite's entrenched dominance and its historical proclivity for an expansionist ideology, particularly concerning the Kashmir dispute, exemplify this dynamic. Despite ambiguous military outcomes in recent conflicts (IISS, 2025), the narrative of military triumph and the symbolic self-aggrandizement of figures like General Munir (Associated Press, 2025; NDTV, 2025) serve to inflate perceived threats from India and reinforce an expansionist posture. This strategic distortion, driven by elite perceptions, mobilizes national resources towards military objectives at the expense of other critical sectors, as evidenced by the nation's socio-economic and human development deficits (IMF, 2025b; Amnesty International, 2024; UNESCO, 2010; International Labour Organization, 2025). The difficulty in rectifying this grand strategy, even when it leads to unsustainable outcomes,

stems from the deeply ingrained narrative that has been "sold" to both the elite itself and the general public (Wikipedia, 2023). This creates a path-dependency where the elite is effectively condemned to perpetuate a strategy that, while serving its internal power interests, may be detrimental to the state's long-term security and stability.

B. Ontological Security Theory and the Maintenance of a Fictive Self

Ontological security theory (OST) provides a unique account of how state self-identity is formed and reformed in international relations, focusing on the security not of the physical body but of the self or identity—the subjective sense of who one is that enables and motivates action and choice (Kinnvall, 2018; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). This sense of self is primarily constituted and sustained through consistent autobiographical narratives and routinized practices (Kinnvall, 2018; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008). The theory posits that actors, including states, seek a stable sense of self to navigate the world and realize agency, often preferring stability over change (Steele, 2008).

Within OST, autobiographical narratives can be "gendered," with dominant narratives often being masculinized, deriving power from an "internal othering" process that counters "feminine" narratives (Steele, 2014). This process of othering helps to solidify a preferred national identity by defining what it is *not*. When an actor is unable to tell coherent stories about themselves or their experiences, a gap emerges between their biographical narrative and their behavior, leading to "ontological dissonance" (Steele, 2014). This dissonance, an anxiety-inducing state, can be triggered by critical situations that destabilize established routines or narratives (Steele, 2014).

In the context of Pakistan, the persistent disjuncture between the elite's aspirational national identity (e.g., a militarily formidable, economically stable, and religiously pure state) and the empirical realities of its poor performance across various indices (military ambiguity, economic precarity, human rights abuses, rampant terrorism, and low literacy) generates profound ontological dissonance. Rather than confronting this discomfort by altering policies to align with reality, the Pakistani elite engages in what this study terms "**Ontological Dissimulation**." This is a deliberate, systematic fabrication of the state's autobiographical narrative, meticulously crafted to maintain a coherent, albeit fictive, sense of self and to mitigate the anxieties arising from the disjuncture between desired identity and objective performance.

This dissimulation manifests in various ways: the promotion of a Field Marshal after disputed military engagements (Associated Press, 2025), the presentation of fake military victory visuals (NDTV, 2025), the selective highlighting of positive economic indicators while obscuring structural vulnerabilities (IMF, 2025a, 2025b), and the "internal othering" of religious minorities and political dissidents to consolidate a masculinized, security-centric national identity (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025; Steele, 2014). The conservative need for ontological security, the preference for stability over disruptive change (Steele, 2008), drives this perpetuation of false narratives. The elite, by engaging in ontological dissimulation, attempts to reassert a preferred, fictionalized self-identity, thereby insulating its power and legitimizing its actions. This process, while seemingly providing a temporary sense of coherence, ultimately entrenches a pathological reliance on deception, hindering genuine self-reflection and adaptive change necessary for long-term national well-being. The constant flux of collective identity (Steele, 2014) means that external critiques or internal counter-narratives can exacerbate this dissonance, but the elite's strategy is to suppress or reframe these challenges through dissimulation.

C. Securitization Theory and the Elite's Discursive Power

Securitization theory, a constructivist approach within Security Studies, challenges traditional realist assumptions by emphasizing the social construction of threats through language and political processes (Buzan et al., 1998; Fiveable, n.d.). It posits that issues are not inherently threatening; rather, they become "security problems" when successfully framed as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures outside the bounds of normal politics (Buzan et al., 1998; Fiveable, n.d.; Thierry Braspenning-Balzacq, as cited in Wikipedia, 2024). This process involves a "securitizing actor" who performs a "speech act," identifying a "referent object" as existentially threatened, and convincing a "relevant audience" to accept this framing (Buzan et al., 1998; Fiveable, n.d.; Thierry Braspenning-Balzacq, as cited in Wikipedia, 2024). Securitization can occur across five sectors: military, political, economic, societal, and environmental (Buzan et al., 1998; Fiveable, n.d.; Wikipedia, 2024).

In Pakistan, the military elite functions as the primary securitizing actor, wielding immense social capital and institutional power to define security issues (Buzan et al., 1998; Fiveable, n.d.). This elite consistently frames external geopolitical rivalries (e.g., India) and internal challenges (e.g., terrorism, political dissent) as existential threats to the "societal referent object"—namely, Pakistan's national identity and integrity (Buzan et al., 1998; Fiveable, n.d.; Wikipedia, 2024). The speech acts employed by this elite, such as declaring a "befitting response" to Indian strikes (Associated Press, 2025) or linking internal militancy to external influences (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025), move these issues into an emergency domain where "extraordinary measures" are deemed necessary for survival (Buzan et al., 1998).

This securitization legitimizes the military's disproportionate resource allocation, often at the expense of critical social development sectors like education and healthcare (UNESCO, 2009; UNESCO, 2010). It also justifies the "suspension of normal politics," including severe human rights abuses, censorship, and the suppression of civil society and opposition parties (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025; Fiveable, n.d.). The success of this securitization hinges on the audience's acceptance, which is facilitated by the elite's ability to draw on "sedimented discourses"—deeply ingrained historical narratives and cultural codes like "sovereignty" and "national interest" (Buzan et al., 1998). These discourses create a powerful "we" concept, which limits what security issues can be accepted by the populace and constructs an "Other" (e.g., India, terrorists, internal dissidents) that threatens the "Self's" survival (Buzan et al., 1998).

The "thick signifier approach" within securitization theory explains how the term "security" itself becomes a powerful, unquestionable discourse, constituting and mediating people's relationship to survival (Buzan et al., 1998). By framing issues in terms of existential threats, the elite gains the authority to decide when democratic frameworks can be suspended and to manipulate populations (Fiveable, n.d.). The increasing "otherness" of the perceived threat, particularly when it approaches a "radical Other" framed as "evil," facilitates the public's tolerance for extraordinary and often undemocratic measures, leading to the exclusion of political communication channels and a desire for complete extermination of the perceived threat (Buzan et al., 1998). This perpetual state of securitization reinforces the military's hegemonic position, allowing it to define the "right" knowledge about threats and solutions, thereby maintaining its control over the national narrative and policy agenda (Fiveable, n.d.).

D. Sociological and Psychological Mechanisms of Narrative Entrenchment

The elite's capacity to propagate and entrench fabricated narratives is profoundly amplified by a confluence of sociological and psychological mechanisms, which collectively foster public acceptance and suppress dissent.

Propaganda and Banal Nationalism

Propaganda, understood as the strategic manipulation of symbols and information to influence public opinion and behavior, is a central instrument in the elite's arsenal (Dovring, as cited in Mirasotirovic, n.d.; StudySmarter, n.d.). It operates most effectively when hidden and undetected, subtly shaping emotions, perceptions, and thoughts through sophisticated mass persuasion techniques (Mirasotirovic, n.d.). Authoritarian regimes, such as Pakistan's elite, deploy propaganda not only to persuade citizens of the leader's competence and benevolence but also, crucially, to dominate and signal the regime's overwhelming strength and invulnerability (Wallace, 2022). This involves spinning narratives, inflating statistics, exaggerating accomplishments, and hiding failures, often by reframing repressive actions as necessary for public protection (Wallace, 2022). The very "stiltedness" or absurdity of certain propaganda, as seen in the fake military painting incident (NDTV, 2025), can paradoxically signal that the regime does not need to pander, thus reflecting its confidence and the inevitability of its continued rule (Wallace, 2022). This "propaganda as domination" induces fear and generates compliance, often requiring the active, albeit coerced, participation of citizens in public displays of loyalty (Wallace, 2022).

The elite employs the concept of "banal nationalism" (Billig, as cited in Wodak, 2006) through everyday media and official pronouncements to make their narratives seem natural and unquestionable. This subtle, pervasive construction of nationhood, often through the consistent use of the first-person plural "we" to signify a collective national identity (Wodak, 2006), creates an inclusive "us" versus an exclusive "them" (Wodak, 2006). This discursive strategy reinforces solidarity and legitimizes elite actions, even when prioritizing national interests over broader global concerns (Wodak, 2006). Education also serves as a crucial phase for socialization, where individuals learn societal functions and values, potentially inculcating obedience and fostering nationalism and loyalty, thereby shaping citizens' preferences and worldviews in alignment with the elite's agenda (Wallace, 2022).

Cognitive Dissonance and Confirmation Bias

The human mind's inherent drive for cognitive consistency is a potent tool for propagandists. Cognitive dissonance is the psychological discomfort experienced when an individual simultaneously holds two contradictory concepts or when their actions clash with their beliefs (Ethics Unwrapped, 2025; Festinger, 1957, as cited in Fiveable, n.d.; Propwatch, n.d.). This discomfort, particularly "moral dissonance" when ethical implications are involved, creates a strong motivation to reduce the inconsistency (Ethics Unwrapped, 2025). Individuals typically resolve this by either altering their beliefs or, more commonly, by rationalizing the contradiction or dismissing conflicting evidence (Ethics Unwrapped, 2025; Propwatch, n.d.).

Propagandists exploit cognitive dissonance by creating an environment where evidence-based information (e.g., Pakistan's poor economic or human rights record) conflicts with an audience's values or identity (e.g., belief in national greatness, loyalty to the state) (Propwatch, n.d.). To alleviate this discomfort, the populace may dismiss verifiable facts as fabricated or biased, or rationalize elite behavior by blaming external factors (Propwatch, n.d.). This mechanism is profoundly reinforced by confirmation bias, which is the innate tendency to seek out, interpret, and remember information in a way that supports pre-existing beliefs, expectations, or hypotheses, while ignoring or downplaying

contradictory evidence (Ethics Unwrapped, n.d.; StudySmarter, n.d.; Wikipedia, 2023b). Social media algorithms exacerbate this by creating "echo chambers" that reinforce existing beliefs and minimize exposure to dissonant information (Fiveable, n.d.; Wikipedia, 2023b). Consequently, the public becomes more likely to accept information that aligns with their desired reality, even if it is demonstrably false, thereby maintaining alignment with the intended narrative regardless of objective facts (Propwatch, n.d.; Wikipedia, 2023b).

Groupthink and Obedience to Authority

Within the elite, groupthink, a pattern of thought characterized by self-deception, forced manufacture of consent, and conformity to group values, can lead to irrational decision-making and a shared belief in fabricated narratives (Janis, 1972, as cited in Benabou, 2013; Wikipedia, 2023a). High group cohesiveness, insulation from external information, lack of impartial leadership, and homogeneity of members' backgrounds can foster this phenomenon, where dissent is self-censored or directly pressured into conformity (Wikipedia, 2023a). This creates an "illusion of unanimity" within the elite, where silence is perceived as agreement, and critical thinking is supplanted by a desire to maintain group loyalty (Wikipedia, 2023a).

For the broader populace, the principle of obedience to authority is a powerful psychological lever. This describes the tendency of individuals to comply with the wishes of superiors, even when such compliance conflicts with their own moral judgment (Ethics Unwrapped, n.d.; Milgram, 1965, as cited in Philosophia Scientiae, 2023; Structural Learning, n.d.). The infamous Milgram experiments demonstrated that ordinary people are capable of inflicting harm on others when instructed to do so by an authority figure, particularly when the authority is perceived as legitimate (e.g., through uniforms or institutional settings) (Philosophia Scientiae, 2023; Structural Learning, n.d.). In Pakistan, the pervasive influence of the military and political elite, often symbolized by ranks like Field Marshal (Associated Press, 2025) and official pronouncements, creates a powerful authoritative presence. This authority, coupled with the threat of social rejection or punitive measures for non-conformity (Wikipedia, 2023a), reinforces public acceptance of official narratives. The public's desire for security within a group, often termed "normative influence" (Wikipedia, 2023a), further compels conformity, making it easier to follow the path laid out by authority figures than to challenge it, even when confronted with contradictory evidence. This psychological conditioning solidifies the elite's control over the public mind, ensuring compliance with the fabricated reality.

IV. The Epistemic Autarky of the Elite: A Proposed Paradigm

The preceding analysis culminates in the conceptualization of "**Epistemic Autarky of the Elite**," a novel paradigm positing that the Pakistani ruling elite, particularly the military establishment, deliberately constructs and maintains a self-referential knowledge ecosystem. This autarkic system is not merely a byproduct of propaganda; it is a meticulously engineered environment designed to insulate elite power and legitimize its actions through the systematic manipulation of perceived reality. Within this autarky, the elite operates as the sole arbiter of truth, controlling the production, dissemination, and interpretation of information to ensure its narratives remain dominant and unquestioned.

The mechanisms of this epistemic autarky are multifaceted. It involves the systematic reinforcement of official narratives through state-controlled media and educational curricula, as discussed in the context of propaganda and banal nationalism (Wallace, 2022; Wodak, 2006). Simultaneously, contradictory evidence, whether from international reports on human rights, economic performance, or military

engagements, is rigorously suppressed, reframed, or dismissed as hostile foreign propaganda (IISS, 2025; NDTV, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025; IMF, 2025a, 2025b). This meticulous engineering of public perception aims to achieve cognitive consonance within the populace, ensuring that the collective understanding of reality aligns with the elite's desired narrative, thereby securing political compliance. The deliberate creation of "internal others" and the securitization of various issues further consolidate this autarky by focusing public attention on external or internal threats, diverting scrutiny from elite performance (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025; Steele, 2014; Buzan et al., 1998).

The purpose of this epistemic autarky is fundamentally teleological: to insulate elite power from accountability derived from objective reality. By controlling the narrative, the elite can perpetuate an unsustainable grand strategy, such as prioritizing military expenditure over human development despite escalating internal threats and economic precarity (IMF, 2025b; Institute for Economics and Peace, 2025; UNESCO, 2009). This autarky enables "Ontological Dissimulation," providing the controlled environment necessary for the state to maintain a fictive self-identity, one that projects strength, competence, and moral rectitude despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The elite, through this dissimulation, mitigates its own ontological anxieties arising from the disjuncture between its aspirational self and its empirical performance.

The theoretical frameworks integrated throughout this analysis illuminate the functional aspects of epistemic autarky:

- **Defensive Realism:** The autarky serves as a means for the elite to sustain an unsustainable grand strategy by controlling the perception of threats and capabilities. By inflating external threats and presenting military actions as triumphs, the elite can justify its disproportionate power and resource allocation, even if it leads to long-term national detriment (Wikipedia, 2023c).
- **Ontological Security Theory:** The autarky provides the necessary conditions for "Ontological Dissimulation." It creates a protected cognitive space where the state can continuously perform its desired, albeit false, autobiographical narrative, thereby managing collective anxieties and maintaining a coherent, albeit fictive, sense of self (Kinnvall, 2018; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008).
- **Securitization Theory:** The autarky empowers the elite as the primary securitizing actor by controlling the "discursive conditions of possibility" (Buzan et al., 1998). It limits alternative framings of issues, ensuring that only the elite's interpretation of threats and solutions gains public acceptance, thereby legitimizing extraordinary measures and the suspension of normal political processes (Buzan et al., 1998; Fiveable, n.d.).
- **Sociological and Psychological Mechanisms:** The autarky leverages propaganda, exploits cognitive biases (dissonance, confirmation bias), fosters groupthink within elite circles, and capitalizes on the populace's obedience to authority. These mechanisms ensure the internal consistency of the fabricated reality within the public consciousness, making it difficult for individuals to challenge the dominant narrative even when confronted with contradictory facts (Mirasotirovic, n.d.; Ethics Unwrapped, 2025; Propwatch, n.d.; Wikipedia, 2023a; Structural Learning, n.d.).

The consequences of such epistemic autarky are profoundly deleterious. It perpetuates an unsustainable national trajectory, characterized by a fundamental disconnect between policy and reality. It erodes critical thinking and media literacy within the populace, fostering a culture of intellectual dependency and uncritical acceptance. Furthermore, it contributes to societal fragmentation by creating "internal others" and suppressing diverse voices, thereby hindering genuine national cohesion and progress. In the

long term, this reliance on fabricated realities renders the state vulnerable to unforeseen shocks and limits its capacity for adaptive, evidence-based policy formulation, thereby ensuring a cycle of instability and underdevelopment.

V. Conclusion: The Perilous Architecture of Deception

The analysis herein demonstrates that the Pakistani elite's proclivity for fabricating national narratives, despite a demonstrable record of underperformance across critical domains, is not a mere aberration but a systemic phenomenon rooted in a complex interplay of strategic imperatives and deeply entrenched socio-psychological mechanisms. The recent incident of the Army Chief's self-elevation to Field Marshal, juxtaposed with the exposure of fabricated military achievements, serves as a poignant illustration of this pervasive narrative artifice, which extends across military, economic, human rights, and social development spheres.

The theoretical exegesis has illuminated the underlying causality. From a defensive realist perspective, the elite, particularly the military establishment, strategically distorts reality by inflating threats and propagating fictionalized triumphs to legitimize an unsustainable grand strategy and maintain its hegemonic position, even when such policies lead to national detriment. Ontological security theory reveals that this narrative fabrication, termed "Ontological Dissimulation," is a crucial practice for the elite to maintain a coherent, albeit fictive, state self-identity, thereby mitigating the profound anxieties arising from the disjuncture between aspirational narratives and empirical failures. Securitization theory explains how the elite, as the primary securitizing actor, leverages discursive power to frame issues as existential threats, justifying extraordinary measures, disproportionate resource allocation to the military, and the suppression of civil liberties, all under the unquestionable rubric of "national security." Finally, sociological and psychological mechanisms, including sophisticated propaganda techniques, the exploitation of cognitive biases (dissonance and confirmation bias), the prevalence of groupthink within elite circles, and the populace's inherent obedience to authority, collectively entrench these fabricated realities, ensuring public compliance and insulating the elite from accountability.

This study's core contribution, the concept of "**Epistemic Autarky of the Elite**," synthesizes these multi-disciplinary insights. It posits that the Pakistani elite consciously cultivates and maintains a self-referential knowledge ecosystem, a hermetically sealed cognitive domain where official narratives are perpetually reinforced, contradictory evidence is systematically suppressed or reinterpreted, and public perception is meticulously engineered. This autarky is the operational framework through which ontological dissimulation is performed and securitization moves are legitimized, ultimately serving to insulate elite power from the inconvenient truths of objective reality.

The implications of this perilous architecture of deception are profound and far-reaching. The perpetuation of a "security-literacy paradox," where military dominance is prioritized over human development, ensures a populace less equipped for critical discernment, thereby reinforcing the elite's control. The continuous process of "internal othering" diverts societal frustrations and consolidates power through division, rather than genuine national cohesion. Such a system, built on a foundation of chimerical narratives, fosters a pathological reliance on deception, hindering genuine self-reflection, adaptive governance, and sustainable development. The long-term veridicality of a state cannot be sustained when its foundational narratives are fundamentally untethered from reality. Unless this epistemic autarky is dismantled, allowing for a more authentic engagement with national challenges and a more inclusive discourse, Pakistan risks remaining trapped in a cycle of instability, underdevelopment, and a perpetual disjuncture between its proclaimed identity and its lived reality.

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