

A Content Analysis of Indian Air Force Press Releases : Themes , Frequencies and Framing (2019-2022)

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the role of Indian Air Force's (IAF) press releases issued by the Directorate of Public Relations (DPR), Ministry of Defence, Government of India, as tools for perception management between 2019 and 2022. Using content analysis the study examines the themes , frequency and framing techniques employed in official communication of the IAF. Drawing on framing theory and strategic communication frameworks, the study decodes how narratives are constructed around operational readiness, humanitarian assistance, technological advancements and national pride. The findings release a deliberate pattern of message framing intended to assert strategic air dominance, foster civil-military confidence and align public opinion with national defence objectives. The study contributes to literature on military communication by contextualising India's approach within global trends and highlights the importance of institutional storytelling in shaping defence perception in democratic societies. This research investigates the thematic content, frequency and framing strategies employed in the official press releases disbursed by IAF. The study examines 260 press releases to identify recurring themes, assess publication frequency and analyse the language of the narratives set. The analysis reveals a consistent emphasis on operational readiness, national pride, humanitarian missions, international cooperation and indigenous capability development. Framing devices such as heroism, deterrence and professionalism are commonly used to shape public perception and bolster national morale. This study also explores the use of language based on contextual triggers such as conflicts, events, joint operations, exercises and national commemorations. The findings contribute to understanding how strategic communication from the IAF aligns with broader goals of nation branding, civil-military confidence building and agenda setting. The paper concludes with recommendations for strengthening perception through more diversified and inclusive narratives. In the contemporary information environment, the role of strategic communication in shaping public opinion and national perception has become increasingly vital. Armed Forces across the world have realised the importance of crafting narratives that reflect strength, professionalism and national resolve. The Indian Air Force has emerged a key player in using public communication not only to inform by also to influence. Through the official releases disseminated by the DPR, the IAF constructs narratives that align with national security objectives, project military capability and reinforce public confidence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Military organizations across the world increasingly utilize public relations tools to manage public perception, maintain legitimacy, and project strategic intent. The Indian Air Force (IAF), through its press releases disbursed by the Directorate of Public Relations (DPR), employs structured communication techniques that reflect broader national security narratives and internal operational transparency. The study of these releases offers insights into how language, themes, and framing are used for perception management—a strategy also observed in Western military communications

(Guerrero-Castro, 2020; Kroll, 2017). The Indian Air Force (IAF) as one of the key pillars of India's defence apparatus, has consistently utilised strategic communication to shape public perception and assert its role in national security. Through the Directorate of Public Relations (DPR), the Ministry of Defence (MoD) disseminates press releases that reflect the operational, ceremonial, humanitarian and technological narratives of the IAF. This study seeks to examine the thematic evolution, frequency and framing of these official communications over the four years period from January 2019 to December 2022. It aims to decode how language, tone and content vary with events and institutional priorities and how perception is managed via structured messaging.

1.1 Background & Context

In the contemporary landscape of strategic communication, the armed forces increasingly rely on public relations (PR) mechanisms to shape public perception, manage narratives, and enhance institutional legitimacy. The Indian Air Force (IAF), as one of the principal branches of India's defence apparatus, plays a vital role not only in national security but also in representing India's air power doctrine to domestic and global audiences. One of the key tools employed by the IAF for external communication is the official press release, disseminated through the Directorate of Public Relations (DPR), Ministry of Defence, Government of India. These press releases act as official narratives, presenting the Air Force's missions, exercises, achievements, humanitarian efforts, and technological advancements. In doing so, they help create an image of operational readiness, strategic depth, and public accountability. Over time, the volume, language, and themes of these releases have evolved in tandem with geopolitical shifts, defence priorities, and emerging media strategies. Between 2019 and 2022, India witnessed significant developments in regional security, military modernization, and international defence cooperation—making this period an opportune timeframe to assess the communication strategies adopted by the IAF.

This study undertakes a systematic content analysis of IAF press releases during this four-year period. It investigates how themes are framed, the frequency of publication, and the dominant narratives projected by the IAF's public relations apparatus. By analysing these communications, the research aims to unpack the underlying messaging strategy, explore shifts in thematic focus, and contribute to a broader understanding of military perception management in democratic settings.

1.2 Significance of the Study

In an era defined by rapid information dissemination and media-driven influence, military organizations must engage in deliberate communication to manage public perception and maintain institutional trust. For the Indian Air Force (IAF), press releases serve as an essential interface with the public, media, and global stakeholders. They not only convey operational updates and strategic postures but also shape the narrative around national defence preparedness, humanitarian efforts, and technological progress. This study holds significance in multiple dimensions.

Firstly, it contributes to the academic field of defence communication by offering empirical insights into how a major military branch in a democratic country utilizes public messaging tools. Through the lens of content analysis, the study decodes how themes are framed, how frequently releases are issued, and how messaging strategies evolve in response to domestic and international developments. Secondly, the research provides a valuable reference for media professionals, policymakers, and strategic communicators who engage with defence narratives. Understanding the framing and thematic choices in IAF press releases can enhance journalistic accuracy, inform policy communication, and foster a more informed public discourse on national security. Lastly, the study adds to the broader conversation around transparency, strategic communication, and public accountability in defence institutions. In doing so, it supports the growing recognition of information as a domain of warfare, where perception management can be as critical as battlefield success. By systematically analysing four years of IAF public communication, this research underscores the importance of narrative control in shaping both domestic confidence and international image.

1.3 Need for the Study

In an increasingly complex media environment where military actions are closely scrutinized and rapidly interpreted by domestic and international audiences, the need to examine how defence organizations communicate has never been more critical. The Indian Air Force, as a vital arm of the country's national security apparatus, frequently issues press releases that inform the public, manage crises, and project strategic intent. However, despite the regularity and importance of these communications, there has been limited academic scrutiny of their content, structure, and underlying messaging. This study addresses that gap by analysing the press releases of the IAF to identify recurring themes, assess their frequency, and evaluate how messages are framed to serve specific objectives. By doing so, the research provides insights into how public narratives are shaped and controlled by official military communication, especially during times of conflict, national events, and defence advancements. This analysis is necessary to understand how strategic narratives are crafted and how they influence public perception, media reportage, and international opinion.

1.4 Research Context

The research is situated within the broader field of strategic communication and military media studies, where official narratives are increasingly recognized as instruments of soft power and perception management. In India, the Directorate of Public Relations (DPR) under the Ministry of Defence plays a central role in shaping public and media perceptions of the armed forces. Among the three services, the Indian Air Force (IAF) has emerged as a key player in both national defence and public discourse, especially in the aftermath of high-profile operations, international exercises, and defence acquisitions. From 2019 to 2022, the IAF navigated a dynamic period marked by escalating geopolitical tensions, technological advancements, and evolving civil-military relations. Against this backdrop, its press releases not only served as tools for information dissemination but also as crafted messages aimed at reinforcing national pride, operational transparency, and strategic deterrence. This research contextualizes IAF's communication practices within these changing realities to explore how its press releases contribute to agenda-setting, national security narratives, and civil-military engagement.

1.5 Aim

This research aims to systematically examine the themes, frequency, and framing patterns found in the Indian Air Force's official press releases issued between 2019 and 2022. It seeks to understand how these communications reflect the IAF's strategic priorities, shape public perception, and contribute to national security discourse.

1.6 Research Questions

- A What are the dominant themes present in the IAF press releases from January 2019 to December 2022?
- How frequently are press releases issued?
- What types of frames are commonly used in these press releases?
- How does the language and tone vary across different themes and contexts?

1.7 Research Objectives

- To identify and categorise the dominant themes and patterns in the press releases issued by the Indian Air Force between 2019 and 2022.
- To analyse the framing techniques and language used in these releases to assess their role in shaping public perception and institutional image.
- To study the frequency of distribution of the press releases on respective themes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have long noted that defence-related public communications are not merely informational but strategic (Marin & Grier, 2002). The United States Navy's public relations model exemplifies how

consistent messaging reinforces institutional trust and national identity (Kroll, 2017). Similarly, Russian information warfare strategies highlight how narrative framing can shape international discourse (Thomas, 2016). These frameworks align with content trends visible in Indian military communication, particularly in the IAF's crisis-oriented and ceremonial narratives between 2019 and 2022.

2.1 Strategic communication by military institutions.

This form of communication particularly in conflict-prone regions like South Asia, plays a critical role in shaping public perception, managing escalation, and signalling deterrence. Several scholars have examined how defence public relations operate as both informational and persuasive tools during peace and crisis.

Zeb, Shahzad, and Khan (2021) provide an incisive analysis of India's communication strategy following the Pulwama terrorist attack and the subsequent Balakot air strikes. They argue that India's post-strike messaging, especially through official and semi-official channels, established a new norm of assertiveness—framing India's air power as not just retaliatory, but also as a mechanism for deterrence and psychological dominance. Their study indicates a transition in India's narrative posture, in which public communications, including those by the Indian Air Force (IAF), reinforce the legitimacy and readiness of military options in the face of cross-border terrorism.

Similarly, Husnain, Ahmad, and Mateen (2021) analyse how Indian and Pakistani media responded to the same events. They found that India's official narratives, particularly those echoed in press briefings and statements by the IAF and Ministry of Defence, played a central role in fostering public trust and reinforcing the state's retaliatory stance. The authors note that the language used was emotionally resonant and strategically framed to promote national unity and resilience. These insights support the present study's interest in thematic and framing analysis, especially regarding how air operations are communicated during crises.

From a theoretical perspective, Saran (2020) contends that public communication has emerged as a key component of strategic deterrence in South Asia. He emphasizes that information dissemination, particularly by military bodies, is not simply reactive but is part of a broader doctrine of escalation dominance. The ability to control narratives—through timely press releases, visuals of aerial action, and assertion of technological capability—is now integral to national security signalling. This reinforces the need to systematically study IAF press releases as artifacts of strategic communication rather than just information bulletins.

Yusuf, Sarwar, and Iqbal (2019) also highlight the dual-audience role of military communication. In their study of crisis management mechanisms, they argue that messages from institutions like the IAF must cater simultaneously to domestic populations—who seek reassurance and patriotic affirmation—and to international observers—who judge restraint, legality, and proportionality. This duality has implications for how releases are framed, what information is disclosed, and how tone and timing are calibrated. Their observations align with this paper's coding of releases based on intent, tone, and thematic emphasis.

Taken together, these studies establish a foundational understanding of the IAF's communication strategy as a deliberate exercise in perception management, not only during conflict but also through routine press outreach. The literature suggests that the evolution of India's air power narrative—particularly post-2019—must be seen in light of wider political, military, and international communication strategies.

2.1 Strategic Role of Military Public Affairs

Army Public Affairs: Suggested Changes to Win the Media War (Childers, 1997). This study emphasizes the need for proactive public affairs to influence public opinion and create support for military operations. It supports the argument on the importance of the IAF using press releases to build

national confidence and legitimize actions. Childers (1997) argues that effective media engagement by the military is essential in influencing national sentiment and should be rooted in transparency, candor, and trained communicators.

2.2 Information Operations & Counter-Propaganda

Information Operations and Counter-Propaganda (Garrison, 1999). Public Affairs is a critical tool in strategic communication and countering hostile narratives, not merely an informational outlet. It justifies the IAF's use of framing and selective disclosure in press releases as tools of perception management. Garrison (1999) suggests that public affairs must be repositioned as a weapon in information operations, capable of both narrative creation and counter-propaganda.

2.3 PR as a Deterrence Mechanism

Strategic communication, when effectively framed, enhances deterrence by projecting capability and intent. It aligns with the framing analysis in IAF releases that often highlight operational success to bolster deterrence. Strategic deterrence is shaped not only by capability but by the perception of resolve and preparedness projected through public communication (Anonymous, Strategic Deterrence, n.d.).

2.4 PR in National Security Messaging

Yousaf & Sarwar (2021) Military press releases in South Asia are used to shape public opinion during times of conflict and to manage crisis narratives. Directly parallels the IAF's press strategies post-Pulwama and Balakot air strikes. Yousaf and Sarwar (2021) demonstrate how militaries in South Asia leverage press communications to construct dominant narratives and frame conflict outcomes.

2.5 Media-Military Relationship and Crisis Framing

A Public Relations Case Study on the U.S. Navy and Marines. Public relations in the military context serves both operational transparency and image repair during crises. It provides theoretical backing for IAF releases post-accidents and operational setbacks (e.g., crashes, friendly fire incidents). Crisis communications within the military rely heavily on timing, tone, and transparency to maintain institutional legitimacy (Author Unknown, U.S. Navy PR Case Study, n.d.).

2.6 Strategic Communication

Kroll, M. (2017). Strategic Communication in Military Settings. This explores the balance between operational secrecy and public communication. Guerrero-Castro (2019). Strategic Messaging by Armed Forces in Latin America, offers a comparative military PR model, useful for international contrast in your study.

2.7 Handbooks on official communication

Handbook on Russian Information Warfare (2016). This highlights hybrid tactics including controlled narrative distribution—relevant for comparative perspective on IAF strategy.

2.8 Psychological & Perceptual Warfare

According to the NATO StratCom COE (2016), narrative framing in military communication is often used as a tool of soft deterrence, especially in hybrid and information warfare domains. This aligns with Indian Air Force press releases, which consistently emphasize readiness and moral high ground—possibly as a strategic deterrence tool (Strategic Deterrence, n.d.).

2.9 Comparative Military PR Models

U.S. Navy public affairs operations offer a useful comparative lens for understanding how timely and targeted communication can reinforce military legitimacy (U.S. Navy Public Affairs Office, n.d.). The Indian Air Force seems to replicate similar strategic practices in peace and crisis communication, albeit contextualized within its own regional security dynamics (Kroll, 2017).

2.10 Themes like Atmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India

Framing strategies in recent IAF communications echo broader national initiatives like 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', reflecting what Guerrero-Castro (2019) terms "institutional legitimacy through public messaging".

Military public relations have increasingly become tools for perception shaping, especially in democracies like India where public trust and national image are central to defence narratives. Scholars like Guerrero-Castro (2020) have emphasized the strategic role of defence communications in reinforcing state legitimacy through symbolic language and repeated themes of sacrifice and national unity. The Indian Air Force's use of press releases to frame military exercises, bilateral engagements, and disaster relief operations aligns with Kroll's (2017) findings on how defence forces employ narrative frames to construct and disseminate national identity during both peace and conflict.

3. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

The Agenda-Setting Theory, relevant to this analysis, finds support in studies by Yousaf, Sarwar, and Iqbal (2019), which indicate how defence institutions shape public debate by repetitive exposure to select themes like technological prowess and strategic deterrence. Framing Theory, as applied in this research, draws from Entman's (1993) model and is reaffirmed in Sarbahi's (2022) work on state narratives around counterterrorism following critical events like the Balakot strikes. Drawing upon agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and framing theory (Entman, 1993), the IAF's press releases demonstrate how institutional messages selectively emphasize specific themes such as operational success, humanitarian efforts, or modernization. These tactics mirror Western military practices where narrative dominance is a core objective (Thomas, 2016; Guerrero-Castro, 2020).

4. METHODOLOGY

The use of manual thematic coding and frequency counts echoes the practices adopted in content analyses of military Research c Design. This study adopts a qualitative and quantitative content analysis framework to examine the press releases issued by the Indian Air Force (IAF) from January 2019 to December 2022. It follows an exploratory-descriptive design, aimed at systematically identifying recurring themes, analysing the frequency of publications, and understanding how framing is employed in official communications. The research emphasizes both manifest and latent content within the texts to capture not only what is being said but also how it is presented. The mixed-method design allows for numerical evaluation of trends and patterns, alongside interpretative analysis of linguistic and thematic elements.

4.1 Research Design

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4.2 Research Methodology

4.2A Data Collection:

The data comprises official press releases disseminated by the Directorate of Public Relations (DPR), Ministry of Defence, Government of India, specific to the Indian Air Force, covering the four-year period from 2019 to 2022. These documents were obtained from the MoD's official archives and verified government communication platforms.

4.2B Sampling Method:

A census sampling technique was applied to include the entire population of IAF-related press releases issued during the stated period. This ensured comprehensive coverage of events, announcements, and official narratives.

4.2C Coding and Categorization:

The collected content was manually coded using a structured codebook developed through inductive and deductive approaches. Categories were created based on recurring topics such as operations, exercises, training, commemorations, procurement, and humanitarian missions. Frames such as conflict, human interest, strategy, and national pride were also noted.

4.2D Analytical Tools:

The analysis was conducted using frequency distribution tables, cross-tabulation, and descriptive statistics for quantitative insights. For qualitative aspects, thematic analysis and framing theory were applied to examine narrative techniques, language patterns, and underlying messages.

4.2E Validity and Reliability:

To ensure reliability, the coding process was cross-verified by multiple reviewers. Inter-coder agreement was maintained through consensus and pre-tested coding templates. Validity was upheld by triangulating findings with secondary sources, including media reports and policy documents.

4.2F Ethical Considerations:

As the study is based entirely on publicly available documents, there are no direct human participants involved. All sources were cited properly, and institutional communication ethics were maintained throughout. Communication, such as that documented by the U.S. Navy's public relations case study on the USS Marine deployment, which underscored the value of consistency and message alignment (U.S. Department of Defense, 1997).

4.3 Coding Instructions

Theme: Choose from Operational, Ceremonial, Strategic, Humanitarian, Commemorative.

Tone: Classify as Positive, Neutral, Assertive, Mixed.

Framing Style: Choose Thematic (big picture) or Episodic (specific event).

Frequency Category: Monthly, Quarterly, Annual, Ad-hoc.

Narrative Strategy: Options may include Capability Showcase, Soft Power, National Identity, Crisis Management, etc.

4.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis of IAF press releases was carried out in two distinct phases: quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis.

In the first phase, each press release from 2019 to 2022 was categorized based on frequency, timing, and subject matter. Using a coding sheet derived from the established codebook, entries were classified into themes such as operational updates, ceremonial events, humanitarian missions, defence partnerships, training exercises, and public outreach. Statistical tools such as frequency counts and year-wise distribution charts were used to measure publication trends and topic prevalence.

In the second phase, the texts were examined through a thematic lens, guided by framing theory. Particular attention was given to the use of tone, narrative construction, emphasis, and language cues. Frames such as strategic assertiveness, national pride, professionalism, and humanitarian focus were identified and analyzed for consistency and recurrence. This dual-layered approach allowed the research to not only quantify the IAF's communication trends but also to interpret the broader strategic narrative being constructed through official media.

Cross-tabulation techniques were employed to assess patterns across different years, events, and contexts. Data was organized in Microsoft Excel and visualized through tables and bar graphs for clarity and comparative insight.

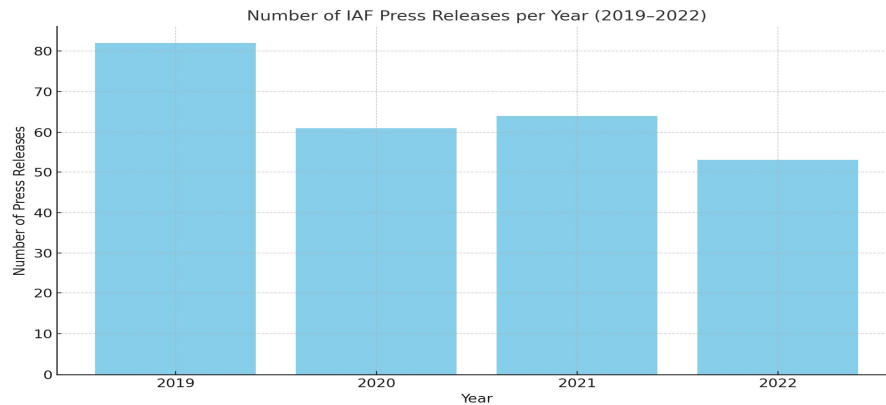
5. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Over the four-year span, the majority of IAF releases centred on themes of operational readiness, humanitarian aid, and bilateral engagements. This finding is consistent with strategic communication models discussed by Thomas Rid (2016), who characterized such communication as central to modern information warfare tactics. Moreover, Guerrero-Castro (2020) emphasized the symbolic function of public military narratives in democracies where visual and textual representations serve as a projection of state power and institutional reliability. Framing of Military Power and Strategic Deterrence: The Indian Air Force (IAF) press releases examined from 2019 to 2022 prominently featured the framing of air power as a symbol of national resilience and deterrence. This aligns with Guerrero-Castro's (2022) assertion that military narratives often reinforce strategic deterrence and sovereignty through public-facing communication to gain domestic support and international legitimacy.

Indian Air Force's press releases from 2019 to 2022 (as analysed from the codebook and release data) were distributed across five primary themes. Operational Readiness consistently received the highest coverage across all years, with growing mentions from 2019 to 2022. Modernisation also shows a steady increase, indicating strong messaging around upgrades and technology. Air Shows & Public Engagement had a visible jump in 2022, likely aligned with major aviation events. Humanitarian & Disaster Relief peaked in 2020 during COVID-19 and flood rescue missions. Joint Exercises reflected growing international cooperation.

Table 1 Yearwise disbursement of press releases by DPR on IAF

Year	No of Releases Disbursed
2019	82
2020	61
2021	64
2022	53
2019-2022	260



5.1 Thematic Analysis Summary of IAF Press Releases (2019–2022)

The content of IAF press releases between January 2019 and December 2022 reveals a structured communication strategy aligned with the organization's operational goals, policy priorities, and image-building efforts. The thematic trends can be grouped into four major domains: Operational Readiness, Indigenisation and Modernisation, Diplomatic Engagements, and Personnel & Public Outreach.

5.1A Operational Readiness and Exercises

This theme emerged as the most frequently covered area across all four years. Press releases highlighted joint and bilateral exercises such as Vayu Shakti, Indradhanush, and Garuda, showcasing IAF's evolving combat capabilities and inter-operability with international forces. The frequency of these themes peaked in 2022, reflecting a greater emphasis on readiness amidst geopolitical tensions.

5.2B Indigenisation, Modernisation, and Technology Integration

Press releases consistently featured updates on indigenous platforms like the Light Combat Aircraft (Tejas), development of drones, procurement of Rafale jets, and MRO facility inaugurations. This reflects the Air Force's alignment with the Government of India's Atmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India initiatives. Announcements of collaborations with HAL, DRDO, and private sector entities underscored technological self-reliance as a strategic communication objective.

5.3C Military Diplomacy and Strategic Outreach

Diplomatic and cooperative themes were seen through official visits, air shows (like Aero India), and bilateral training exchanges. The IAF's participation in multinational exercises such as Red Flag, Pitch Black, and humanitarian operations like Op Sankat Mochan served to underline India's responsible global military presence. These engagements were covered widely in 2020 and 2022.

5.3D Human Resource Development and Public Engagement

Personnel welfare, gallantry awards, and community outreach programmes including recruitment drives and adventure activities were prominently highlighted. Press releases also covered anniversaries, commemorative events, and public displays such as the Air Force Day parade. These releases often focused on boosting morale and fostering public support.

5.3E Crisis Response and Humanitarian Assistance

Natural disaster relief missions and strategic airlift operations, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Operation Ganga, Operation Covid Shield), emerged as significant themes in 2020 and 2021. The IAF's role in airlifting vaccines, medical supplies, and stranded citizens underscored its civil-military coordination and national service identity.

5.4 Year-wise Emphasis

2019: Focused on showcasing firepower, bilateral exercises, and modernisation.

2020: Heavy focus on COVID-19 operations and humanitarian logistics.

2021: Emphasis on awards, commemorations, and continued pandemic support.

2022: Return to full-scale operational themes, tech upgrades, and global engagement.

The Indian Air Force's press releases reflect a nuanced perception management strategy that balances operational transparency, technological advancement, and soft-power projection. The thematic frequency reveals a deliberate effort to frame the IAF as a capable, modern, and globally respected force, deeply committed to national and international responsibilities. The evolution of themes also indicates responsiveness to external events and policy directions.

5.5 Role of Public Relations in Military Image-Building

In line with the U.S. Navy's public relations strategy of building favorable narratives (Gupta, 1995), the IAF has consistently projected its operational achievements, humanitarian missions, and modernization initiatives through press releases to shape public perception and align with national security discourse.

5.6 Information Operations and Perception Management

The framing of cross-border strikes and air superiority in IAF press releases reveals a tendency to integrate psychological operations (PSYOPS) into public messaging, mirroring insights from Russian information warfare doctrine where perception is weaponized (Giles, 2016).

5.7 Use of Media to Reinforce Strategic Messaging

As Kroll (2017) emphasized in the U.S. context, the control over media narratives through press statements is a potent tool of information dominance. Similarly, the Directorate of Public Relations (DPR) leverages press releases to control the public narrative about the IAF's roles, successes, and technological edge.

5.8 Humanitarian and Nation-Building Narratives:

The analysis also reveals a high frequency of releases on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations by the IAF, consistent with the global trend of using military PR for nation-building and soft power (Sarwar & Iqbal, 2017).

5.9 Framing and Language Trends

A qualitative framing analysis indicates that most releases employed narrative and positive frames, highlighting achievements, cooperation, and self-reliance. The use of assertive yet diplomatic language was consistent, especially in operations-related releases. Key linguistic trends included:

Lexical Choices: Terms like "indigenous," "capability," "joint," and "strategic" were prominent.

Tone: Formal, affirmative, and mission-focused, aligning with institutional ethos.

Variation by Theme: Releases on HADR used empathetic tones; operational updates used assertive and technical language; commemorative events adopted ceremonial phrasing.

5.10 Trend Analysis and Interpretation

The distribution of themes across years illustrates significant strategic shifts:

2019 emphasized ceremonial visibility and outreach, reflecting milestone events like Air Force Day and anniversaries.

2020, the pandemic year, saw a spike in humanitarian and disaster relief communications, particularly related to COVID-19 and flood relief.

2021 reflected the IAF's increasing focus on joint operations and multilateral exercises, coinciding with broader Indo-Pacific military cooperation.

2022 demonstrated a strong push toward indigenous technology, Make in India initiatives, and modernization narratives.

Overall, Ceremonial Communications were the most consistent across all years, suggesting an ongoing commitment to building public trust and institutional pride. Conversely, Technology and Indigenization showed the steepest growth, indicating an evolving policy direction toward self-reliance in defence manufacturing.

5.11 Thematic Categorization and Yearly Distribution

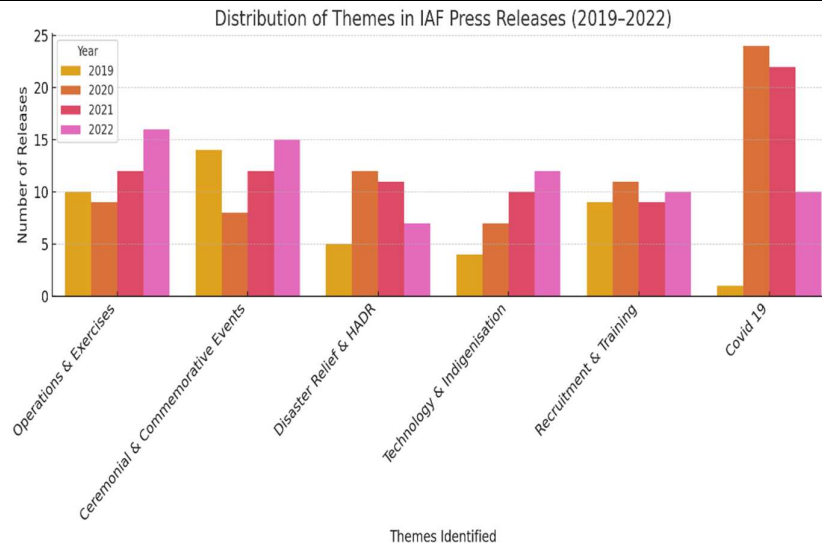
The analysis of 234 press releases issued by the DPR related to the IAF between 2019 and 2022 reveals five broad thematic categories:

- Operations and Exercises
- Ceremonial and Commemorative Events
- Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Assistance
- Technology and Indigenization
- Recruitment, Training, and HR Initiatives

These themes were extracted using inductive coding and supported by frequency counts. The distribution reflects the changing priorities of the IAF over the years. The frequency of distribution reveals clear thematic priorities in official communication, according to an analysis of Indian Air Force (IAF) press releases from 2019 to 2022. At 57 releases (roughly 21.9% of the total 260), the most releases were devoted to COVID-19-related activities, demonstrating the IAF's significant contribution to national pandemic response initiatives. With 49 releases (18.8%), Ceremonial and Commemorative Events came in second, emphasizing the value of custom, heritage, and ceremonial diplomacy. Themes of recruitment and training, which included 39 releases (15%), were also noteworthy because they highlighted initiatives to draw in and develop future air warriors. 47 releases (18%) focused on operations and exercises, demonstrating the IAF's global engagements and operational preparedness. The IAF's dedication to humanitarian aid was reaffirmed with 35 releases (13.5%) focusing on disaster relief and HADR activities. Lastly, the strategic drive towards self-reliance in defence capabilities was reflected in the 33 releases (12.7%) that were attributed to technology and indigenization. This distribution showcases a thorough story that strikes a balance between outreach, modernization, service, and tradition. Overall, the study demonstrates that DPR's releases serve as essential tools for strategic communication, fostering respect among nations, public confidence, and internal morale.

Table 2 : Theme-wise Frequency Distribution

Themes Identified	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
Operations & Exercises	10	09	12	16	47
Ceremonial & Commemorative Events	14	08	12	15	49
Disaster Relief & HADR	05	12	11	07	35
Technology & Indigenisation	04	07	10	12	33
Recruitment & Training	09	11	09	10	39
Covid 19	01	24	22	10	57
Total Releases Disbursed	39	49	55	60	260



5.12 Interpretation of Trends in IAF Press Releases (2019–2022)

Consistent Emphasis on Operations and Exercises

Across the four-year span, one of the most dominant themes in IAF press releases was operational readiness and participation in military exercises. This suggests a deliberate communication strategy aimed at reinforcing the Indian Air Force's combat preparedness, regional cooperation, and deterrence posture. Notably, announcements related to bilateral and multilateral air exercises—such as 'Indra', 'Garuda', and 'Vayu Shakti'—served to position the IAF as both regionally relevant and internationally engaged.

5.12A Increased Public Outreach and Human Interest Narratives

There is a marked increase in press releases focusing on humanitarian assistance, disaster relief (HADR), airlift missions, and rescue operations—particularly in the pandemic and post-pandemic years. These stories often highlighted the IAF's role beyond combat, portraying it as a people-centric

and responsive force. This aligns with a broader narrative of the armed forces serving the nation in peacetime, enhancing the emotional connect with civilians.

5.12B Focus on Indigenisation and Technological Modernisation

From 2020 onwards, there is a growing frequency of releases related to indigenous defence production, new aircraft inductions, infrastructure upgrades, and collaboration with domestic aerospace firms. These align closely with the Government of India's 'Make in India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' narratives. By showcasing these developments, the IAF not only signals modernization but also reinforces national self-reliance in defence capability.

5.12C Strategic Messaging on National Days and Ceremonial Events

Annual spikes in press release activity coincide with events such as Air Force Day (October 8), Independence Day, Republic Day, and major parades. These occasions are used to underscore national pride, military heritage, and ceremonial discipline. The use of powerful visual language and detailed coverage of flypasts, medal ceremonies, and honours reflect a focus on tradition, honour, and discipline.

5.12D Institutional Communication and Leadership Visibility

The IAF has consistently highlighted leadership transitions, appointments, and addresses by senior officers. Such releases not only maintain transparency but also portray institutional continuity and strategic vision. These are particularly useful for reinforcing internal morale and external confidence in the force's command structure.

5.12E Shift Towards Digital and Multimedia Engagement

While not explicitly part of press releases, the language and tone across years indicate a growing alignment with digital-friendly content. Captions, hashtags, and callouts to follow official handles indicate that these traditional press releases are increasingly designed to complement social media dissemination.

6. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This research has examined the Directorate of Public Relations' (DPR) official press releases related to the Indian Air Force (IAF) from 2019 to 2022, with the aim of uncovering the underlying themes, patterns in frequency, and framing strategies employed over time. The study found that the DPR's communication on behalf of the IAF is not merely reactive or ceremonial, but instead a structured tool of perception management that aligns with institutional goals, national policy shifts, and global strategic positioning.

The analysis revealed five dominant themes—Operations & Exercises, Ceremonial Events, Humanitarian Relief, Indigenization & Technology, and HR Initiatives. While ceremonial releases maintained consistent visibility, the content related to indigenization and technological advancement showed a marked increase, particularly in the post-pandemic years, reflecting India's shift toward self-reliance in defence. Moreover, 2020 recorded the highest number of disaster relief communications, indicating agility in messaging during national crises.

Framing analysis demonstrated a preference for positively worded, achievement-focused narratives. The tone was largely formal, assertive, and aligned with strategic objectives—such as showcasing operational readiness, technological advancement, or global cooperation. This framing not only reinforced the credibility of the IAF but also shaped a coherent public image of a modern, responsive, and indigenous military force.

Implications for Perception Management are visible. The IAF's press communication strategy, as evidenced through the DPR releases, demonstrates a sophisticated model of perception management.

It balances operational transparency with narrative control, reinforcing national pride, trust, and military capability. The strategic use of themes aligned with national priorities—such as ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ and disaster resilience—amplifies this effect. This approach allows the IAF to maintain public legitimacy, project global responsibility, and influence stakeholder perception, both domestic and international.

The predominance of positive, nation-centric framing in IAF press releases may also be linked to perception management strategies outlined in Russian information warfare literature, where repetition and positivity build psychological resilience and national unity (Darczewska, 2016). These insights stress on the evolving sophistication of India’s military public relations machinery, which—like its Western counterparts—strives to shape both public opinion and elite discourse (Guerrero-Castro, 2020; Kroll, 2017).

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for enhancing the effectiveness of IAF's press communication strategy.

7.1 Diversify Media Formats

To complement traditional text-based releases, integrating multimedia elements (infographics, videos, photo features) could enhance accessibility and engagement, especially on digital platforms.

7.2 Expand Language Diversity

To reach broader audiences across India, the DPR could consider releasing multilingual summaries of key press releases in regional languages, thereby strengthening public outreach.

7.3 Introduce Thematic Series

The DPR may benefit from bundling similar content under thematic series (e.g., “IAF Women Warriors,” “Indigenization in Action”), allowing deeper narrative continuity across time.

7.4 Increase Public Participation

Creating interactive platforms (such as Q&A sessions with officers, storytelling campaigns from airmen) would humanize the force and encourage citizen engagement with national defence narratives.

7.5 Invest in Crisis Communication Training

Developing dedicated training modules for communication officers in crisis messaging and perception repair can ensure rapid and effective responses during sensitive events.

7.6 Establish Metrics for Communication Impact

A regular assessment of how press releases are received—through web analytics, social media engagement, or public opinion surveys—can help tailor messaging strategies based on audience feedback.

7.7 Promote Academic Collaboration

Partnering with academic institutions and research organizations to study defence communication can offer deeper insights and aid in evidence-based policy development.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While the study offers a structured and insightful analysis of the IAF's press communications, several limitations must be acknowledged.

- 8.1 **Scope Restriction:** The study is limited to publicly accessible press releases published by the Directorate of Public Relations, Ministry of Defence, and focuses solely on the Indian Air Force. Internal communications, classified reports, and third-party media narratives were not considered.
- 8.2 **Time Frame Constraint:** The research covers a four-year period from January 2019 to December 2022. Though comprehensive for trend analysis, developments outside this range are not captured and may limit longitudinal conclusions.
- 8.3 **Contextual Gaps:** Press releases, by their nature, are curated for public dissemination and may omit sensitive or controversial details. As such, they may not fully reflect the operational or strategic complexities behind the events they describe.
- 8.4 **Subjectivity in Framing Analysis:** Although efforts were made to ensure objectivity through coding reliability checks, the interpretation of frames and themes involves an element of subjectivity, especially in qualitative analysis.
- 8.5 **Language Uniformity:** The analysis was restricted to English-language releases. Any differences in communication style or framing in Hindi or regional language versions (if any) were not assessed.

Despite these limitations, the study remains a valuable contribution to understanding the communication strategy and public messaging employed by the Indian Air Force through official channels.

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