

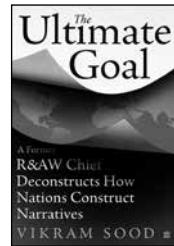
BOOK REVIEWS

**The Ultimate Goal: A Former R&AW Chief
Deconstructs How Nations Construct Narratives**

Author: Vikram Sood

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Narrative building and shaping of perceptions have been an important part of national strategy at the domestic and international levels. Powerful and influential nations have managed to project, or for that matter, camouflage the truth and harsh realities cautiously with narrative building. *The Ultimate Goal*, by Vikram Sood, former R&AW Chief, is an extremely comprehensive study of how major powers have managed to build up the narratives and shape opinions to support their objectives, policies and posturing. The book goes into great depth to discuss how a nation's ability to formulate, control and sustain narratives enhances its position and power internally and externally. The intelligence agencies play a critical role in this regard. Narrative could be offensive or defensive in nature. Not essentially based on facts, narratives

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assist a country to create perceptions bringing political, social, economic and strategic gains to a country.

Vikram Sood's book discusses a critical yet unaddressed area in the aspect of power dominance. The author takes us into an unknown world of narratives with fascinating facts and convincing secret stories to make us understand how major powers have used this vital tool of statecraft to create and sustain perceptions in their favour.

The first chapter of the book dwells on understanding—What is a narrative?

According to the author, narratives are not always based on truth:

“Narratives are not the truth, rather they nudge you to understand the truth in a particular way. They are never neutral or innocent, they are always strategic.”

Narratives are to convince people to look at the facts in a manner which is favourable to a nation, and it does require a “receptive audience”, as the author puts it. According to the author, “Narratives create perceptions that often become permanently etched or embedded in the subconscious. Positive imagery that makes life more comfortable both for those setting the agenda and the target audience is the ideal goal.” Major nations have tried to manage the facts to use for narrative building to justify their actions and reactions, as the author puts it, “Narratives are for self-justification ... they are designed by the narrator not only to tell his version his way, but also to tell you your version his way.”

The exhaustive work by the author offers some very important points to its readers.

The book, as described by the author, is an “explanation of the storylines that are created by states to rule or dominate others and exercise control”. The intelligence agencies in the West have created and sustained narratives supporting their actions for more than two centuries now. Afghanistan is witnessing the fallouts of the strategically created and modified narratives by the West. Post 9/11 the US launched its war on terror in Afghanistan and united the West under the NATO umbrella to fight the deadly phenomenon—terrorism—which had hit the West for the first time on a massive scale. India has been dealing with the challenges of terrorism and New Delhi's concerns lacked much needed international attention for decades. Although, it cannot be denied that India needed a

much stronger narrative to persuade an international action against Pakistan for sponsoring terrorism on Indian territory.

Post 9/11 the US built the narrative that military actions with the allied forces would defeat the ideological war launched by the jihadi militant groups. In 2003 the US media started to carry sensational stories about the Iraqi Nuclear weapon programme. This was followed by the US war and destruction in Iraq and simultaneously the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Pakistan's President General Musharraf leveraged the US distraction in Iraq and facilitated the Taliban comeback in 2003-2004. The book analyses the US vested interests in Iraq in a comprehensive manner.

During the twenty years of the US war in Afghanistan, the perception till 2012 was regarding the indispensability of the war. The US surge took place in 2009 with a much-expanded military strength and enormous funds flowing into Afghanistan. President Obama announced the US withdrawal plans from Afghanistan after the killing of Osama bin Laden by the US Navy SEALs in Abbottabad. The narrative was maintained that the US was determined to bring stability in Afghanistan, have a democratic government in Kabul and the Afghans need to enjoy much awaited freedom and political rights. With the efforts of the international community and the support of the Afghans there was significant development in Afghanistan in terms of civic rights and liberties and social-economic development. From the gloomy repressive days of the Taliban regime in the late 1990s what the Afghans now saw was a fresh breeze of freedom and liberty. Women's freedom and rights were the major achievements for Afghanistan, and it was commendable that the Afghan parliament managed to have approximately 25 per cent of women parliamentarians.

While the narrative of the long-dragged war in Afghanistan was building up at the domestic level within the US, perception regarding the need for the US to exit Afghanistan was being driven. What changed the American position on Afghanistan was former President Trump's restlessness and the pressure he felt at the domestic level to exit the Afghan war. President Biden made a rather quick decision to announce the complete withdrawal of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan by the end of August 2021.

The narrative highlighted by President Biden is that the war is unsustainable for the US, and he cannot allow the next generation of Americans to fight a war which is not theirs. It is interesting to note that the US narrative of an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led peace process was highlighted but never executed as the US negotiated with the Taliban excluding the elected Afghan regime, and signed the agreement with the Taliban on February 29, 2020. The narrative of the US commitment to Afghan democracy and stability has faded and what we see is the aggravating security and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan with the US pull-out. The Taliban in Afghanistan used the narrative of their victory to demoralise the Afghan security forces and gain control in Afghanistan. The author has very aptly described the narratives of the US:

“The might of the US lies in the fact that it is the only country in the world today that can make its domestic laws applicable globally, ignore international laws when it suits it, bomb and invade other countries and walk out when bored.”

The chapter on Russia discusses the Russian struggles to counter the US narratives. The book talks about China’s aggressive attempts to formulate a narrative about its rise. Beijing’s narrative about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been extensively used to convince strategically important nations (for China) that the BRI has all the essential ingredients of national prosperity.

As far as India is concerned, there has been a strong need for New Delhi to manage perceptions and build a narrative to its strategic advantage. To some extent, India has managed to successfully build a fact-based narrative, and this was apparent in the global response which was not against India after India’s military retaliation—Uri and Balakot Strikes—against Pakistan’s sponsored terrorism. I cannot agree more with the author’s assessment that India needs to tell its story—Who we are and What we are, in our own words. He very rightly says, “We cannot let the West define us. India needs to honour its past and heritage.” Very importantly, the book asserts that India’s image needs to be strengthened at the global level and we need to put our house in order for strong narrative build-up.

The book very comprehensively covers the narrative building of major powers and also provides inputs for India's way forward. However, the quest for more in readers is never ending. A few issues/questions if highlighted by the author would have made the task of policymakers easier.

Firstly, the US war in the region led to the origin (directly and indirectly) of the most deadly organisations: Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Islamic State. The narrative of these militant organisations has been anti-America and anti-West. The Author's wisdom on these narratives and what the US has done in this regard could have helped providing answers for counterterrorism. Secondly, the book talks about the strategy of the powerful nations to create narratives and facilitate their strategic and economic interests. But the question is—Can an economically and militarily weak nation formulate effective narratives? A rare case where a weak nation has built rather convenient narratives is Pakistan. But Pakistan did that with the support of the West. It leveraged its alliance with the West to build and leverage the anti-India threat perceptions at the domestic and international levels. Is military and economic strength a prerequisite to formulate and sustain an effective narrative? This is a critical question which needs assessment.

The author's earlier book, *The Unending Game: A Former R&AW Chief's Insights into Espionage*, is a fascinating work on the nuances of espionage. *The Ultimate Goal* provides us with the nuances of narrative building. The book is a must read for policymakers, academicians, strategists, serving and retired military personnel and scholars of international relations.