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Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Department of Journalism

Master's Thesis

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Ebad Ahmed

CHARLES UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Political Studies

Department of Political Science

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Department of Journalism

**The Analysis of Media Coverage of Afghan Taliban Takeover of Kabul in
Pakistani Urdu Newspaper Jang**

Master's Thesis

Author of the Thesis: **Ebad Ahmed**

Study programme: Political Studies: Erasmus Mundus Masters in Journalism, Media
and Globalisation

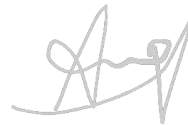
Supervisor: Mgr. et Ing. Katerina Turkova, Ph D

Year of the defence: 2024

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In Prague on
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Ebad Ahmed

References

Ahmed, Ebad. *The Analysis of Media Coverage of Afghan Taliban Takeover of Kabul in Pakistani Urdu Newspaper Jang*. Praha, 2024. 113s. Master's thesis (Mgr). Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Political Studies, Department of Political Science. Supervisor Mgr. et Ing. Katerina Turkova, PhD

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Research proposal for Erasmus Mundus Journalism Diploma Thesis	
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Start of studies for EMJ (in Aarhus): September 2022	
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Thesis title in English: The analysis of media coverage of Afghan Taliban takeover of Kabul in Pakistani Urdu newspaper Jang	
Expected date of submission Spring semester 2023/2024 (April - defence in June)	
Main research question (max. 250 characters):	
Did the mainstream Pakistani Urdu newspaper “Jang” show a pro-Taliban bias in its editorials during the takeover of Kabul in 2021?	
Did Jang’s editorials follow the Pakistani state foreign policy on Afghanistan during the takeover of Kabul in 2021?	
Current state of research on the topic (max. 1800 characters):	
The topic is partially covered by the current academic research. However, while the current research (e.g., Hussain & Jehangir, 2023; Sakhi, 2022) has focused on the general coverage, I would like to put my research into context of the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021.	

In my opinion, there is still a gap on how particularly a mainstream Urdu newspaper “Jang” covered the takeover. This daily newspaper with the highest print circulation in complement to a substantive digital presence is arguably the biggest opinion-maker in the country; hence it is important to reveal how it particularly investigated the development.

Talking about the situation in the region, Afghan Taliban has remained a contentious issue in Pakistan, as while the group is appreciated by a certain segment of the society including former foreign minister Khawaja Asif who wrote on Twitter: “*You may have the power, but God is with us... Allah is great,*” and added a picture of Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar with the United States secretary of state Mike Pompeo. Contrary, there has also been a significant part of society that challenges it.

In between the two clashing ideas whilst the state welcomed the Taliban with warm words, but a civil society worried about their fundamentalist approach, my MA thesis aim to uncover whether the Jang’s editorial toed the Pakistan’s foreign policy line on Afghanistan while catering to the pro-Taliban opinions or took a different stance in its editorials on the matter.

Expected theoretical framework (max. 1800 characters):

The reason behind taking media conformity theory is to test whether the mass media generally conforms to the foreign policy of the state. The media conformity theory suggests that the mass media often conforms to the narratives put ahead by the state governments on respective issues in their coverage.

Using this theory for the explanation of the situation in other countries, Fishman (1980) concluded that the US media determine the newsworthiness of the state authorities. Meanwhile, Berry (1990)

found out that The New York Times' coverage on the Bay of Pigs crisis toed the US foreign policy. Bennet (1993) witnessed the same in The New York Times' coverage of the Nicaraguan conflict.

Adoption of this theory will also give a glimpse over the state of media freedom in Pakistan, for example if the editorials held a divergent view than the official foreign policy. It will show the agenda setting and diverseness of the ideas present in one of the most influential newsrooms of the country.

Expected methodology, and methods for data gathering and analysis (max. 1800 characters):

I plan to gather all the editorials focusing on Afghanistan between August 15, 2021 (The exact day of the fall of Kabul) to September 15, 2021. This month-long editorial coverage will give a conclusive idea about the patterns, focus and interest of the coverage on the issue.

I plan to adopt qualitative content analysis to determine the tilt of the editorials in regard to the Afghan Taliban takeover. The themes of the editorials will be also divided into pro-Anti Taliban, pro-Anti previous Ghani government, stressing on right to women's education or not, pro or anti militancy, to provide a basic overview regarding the issues. This coding will give a general idea on where the editorials do generally stand on the issue.

Expected research design (data to be analyzed, for example, the titles of analyzed newspapers and selected time period):

I will include all the editorials in the "Jang" newspaper that are solely looking into the Afghan Taliban's coverage during and after the Kabul fall to my research sample. The observation period will be 30-days long (From August 15 - September 15). The themes and sub-themes as well as other items of the editorials will be coded and further analyzed. The goal of the MA thesis is to answer above-mentioned research questions and reveal how these editorials were shaped and whether they were influenced by the Pakistani foreign policy in regard to Afghanistan.

Along with the basic quantitative overview, I plan to also qualitatively analyse all the thirty editorials to understand its basic premise, the point of stress, and to see if its aligned with the Pakistani foreign policy announced by the country's foreign office in regards to Afghanistan

I also plan to interview at least five journalists associated with the editorial department of Jang and were part of the team who wrote those editorials on the subject matter to better understand what factors were taken into consideration while writing the editorials.

Expected thesis structure (chapters and sub chapters with brief description of their content):

Introduction

1. Theoretical Part

1.1. Media conformity theory - Overview and Relevance

1.2. Pakistan's peculiar relationship with Afghanistan

1.3. The newspaper's impact on the public opinion in the country

1.4 Pakistan's foreign policy regarding Afghanistan after Kabul takeover

1.5 Position of the "Jang" newspaper in the context of the mainstream Urdu print journalism in

Pakistan

2. Method

2.1. Research questions, observation period and research sample

2.2. Qualitative content analysis

2.3. Interviews

3. Results

Discussion and Conclusion

References

Appendices

Basic literature list (at least 5 most important works related to the topic and the method(s) of

analysis; all works should be briefly characterized on 2-5 lines):

Hussain, S., & Jehangir, A. (2023). Coverage of Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in the international press: A perspective on indexing theory. *Journalism*.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849231153727>

The study is aimed at the coverage of Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in the international press from the perspective of indexing theory. As a method, a content analysis was adopted. The seven newspapers selected for research: The New York Times, The Guardian, Moscow Times, China, The Hindu, Dawn and Tehran Times.

Mehlman, Y. Y., & Hess, J. H. (2023). A Comparative Analysis of the Afghan Taliban and the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan Ideologies Following the 2021 Takeover of Afghanistan. *Global Security & Intelligence Studies*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.18278/gsis.7.2.4>

This paper also purely looks at the Taliban group through a security lens. The iSTART framework was utilized to properly understand Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Taliban ideology to study ideological change. This framework allowed for a deeper understanding on how a terrorist group operates.

Pantucci, R., & Basit, A. (2021). Post-Taliban Takeover: How the Global Jihadist Terror Threat May Evolve. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 13(4), 1–7.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48618776>

This paper looks at the potential impact of the Taliban takeover on the global level. Due to the results, the takeover has indeed given a boost to the Jihadi narrative present in the marginalized ideological space present within the Muslim world.

Poornima, B. (2022). Reluctant or Pragmatic? The GCC's Policy towards Taliban-Led

Afghanistan. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 9(3), 531-545.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970221130654>

This article focuses on the approaches of the GCC countries towards the Afghan Taliban takeover.

Sakhi, N. (2022). The Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan and Security Paradox. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 9(3), 383-401.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970221130882>

The study viewed the Taliban as a movement and government under the lens of a totalitarian system, making the case that the group's takeover has opened the door for structural security concerns due to their intrinsic ideological foundation. The paper made the case that Taliban by group and practice is a practical textbook definition of totalitarianism, who now with government in hand are impending on the individual rights especially people of marginalized communities and women. It further looked into the challenges of the Taliban group as a governing body in between huge administrative challenge.

Related theses and dissertations (list of B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. theses defended at Charles

University or other academic institutions in the last five years):

KEPKA, Jiří. *Mediální propaganda Tálibánu*. Bakalářská práce, vedoucí Ťupek, Pavel. Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická fakulta, Katedra Blízkého východu, 2019.

KRÁTKÁ, Kristina. *Současná podoba hnutí Taliban a jeho ideologické zázemí*. Bakalářská práce, vedoucí Charvát, Jan. Praha: Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta sociálních věd, Katedra politologie, 2021.

SKUHRAVÝ, Vojtěch. *Mírová smlouva mezi USA a Talibanem a její případné geopolitické dopady v regionu*. Bakalářská práce, vedoucí Raška, Francis. Praha: Univerzita Karlova, Fakulta sociálních věd, Katedra severoamerických studií, 2021.

Date / Signature of the student:	Ebad Ahmed – 23/07/2024.....
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Abstract

This study investigates the Jang newspaper's editorial coverage of Afghan Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021. To guide the analysis, this research incorporated quantitative and qualitative content analysis and interviews with the journalists who were associated with the Jang newspaper's editorial department during the time of the takeover. The findings indicate that the Jang newspaper followed the Pakistani foreign policy in regards to Afghanistan by welcoming the Taliban group's takeover on the grounds of potential Geo-strategic benefits, adopted a hawkish position, and assumed the responsibility of protecting state defined national interest rather than fulfilling journalistic responsibilities. The coverage showed the case of structural censorship being observed by the Jang newspaper as it bears in mind of not crossing any redlines drawn by the state. This study makes a significant contribution to the literature on the functionality of media in a semi-authoritarian security state where the authority rests with the armed forces rather than elected leadership. Given the near uniformity of results, it can be argued that Pakistani media collectively operates in concert with the state's official narrative.

Abstrakt

Tato studie zkoumá redakční zpravodajství novin Jang o převzetí moci Afghánistánem Talibanem nad Kábulem v roce 2021. Pro účely analýzy zahrnoval tento výzkum kvantitativní a kvalitativní analýzu obsahu a rozhovory s novináři, kteří byli v době převzetí spojeni s redakčním oddělením novin Jang. Zjištění naznačují, že noviny Jang sledovaly pákistánskou zahraniční politiku ve vztahu k Afghánistánu tím, že přivítaly převzetí moci skupinou Taliban na základě potenciálních geostrategických výhod, přijaly jestřábí postoj a převzaly odpovědnost za ochranu státem definovaných národních zájmů

spíše než za plnění novinářské povinnosti. Zpravodaj ukázal případ strukturální cenzury, který zaznamenaly noviny Jang, protože mají na paměti nepřekračování žádných redline nakreslených státem. Tato studie významně přispívá k literatuře o funkčnosti médií v poloautoritativním bezpečnostním státě, kde autoritu mají spíše ozbrojené síly než volené vedení. Vzhledem k téměř jednotnosti výsledků lze tvrdit, že pákistánská média kolektivně fungují v souladu s oficiálním vyprávěním státu.

Keywords

Pakistan, Afghanistan, Afghan Taliban, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, censorship, news organizations, political communication.

Klíčová slova

Pákistán, Afghánistán, afghánský Taliban, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pákistán, cenzura, zpravodajské organizace, politická komunikace,

Title

The Analysis of Media Coverage of Afghan Taliban Takeover of Kabul in Pakistani Urdu Newspaper Jang

Název práce

Analýza mediálního pokrytí převzetím Kábulu afghánským Talibanem v pákistánských urdských novinách Jang

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Introduction

The Afghan Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021 is a watershed moment in modern Afghan history. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan after a span of two decades and the re-takeover of the militant Islamist group attracted global attention as it dramatically changed the regional dynamics within a span of few weeks. The global media, including Pakistan, followed the changing development with tremendous interests. For Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban's resurgence remained a contentious issue as while a substantive section of the Pakistani society wholeheartedly supported their return due to their favourable view of the militant group on the grounds of religious brotherhood and perceived national security interest, a minority expressed their disapproval of the return on the grounds of their abysmal human rights record. Despite this diversity of views within the country on the militant Islamist group, the state of Pakistan chose to accept the Afghan Taliban as the new de facto government of Afghanistan, called for continued humanitarian aid, and advocated for strong regional and international cooperation to support the new Kabul administration. While the neighbouring countries, Pakistan and Afghanistan, share historical, linguistic, religious, and cultural aspects, it is also important here to put that there exists strong friction between the two nations given that Pakistani nationals often perceive Afghans as outsiders (Jehangir, 2023).

This study focuses on the editorials of Jang, Pakistan's most read Urdu newspaper, to the Afghan Taliban's return. Considering the influence of the newspaper on the Pakistani society it is imperative to understand the newspaper's positions on the political shifts in Afghanistan at the backdrop of local media landscape that traditionally follows the state's narrative and policies (Ghufran, 2006). In the context of Afghanistan, since 1971, Pakistan has virtually hosted more than 8 million Afghan refugees (Alimia, 2019), a close look at the local Pakistani media coverage of

Afghan refugees show that the media tends to adopt an overwhelmingly negative framing as it follow nationalistic stance by seeing the issue through the prism of national security (Jehangir, 2023; Ghufuran, 2006). While the anti-Afghan pattern of coverage remain a reality, the return of Taliban militant group, alleged to enjoy close proximity with the all-powerful Pakistani army, prompts the question of how Pakistan's most circulated newspaper analyzed the developments in its editorials.

There exists a substantial resource of literature addressing the question of state-media interplay on foreign conflict but particularly within the Western context. This research attempts to fill the gap by taking a Pakistani newspaper into equation on the Afghan Taliban return through the lens of Media Conformity Theory. A theory that suggests mainstream news outlets tend to follow official state foreign policy guidelines when covering international news, more particularly during diplomatic tensions. A research study by (Khan, 2008) used this theory to understand the image of Pakistan in prestigious American newspaper editorials, in its its literature review the study noticed that the US media tends to positively cover those countries that are close to the interests of the US government or enjoy good diplomatic relations with Washington DC. This study attempts to use the theory to see its applicability in the Pakistani context in regards to Afghanistan.

This research endeavors to assess the Jang newspaper's coverage of Afghan Taliban takeover in 2021, between August 15, 2021 (The exact day of the fall of Kabul) to September 15, 2021 through quantitative and qualitative content analysis supplemented with interviews from journalists associated with Jang's editorial department. The reason for choosing this particular time frame is because as argued by (Heidenreich et al., 2019) the extent of media coverage often escalates in tandem with real-world events. It is also relevant as it aligns with the research study's scope and constraints. Using the qualitative content analysis provided the researcher to engage with the data with required nuances through an inductive engagement rather than extracting conclusions in a

reductionist manner (Reese, 2007); the quantitative method provided the statistical data for the research but in order to understand the meaning of the individual participation, their point of view, and experiences, qualitative method techniques like interviews deepened the perspective on the individual variations and point of views (Yilmaz, 2013).

This study aims to address the following research questions:

- 1. Did the mainstream Pakistani Urdu newspaper Jang show a pro-Taliban bias in its editorials during the takeover of Kabul in 2021?*
- 2. Did Jang's editorials follow the Pakistani state foreign policy on Afghanistan during the takeover of Kabul in 2021?*

1.1 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis starts with a theoretical background on the topic to seek the theoretical underpinning on the subject matter. It takes the Media Conformity Theory to establish the case of how the western media in particular chose to unconditionally stand with the state narrative in the coverage of foreign conflict, taking this theory on face value, this research contextualized the media conformity theory on Pakistan's Jang newspaper's editorial coverage of Afghan Taliban takeover in 2021. To familiarize the context of the editorial coverage it is important for the reader to understand the historical relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan since its inception, this academic research's next chapter includes a brief overview of the main historical events that dictated the bilateral relationship between the two neighbouring countries. The prime historical events were covered since the creation of the nascent state of Pakistan in 1947 till the Afghan Taliban takeover in 2021.

The academic research has taken into account of the Jang newspaper's significance in the newspaper market of Pakistan in its third chapter. It dives down onto its readership market share, its influence in the corridors of power and also its contentious history with the elected government and successive military establishments in the past. It

also highlights its editorial positions on the previous foreign conflict to better understand where the Pakistan's biggest newspaper has traditionally stood on the matters of diplomatic significance. The academic research transitions to the Pakistani foreign policy in regards to the Afghan Taliban takeover in 2021 in the fourth chapter of this thesis research. This research has taken the Pakistani foreign policy statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' official website, and dissected the statements given to the regional countries, western countries, and the OIC. It is an important part of the research as it helped the researcher to correspond with the Jang editorials to understand the emerging patterns.

1.2 Theoretical Background – Media Conformity Theory

Media Conformity Theory showcases a pattern observed in Western media entities, which reflects that mainstream journalistic news outlets tend to follow official state foreign policy guidelines when covering international news, more particularly during diplomatic tensions (Bennett, 1993; Carpenter, 1995; Fishman, 1980; Largio, 2004).

Academic research indicates that the US press, from time to time, told the State Department's talking points, notably during seminal moments like the post-September 11 terror attacks, where The New York Times' coverage was heavily influenced by President Bush's policies (Frenssley, 2002). The state-media bonhomie also appeared during the coverage of the Afghan invasion as the media chose to support the governmental stance with little or no critical commentary. (Kellner, 2017). Prominent US newspapers endorsed state narratives on the alleged threat of Weapons of Mass Destruction posed by the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, followed by the Iraq war coverage, which substantially conformed to the official foreign policy (Kaufmann, 2004; Zheng, 2006).

In the past, the same pattern was observed during the Bay of Pig crisis and the Nicaraguan conflict, as the New York Times followed the US foreign policy (Berry, 1990; Bennett, 1993). While it can be argued that with the US being an actor in the conflict, the US media chose to take a pro-state side, the same pattern of support to the US policy is seen in foreign conflicts like Yugoslavian wars where a large section of the US media called for immediate intervention (Carpenter, 1995). This media behavior is not only reflective of the direct bilateral relationships, as seen in the coverage improvements of India and China when their relations with the US improved (Chang, Ramaprasad;1989) but also indicative of the broader influence of ideology and government policy on journalistic content (Paletz & Entman, 1981; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Another study by (Mazumdar, 2020) found the same trend that the New York Times between the times of Cold War from 1967 to 1991 was influenced by the US governments posture towards India.

The Swedish and the US media's news framing appeared to be consistent with the views of the political leadership in both countries (Dimitrova and Stromback, 2008). Beyond following the US foreign policy statements, it is also seen that the US media also assumed the charge of defending the forces. In the case of Abu Gharib prison abuse scandal, the US media framed the issue as an a case of an unfortunate and isolated incident to ostensibly protect the US forces from public criticism (Bennet et al., 2006).

However, it is also important to maintain that this theory can also be challenged on the grounds of (Khan, 2008) study that focused on the image of Pakistan in prestigious American newspaper editorials after 9/11 did not find the US press tilting in favour of Pakistan despite Islamabad being a non-NATO ally in the War Against Terror, hence making a strong case of whether it is right to assume that this is not a one size fits all theory.

But on the other hand taking the Pakistani media coverage itself on the Afghan refugee issue indeed show the bilateral relations between the two neighbouring countries had a profound impact on the reportage. Despite their longstanding integration into society, Afghans have been depicted as adversaries in mainstream media narratives (Jehangir, 2023). (Ghufran, 2006) argues that the portrayal of Afghan refugees in the media has mainly oscillated over the past four decades of the bilateral relations, mirroring the prevailing policies at each juncture. It started on a positive note right after the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan in 1979, the Pakistani state welcomed the Afghan refugees with open arms, consequently the media also reflected their plight sympathetically, not as a threat but people in distress that needs help and care. The media sympathy did not last long as when the Pak-Afghan relations soured, the Pakistani media now takes a hawkish stance which is completely in line with the recent state policies in regards to Afghan refugees.

As the academic research establishes the veracity of Media Conformity Theory - albeit more dominated with examples of the US press - this academic research paper puts into equation this theory to explore whether Pakistani media, irrespective of the state censorship and military influence, also tends to align its coverage with the state foreign policy particularly with Afghanistan, with which it shares a tumultuous history.

The scant academic research on Pakistani media's approach to foreign conflict, especially in the neighbouring countries, is a research gap that should be filled. It is important to understand what factors are taken into consideration by an editorial team to editorially analyze the developments. There existed a need to understand Pakistani newspaper's news frame, positioning and ideological framework that caters to millions of readers all over the globe through print and digital mediums.

To conclude, this literature review has established a noticeable connection between the press and the state mainly in the United States, particularly during foreign conflicts, where the press chooses to align itself with the state's stance. There remains a huge research gap specifically examining whether Pakistani newspapers, which cater to a global readership of millions of readers, exhibit the same pattern of alignment especially in light of the Afghan Taliban takeover in 2021. This research gap highlights the necessity for comprehensive research to ascertain whether the media practices established in Pakistani newspapers reflect those of the US press in times of foreign conflict and to reveal the reasons behind such alignments.

In the context of Pakistan, where military influence is an inescapable reality, since its establishment in 1947 the nation has predominantly been governed by direct military rule. Even during periods of nominal democracy, the true authority resided with the military establishment, which orchestrated affairs from behind the scenes (Siddiqa, 2017), this research attempts to unravel and explore how media in a semi-authoritarian security state like Pakistan, which is considered to be a hybrid democracy, approach the reporting of foreign conflicts. By examining these state-journalism dynamics, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced comprehension of the interplay between media practices and state power where political authority does not necessarily rest with the civilian elected leadership but rather with the military authorities.

This research is an extension to the previous study conducted by (Hussain; S.Jehangir, A. 2024) that analyzed how the press of seven countries: US, UK, India, Pakistan, Russia, China and Iran reported Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 through the prism of indexing theory. The indexing theory introduced by Lance Bennet in 1990 looks into the degree of freedom and counter framing put into action by the independent media in democratic countries on foreign policy analysis and reporting. It argues that the news media adjust perspectives to align itself

closely with with the position of the political elite and policymakers on important national and foreign policy issues (Bennet, 1990). However, the broadened and un-defined definition of political elite in this theory prompted the researcher to use the Media Conformity Theory as it establishes a direct link between the state and media, without referring to an elite that is not confined to a particular institution. The state and elite were not necessarily looked as a similar entity by (Ha, 2017) as they examined the indexing patterns of Arab Spring, and in that they found that the US press supported the elite perspectives over the US government's official policy on supporting the dictatorial regimes in the Arab world.

But before looking at the Jang newspaper coverage on the Afghan Taliban takeover, it is pertinent to understand the historical dynamics at play between the two countries which contextualizes the Jang newspaper's perspective on the political developments in the neighbouring country.

2.0 Historical Relationship - Pakistan's complex relationship with Afghanistan

It is pertinent to understand the intricate historical relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan to contextualize the editorial positioning of the Jang newspaper on the return of the Afghan Taliban to power as the history between the two neighbouring countries continues to influence Pakistani foreign policy, media, and political dynamics at play in a regional context.

The brief historical background would allow the readers to become privy to the established hostilities entrenched in the governing structure between the two countries, which share a 2460 km border, that often surfaces in different critical junctures of time. Notably, this region has been impacted by the presence of ethnic Pashtuns, which are living on both sides of the border. The

Pashtun factor has substantively influenced the regional dynamics and diplomatic relationship between the two Muslim countries over several decades.

2.1 - Durand Line

The Pak-Afghan relations started on a stormy note to the extent that Afghanistan was the only country to vote against Pakistan's inclusion in the United Nations on the grounds of a border dispute.

Kabul expressed its reservations over Pakistan's claim of sovereignty of the North West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). The Afghan Ambassador to the United Nations, Hosayn Aziz, articulated, *"We cannot recognize the North-West Frontier as part of Pakistan so long as the people of the North-West Frontier have not been given an opportunity, free of any kind of influence—and I repeat, free from any kind of influence—to determine for themselves whether they wish to be independent or to become a part of Pakistan"* (UN Meeting Minutes, 1947). The Durand Line, a demarcation between Afghanistan and British India, negotiated by Sir Mortimer Durand, the Foreign Secretary of the British colonial government of India, and Amir Abdur Rehman of Afghanistan, remains the central dispute between the two states since its inception. The agreement, which took into account a territory of 1,519 miles, included a substantial subsidy in the cession of several small territories from Afghan control. Despite recognizing the Durand Line as a de facto border in 1919, Afghanistan made territorial claims in reaction to Pakistan's inclusion in the United Nations by challenging the legality of the agreements after the withdrawal of colonial Britain (Barfield, 2007).

A CIA report from July 1961 which was later declassified said, "The boundary situation is further complicated by the fact that a major territorial or ethnic problem area—Pashtunistan—lies astride the Durand Line," adding, *"Afghanistan would be happy to carve a*

new state out of the Pashtun tribal lands lying in Pakistan east of the Durand Line...it is possible that Afghanistan may want to annex such a newly created state” (Office of Research and Support, 2012).

The border dispute gradually transformed into a full-scale military confrontation between the neighboring states as in September 1960, the Afghan forces stepped into Bajaur, a tribal agency in Pakistan, starting an intense diplomatic and military friction for a couple of years, which only started to recover in 1964. The hostilities opened a new chapter of confrontation as the successive Afghan government marked 'Pashtunistan Day', which was considered in Pakistan as a hostile diplomatic effort to challenge the Pakistani territorial sovereignty by promoting a regional Pashtun entity on the country's border despite failing to secure any significant international or even regional Pashtun support (Khan, 2017).

In reaction to the Afghan aggressive diplomatic posture, Pakistan's earliest recorded state-sponsored interference in Afghanistan occurred following the 1973 coup that reinstated Afghan Prince Daud, known for his anti-Pakistan stances. The Pakistani state, under its first civilian elected leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, chose to support local Afghan Islamist groups against his regime, which consequently led to failed insurgencies orchestrated by the Pakistani military and its intelligence agency - ISI. The Islamist groups were given safe havens within Pakistan's province of NWFP, now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Armajani, 2021).

This strategy of utilizing non-state actors significantly shaped the subsequent decades of the Afghan political landscape, embedding militant groups as central figures in Afghanistan's governance. A claim that Pakistan denies, but the respective Afghan government leveled that allegation against the neighboring state on different occasions right until the Afghan Taliban

takeover of Kabul in 2021.

2.2 - Afghan Jihad

The biggest watershed moment in Pak-Afghan relations came when Afghanistan saw a communist regime in power courtesy of a bloody coup led by Noor Muhammad Tarkai. Historians have called the developments the “April Revolution.” The coup resulted in the assassination of President Daud and his family in the year 1978 (Baqai and Wasi; 2021).

On December 24, 1979, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev approved the deployment of the 40th Army's entry into Afghanistan, which ultimately resulted in the execution of Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin, he was replaced by Babrak Karmal as president. The Soviet intervention faced little resistance as Moscow swiftly enforced its presence over the major Afghan urban areas (Newell, 1980).

In neighboring Pakistan, under the influence of military dictator General Zia ul Haq's Islamization policy (1978-1988), Pakistan provided massive support to Afghan resistance groups against the newly installed Soviet-backed regime through the provision of arms, financial aid, and sanctuaries. The Afghan policy was directly enforced from the military headquarters in Rawalpindi, which declared the resistance as an act of Jihad under the Islamic commandment to protect Afghanistan and Pakistan (Baqai and Wasi, 2021).

Pakistan maintained diplomatic ties with Soviet-backed Afghanistan but simultaneously fuelled an insurgency through its trained Islamist groups, and sought support from the United States to back its efforts, the Washington-Islamabad bonhomie began in July 1979 when President Carter

approved CIA assistance to the Afghan fighters - known as Mujahideen - starting a new phase of collaboration against the Soviet Union. President Zia ul Haq also invited Saudi Arabia to join the anti-Soviet alliance (Haqqani, 2015).

Pakistan became a central player in the war in Afghanistan as it provided safe havens to its selected Mujahideen factions primarily based in Peshawar, near the Afghan border, with the support of the CIA. The ISI consolidated 40 armed groups into seven major factions in 1982 in view of tightening its control on the militancy. Officially, Pakistan rejected its involvement in sponsoring cross-border militancy to avoid Soviet retaliation (Kux, 2001).

The US support to Pakistan in the war was not limited to the provision of war and ammunition as Washington became an active participant in imposing a significant cultural intervention in the bordering Pak-Afghan areas. The cultural dynamics of the region dramatically changed as the US contributed to the creation of specialized textbooks in the local languages of Dari and Pashtu. This initiative was led by the Centre for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, funded by a USAID grant totaling \$51 million between 1984 and 1994. The strategic aim of these new textbooks was to enforce militancy under the name of Jihad and encourage armed training among Pashtuns living in Pakistan as refugees from Afghanistan due to war. Over 13 million copies of these books were distributed across Afghan refugee camps and Pakistani religious seminaries known as madrasas. The ideologically charged books maintained a strong anti-Soviet bias, with examples such as students learning basic mathematics by counting images of dead Russian soldiers and Kalashnikov rifles (Group, 2002).

The strong financial support from the US and safe havens in Pakistan gave Mujahideen enough firepower and security as it allowed them to sustain continuous resistance against the

Soviet forces. Among the seven groups fighting the war inside Afghanistan, ISI threw its weight behind the fundamentalist groups, notably backing Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an anti-American figure, yet ironically channeling the largest share of the US aid (Kux, 2001).

Courtesy no clear victory in sight, the Soviet withdrawal became imminent leading to the Geneva Accord in April 1988, brokered between Pakistan and Afghanistan with the US and Soviet Union as guarantors of the agreement. The accord provided room for the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was completed by February 15, 1989, but leaving behind a well-equipped regime of Mohammad Najibullah (Shah, 2000).

Post-Soviet withdrawal, Pakistani military circles feared a power vacuum in Afghanistan that could ultimately culminate in an anti-Pakistan government in the future. President Zia ul Haq repeatedly called for ensuring an Islamabad-friendly government in the neighboring country because of the country's role in bearing the highest cost of being a front-line state in the conflicts (Haqqani, 2015).

The Soviet-backed Najibullah government collapsed in 1992 after the end of Soviet financial and military support, leading to another round of violence, as the Mujahideen groups engaged in intense infighting. Islamabad attempted mediation but the internal divisions exacerbated the conflict to the extent that multiple battle fronts were opened in the country for the control of Kabul. The Mujahideen infighting drove millions of people to become refugees as the instability generated massive turmoil. (Cogan, 1993; Rubinstein, 1988).

2.3 - Taliban Ascendancy

Taliban, primarily Afghan refugee students from Pakistani religious seminaries, became a

strong militant force in Afghanistan at the backdrop of the infighting between the Mujahideen groups, seized control of most of Afghanistan, including Kabul, by 1996 with support from the Pakistani military (Magnus, 1997).

The Taliban militant group announced that their priority remained to restore order in the country that was marred by decades of conflicts, de-weaponize groups that were not supportive of their ascendancy to power, and impose their strict interpretation of Islamic law which was idealized in the religious seminaries located at the Af-Pak border and funded by the Saudi Arabia. The majority of the Taliban were Sunni Muslims, many of whom were Pashtuns born in refugee camps in Pakistan. They had previously fought as Mujahideen against the Soviet occupation and were disillusioned by the corruption and discord among the Mujahideen leaders. They saw themselves as righteous leaders who would bring peace and justice to Afghanistan through the strict application of Islamic law (Armajani, 2021).

The Taliban's claim to power was met with relief by a wide segment of the Afghan society that was weary of the lawlessness in the country due to the aggression of the Mujahideen warlords, the acceptance was also bolstered courtesy of the charisma of its leader Mullah Omar, who enjoyed popular support because of his reputation for protecting the rights of the marginalized communities by resolving disputes and curtailing the excesses of warlords (Riedel, 2008).

Pakistan supported the group through its intelligence service - ISI - as it maintained strong bonds with the group because many of the militant group members studied in the same religious seminaries as the military officers. Islamabad maintained a strong strategic relationship with the group with its aim to exert diplomatic influence in the neighboring country with the objective of using Afghanistan to access Central Asian markets, which were previously

inaccessible due to civil war (Armajani, 2021).

As the Taliban gripped its power in Afghanistan, the United States lacked a coherent strategy on Afghanistan between 1992-94, granting an open pass to regional powers, including Pakistan, Iran, India, and Turkey, to pursue their interests more aggressively (Rubin, 1997).

The Taliban regime received full backing from Pakistan, which considered the militant group not only as a de facto Afghan government but as a military asset that holds the potential to provide Islamabad strategic depth against the country's archrival - India. Pakistan was one of only three countries, alongside Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to officially recognize the Taliban government (Ahmed and Bhatnagar, 2007).

Pakistan secured its strategic objectives with the Afghan Taliban being charged of Afghanistan, the US interests divested from the region, however the people of Afghanistan especially the women paid the biggest cost of this change. The strict policies of the Taliban, particularly towards women, prompted severe condemnation from all across the globe. The militant group based on their so-called interpretation of Quran banned women education on the cover of Sharia law, restricted women's public participation, perpetuated severe human rights abuses particularly against non-Pashtun ethnic groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras by enforcing systematic persecution and violence (de Leede, 2014).

But the Pakistani policymakers received harsh reality checks after the Taliban's grip on power strengthened as the militant group, contrary to expectations, did not act like a proxy for the Pakistani state, despite appearances of close ties. Although Islamabad-backed group members attained leadership roles, but it failed to achieve resolutions on key contentious issues like Durand

Line. Pakistan's appeals to the Taliban, at the behest of the global community, on the preservation of the Bamiyan Buddhas were dismissed. Despite the potential for diplomatic engagement, the Taliban proceeded with the destruction of these historical artifacts, illustrating a clear disregard for Pakistani requests. This series of interactions highlights the complexities and limitations within the Pakistan-Taliban relationship, revealing a dynamic where the Taliban, under Mullah Omar's leadership, did not invariably align with Pakistani interests or directives (Faruqui, 2022).

2.4 - War on Terror in Afghanistan

On September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda terrorists launched multiple attacks on the United States, Washington pinned the responsibility of the terror attacks on Osama Bin Laden, who was based in Afghanistan with his group members under the hospitality of the Taliban regime. The United Nations Security Council declared that the Taliban must „*implement United Nations Security Council resolutions... immediately and unconditionally.*” The US, in its stern directive to the Pakistani intelligence chief, stated that Pakistan must either stand with America in its War on Terror or be viewed as an adversary. Pakistan's then-President, General Pervez Musharraf sent a high-level delegation to Afghanistan to demand Bin Laden's extradition as according to the demands of the international community and the US. The Taliban's refusal to agree to the demands commenced Operation Enduring Freedom in October with the broader objective of dismantling Taliban and supporting the establishment of anti-Taliban forces (Riedel, 2008).

The military operation, spanned for at least two months, primarily led by the US forces culminated in the overthrow of the Taliban regime - replaced by an interim government formed on the grounds of Bonn Agreement, a framework that centralized the post-war recovery and democratization of Afghanistan, signed on December 5, 2001 in Germany (Gul, 2006).

The changing geopolitical dynamics forced Pakistan to overhaul its Afghan policy by providing support to the US military operations, including hosting NATO military bases and joint military operations within its borders but the Pakistani efforts failed to bridge the trust deficit between the new Kabul administration and Islamabad as the anti-Taliban Afghan leadership accused Pakistan of providing safe havens to the Taliban militants and failing to prevent cross-border attacks. In reaction to the hostile stance, Pakistan accused the Indian intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), of conducting state-sponsored terrorism inside Pakistan from Afghanistan - a claim denied by Kabul (Ikram, 2006).

The biggest contention in the new Pak-Afghan equation remained the anti-Taliban followers of the late Ahmad Shah Masood, the former leader of the Northern Alliance; they were stationed in prominent positions in the US-backed Karzai administration, they blamed Pakistan for the civil insurgency inside Afghanistan. They called their struggle against the Taliban not merely a civil conflict but a war of national liberation against a proxy group being operated from the neighboring country, situating their efforts within a broader narrative of resistance and sovereignty (Ahmed, Z. S and Bhatnagar, S; 2007).

Meanwhile, Afghan President Hamid Karzai expressed his frustrations in an interview with the BBC, stating, *"Despite all destructions, calamities, and problems faced by both our country and Pakistan, a double-standard game and [the use of] terrorism as a tool continued. The Pakistan Islamic government has not cooperated with us to ensure peace and security in Afghanistan, which is disappointing for us. In reality, we are confronted with governments, not the forces which are dependent on them. Therefore, we should talk to the main side, which has got the authority"* (BBC News, 2011). This statement underscored the deep-seated tensions and the complex dynamics influencing Afghanistan-Pakistan relations in the aftermath of the U.S.-led

invasion that continued till the end of the US-backed Afghan regimes led by successive government.

The Pakistani state not only continued to deny the allegations leveled from the Afghan side but also accused Kabul over being in cahoots with India against Pakistani interests. Islamabad raised its concerns over the increasing presence of the Indian consulates in Afghanistan, and the alleged presence of anti-Pakistan militant groups - Baloch nationalists and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan militants - inside Afghanistan. Moreover, the Pakistani Army in 2019 blamed Afghanistan for creating unrest in the country by supporting the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) - a civil rights group critical of military operations inside Pashtun areas of Pakistan. The allegations underscore the tension and mutual recriminations characterizing the bilateral relationship (Alikozai, 2019).

In January 2020, the already strained bilateral relations dipped to a new low with the arrest of the PTM leader Manzoor Pashteen as it prompted a response from the-then Afghan President Ashraf Ghani who expressed his concerns over the developments in a tweet: *"I am troubled by the arrest of Manzoor Pashteen and his colleagues. I fully echo the concerns raised by [the] Amnesty International in this regard and hope for their immediate release."* Pakistan issued a sharp rebuke on his statement by calling Ghani's tweet as a *"clear interference in Pakistan's internal affairs and hence unwarranted"* (Tribune, 2020).

The diplomatic tensions present since the start continued to exacerbate in the Pak-Afghan chequered even when both countries became non-NATO allies of the United States of America. The diplomatic confrontations between the two neighboring continued to surface throughout the time since the US-backed Afghan regime took over from the Taliban. Numerous attempts were made by the international community to bridge the differences between Islamabad-Kabul but to no avail, hostilities

due to border tensions and terrorism accusations continued to heighten from time to time

2.5 Afghan Taliban Takeover

The Afghan Taliban made a grand comeback to power with the takeover of Kabul on August 15, 2021, marking their return to the power corridors after a span of two decades. This return was based on the signing of the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan" between the United States and the Taliban, also known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, back on February 29, 2020. The-then Afghan government was not a party to this agreement signed in Doha, Qatar. The US-Taliban agreement sans the Afghan government further exacerbated the already strained tie between the Kabul administration and Pakistan, resulting in a sharp exchange of words to the extent that Afghanistan's National Security Adviser, Hamdullah Mohib, in its highly inflammatory remarks against Pakistan drew an analogy between Pakistan and Heera Mandi, a well-known red-light district in the country, in a public gathering at Nangarhar province alongside Pakistani border. Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, communicated through informal channels that Pakistan would cease official engagements with Mohib, indicating a substantial diplomatic fallout from the incident (Gul, 2021).

The Taliban's return led to the self-imposed exile of the Afghan government officials as they feared for their safety. President Ashraf Ghani is now based in the United Arab Emirates, with his wife and close aides, while other vocal anti-Taliban ministers are dispersed all over the world (Dawi, 2023). US and NATO forces completed their withdrawal by evacuating their diplomats, soldiers, and some key Afghan staffers as the takeover was completed without any significant military challenge (BBC News, 2021).

The Pakistani government and opposition parties welcomed the Taliban's return to

power. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan described their return to the power corridor as the Afghans "breaking the shackles of slavery" (Times Of India, 2021). The takeover was also appreciated by opposition figures in Pakistan, including Khawaja Asif, a former Defense Minister and leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, who lauded the return of the Afghan Taliban as a significant military defeat for the United States (Ex-foreign minister Khawaja Asif under fire for glorifying Taliban - The Current, 2020).

2.6 - Pakistan's quest for strategic depth inside Afghanistan

Strategic depth is an important geostrategic concept that appears to hold a pivotal importance in Pakistani foreign policy in regard to Afghanistan since the start of the Cold War period. The term calls for the acquisition of regional depth or influence, a strategy traced back to colonial military designs. In the context of the Pak-Afghan bilateral relations, strategic depth refers to Pakistan's policy to ensure the curtailment of Indian influence in the neighbouring country. This policy is a legacy of the strategic doctrines embraced by colonial Britain during its rivalry with Czarist Russia.

The military doctrine of strategic depth provided Pakistan with the reason to establish active militancy in Afghanistan through religious militant groups and eventually support the Taliban. The doctrine gave a justification to Pakistan to consider the Taliban as a strategically important ally for the country despite their abysmal human rights records. The militant group's predominantly Pashtun ethnicity resonated with the demographic composition in Pakistan; their conservative Islamic background gave them legitimacy in the Afghan society to the extent that their leadership was accepted by the broader segment of people, making them the preferred choice for the Pakistani military establishment (Parkes, 2019).

But while the strategic depth doctrine pushed Pakistan to throw its weight behind the Taliban, it is important to acknowledge that the Pakistani apprehensions regarding non-Taliban Afghan entities could not be dismissed as a figment of imagination born out of paranoia. The US-backed Afghan regime consistently overlooked Pakistani grievances regarding the operation of at least four Indian consulates on its territory, which Pakistan perceived as potential threats. In October 2011, New Delhi and Kabul formalized their military cooperation through a strategic partnership agreement under which India was complemented with training Afghan military officers at its defence colleges. Additionally, India also reviewed multiple requests from Afghanistan to assist in training its security personnel. The Afghan-India bonhomie gives credence to Pakistani fears of disproportional Indian influence that would eventually disturb the balance of power in the region - a concern rooted in tangible geopolitical developments ("Reality or Paranoia: Why Is Pakistan Afraid of India – Afghanistan Ties?" Hudson, 2024).

2.7 - Summary of Pakistan-Afghan Relations

Except for a brief period in the 1990s following the first Taliban takeover in Kabul, Pakistan and Afghanistan shared a hostile bilateral relationship since the inception of their diplomatic relations. The border issues - Durand Line - which Afghanistan, even during the Taliban times, refused to recognize as a legitimate border, culminated in secessionist movement and military skirmishes through proxies sowing severe discord between Islamabad-Kabul.

The Pakistan Army played a pivotal role in the Afghan Jihad against Soviet forces, starting in 1979, with extended support from the US, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries. Pakistan, under the command of military dictator and president General Zia ul Haq, trained Mujahideen fighters resulting in the withdrawal of the Soviet forces in 1989. The Pakistan Army's support to its favoured group continued even after the Soviet withdrawal during the civil conflict, leading to the emergence of the Afghan Taliban.

The Afghan Taliban, a group of students from religious seminaries along with the Pak-Afghan border dramatically changed the equation of the civil insurgency by swiftly seizing control through its military might with support from the Pakistan Army. Initially welcomed by the Afghan society, the Taliban established a strict order that adversely curtailed the rights and lives of Afghan people, especially women and minorities.

The September 11 attacks orchestrated by Al Qaeda from Afghan soil were a watershed moment in Afghan history as they led to a US intervention that temporarily removed the Afghan Taliban from the helms of affairs; they were replaced with anti-Taliban groups aligned with Western policies. The changing geopolitical situation forced Pakistan to change its course in regard to Afghanistan by accepting the new Afghan government. However, relations between the US-backed successive Afghan government and Pakistan remained far from ideal, with mutual accusations of harboring terrorists remaining a centre point.

Pakistani government and opposition parties welcomed the Afghan Taliban takeover in 2021; Meanwhile, President Ashraf Ghani and his cabinet took self-imposed exile in different countries of the world. The state of Pakistan considered the return as a strategic victory, presumably more aligned with Pakistani interests in the region.

3.0 Position of the Jang Newspaper within Mainstream Urdu Print Journalism in Pakistan

This study picked the Jang newspaper for the research because of it being the biggest player in the Pakistani newspaper market. The newspaper not only dominates the commercial market but also at times becomes a key player in the Pakistani political scene courtesy its influence in the

power corridors.

Jang newspaper is the most influential print entity in Pakistan, with circulation of at least daily 700,000 copies, which escalates to 875,000 on Sundays, thereby catering to over 8 million readers across diverse backgrounds all over the country, including a 57 percent readership in urban areas of the country (Jang Advertising Solutions, 2018).

According to Freedom Network, an independent media monitoring body, Jang commands a 27 percent share of Pakistan's total newspaper readership market (Jang, 2019). The significant clout of Jang is further underscored by instances where its owners have been offered ministerial positions by Pakistan's powerful military establishment at various times (Bano, 2022). The media conglomerate publishes not only the flagship Urdu daily Jang from multiple national and international locations but also "Akhbar-e-Jehan," the largest circulating Urdu weekly, alongside two evening papers— "Daily News" in English and "Awam" in Urdu. In 1991, the group expanded its portfolio by launching "The News" an English morning paper (Gunaratne, 2003).

But despite its considerable clout, the Jang maintains a complex and, at times, contentious relationship with the Pakistani military establishment primarily due to its relative editorial stance on political matters. In early 1999, the group faced harassment from state officials, including raids on its offices, ostensibly due to its critical reporting. The standoff included seizing newspapers, and freezing the group's bank accounts - however, the government retracted its measure after some time. (Gunaratne, 2003).

Notably, the group came in direct clash with the military after its star journalist, Hamid Mir, was shot in the Karachi city in 2014. The journalist's family accused the intelligence agency, ISI, of the

attack. Following a hostile standoff, Jang issued a formal public apology to the ISI, describing its coverage of the incident as "excessive, distressful and emotional" (BBC News, 2014). But while it is true that the Jang has put up resistance against the Pakistani state structure by exercising their right to freedom of expression, it is also noted that it has also been subdued by political pressures and incentives. The group has also been under the radar for extracting benefits from the state authorities and trespassing the commercial laws to their advantage; The group was in the middle of a dispute with a democratic government involving tax arrears (Mezzera, Sial, 2010).

Furthermore, the Jang may have a bitter history with the Pakistani military establishment on the Hamid Mir assassination affair, but reportedly, it has also been accused of propagating the military narrative at the expense of the legal authority of civilian democratic governments, particularly during events like the 'Memogate' scandal. This scandal involved accusations against the government of treason for allegedly seeking the Obama administration's support to prevent a military coup ('Memogate' scandal reveals civil-military splits, 2011). Interestingly, Hamid Mir, the same journalist who reportedly has maintained a fractious relationship with the military establishment, himself has been a vocal supporter of the military's foreign policy perspectives, often standing contradictory to an elected government's foreign policy objectives.

On the foreign policy front, Geo News, a sister company of Jang newspaper, has acknowledged its engagement in a non-profit media peace initiative, Aman ki Asha, in collaboration with India's largest media group after extensive consultations with senior figures within Pakistan's military establishment, including but not limited to the Director- General of Inter-Services Intelligence (DG ISI) and the Director-General of Inter-Services Public Relations (DG ISPR). The news channel also said that its advisory panel included national security advisors and that all of its initiatives were executed after getting approval from the ISPR. The rare admission reveals

the discreet working relationship between the Jang newspaper and the Pakistani military's media wing which extends its power beyond the local politics to diplomatic engagements (News, 2021).

The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media wing of the Pakistan Army, exerts a strong influence on Pakistani journalism on both local and international issues. Established shortly after Pakistan gained independence, the ISPR's mandate was restricted to providing information about military affairs, but over time; its role expanded to shaping media narratives in favor of the military institution by exerting policies that include influencing journalists even by using coercive measures. The killing of journalist Saleem Shahzad is blamed on the organization, showcasing the potential risks Pakistani journalists face in adopting stances contrary to the policies endorsed by the military. The ISPR's influence was reported in 2014 when it purportedly compelled the Pakistani Society at Oxford University to invite military-friendly journalists to its events as official guest speakers (Siddiqa, 2017).

In the context of this research, it is notable that Jang newspaper, in its editorials, put its weight behind the Pakistani caretaker government's controversial policy of repatriating undocumented Afghan refugees, officially termed as "voluntary repatriation" by the Pakistani government. The Jang newspaper maintained an editorial line that focused on how to navigate potential negative publicity for its decision (Editorial, 2023), while fully supporting the policy that was criticized by the human rights groups of the country and abroad.

4.0 Pakistan's Foreign Policy on Afghanistan After the Afghan Taliban takeover

A detailed examination of Pakistan's foreign policy in response to the second Afghan Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021 reveals a more cautious approach by Islamabad compared to

its immediate recognition of the Taliban regime in 1996. This time, Pakistan articulated distinct policy guidelines tailored for regional countries, western powers, and the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC).

4.1 - Regional Countries and OIC

Pakistan's diplomatic stance on the Afghan Taliban in talks with the regional countries remained concentrated on coordination, inclusive Afghan government, and mutual benefits. Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, in his contact with regional counterparts, reiterated a "coordinated approach" to ensure "security, stability, and inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan." He maintained that such an approach guarantees not only peace in Afghanistan but also can galvanize regional economic integration, enhancing connectivity by establishing people-to-people relationships (Foreign Affairs, 2021). This diplomatic stance marks a significant pivot from Pakistan's earlier policy in 1996 when it swiftly recognized the Taliban regime, along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The political settlement and regional cooperation were centered on the premise that the political change in Afghanistan demands a collaborative framework that could eventually provide sustainable peace and economic prosperity in the region for the benefit of people of all regions.

Pakistan adopted an assertive policy in its diplomatic engagements at the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) as Islamabad warned of the potential "spoilers with and outside Afghanistan" taking advantage of the unstable situation in the country (Foreign Affairs, 2021). The assertiveness in its statements showcases Pakistan's long-held geo-strategic concerns about the Indian influence in the region.

4.2 - Western Governments

Pakistan expanded its focus to include continued humanitarian and economic assistance for Afghanistan along with coordinated and inclusive political settlements in its engagements with the Western governments. Pakistan urged Western nations to "support the people of Afghanistan to address the humanitarian situation and also provide economic assistance," while encouraging them to "stay engaged" with the region throughout its diplomatic engagements. Pakistan continued to put to the center its role in assisting European officials, security personnel, NGO workers, and journalists in evacuating from Afghanistan alongside the US forces.

The consistent message to both regional and Western interlocutors was that "a peaceful and stable Afghanistan was of critical importance for Pakistan and the region," (Foreign Minister Receives Call from UK Foreign Secretary, 2021).

4.3 - Reaction to the Taliban Government's First Official Press Conference

Pakistan welcomed the statements given by the Taliban in its first official conference after the Afghan Taliban takeover, appreciating the peaceful transition of power, the militant group's promise of not making the country a haven for global terrorism, to uphold the rights of all citizens, including women and minorities and an acceptance for political reconciliation. The Pakistani government called these commitments "positive indications" (Transcript of the Press Briefing by Spokesperson on Friday, 20 August 2021).

Islamabad reiterated its call for durable peace in Afghanistan through an "inclusive, political settlement" facilitated by an intra-Afghan process, and emphasized "the importance of an early and smooth transition of power and the need for all Afghan sides to engage and work out an inclusive political settlement." Following its stance specifically with engagements, Pakistan again reiterated its call for continued humanitarian and political engagement in Afghanistan, to

ensure durable peace, security, and development in the region (Foreign Affairs, “Transcript of the Press Briefing by Spokesperson on Friday, 20 August, 2021”).

4.4 - Summary of Pakistani Foreign Policy on the Afghan Taliban Takeover

Pakistan called for a 'coordinated approach' and emphasized the necessity of an 'inclusive political settlement,' 'security and stability,' and the 'economic and political benefits for the region,' in its diplomatic engagements with regional countries. Islamabad linked greater economic integration, enhanced regional connectivity, and facilitated people-to-people linkages with the restoration of peace.

Pakistan maintained as a facilitator for the Western governments in evacuating their citizens from Afghanistan, however, it maintained an aggressive stance towards its neighbouring rival, India, as it implicitly criticized New Delhi at the OIC meeting by labelling it as “spoilers outside of Afghanistan who wanted to take advantage of the situation in the country” (Foreign Affairs, 2021).

Pakistan maintained a friendly posture towards the Taliban as it welcomed all their commitments centred on safeguarding people’s lives and properties and respecting the rights of all Afghans, including women and minorities. Islamabad continued to stress inclusive political settlements that include all groups and ethnicity of the neighbouring countries to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a hotbed for terror activities again.

To conclude, the Pakistani foreign policy tilted in favour of the Afghan Taliban after the takeover, while unlike in the past, it did not market the Taliban to the international community but at the same time appealed to the international community to continued its assistance to Afghanistan after the takeover. The official Pakistani policy remained that it did not aid or abet any

group in the takeover neither it supports political solution rather than forceful takeover, Islamabad at the same time continuously called for the international community to ‘engage’ with Taliban.

The chequered Pak-Afghan history, supplemented with Pakistan’s direct and indirect role in respective insurgencies, their alleged covert support to the Afghan Taliban against the former Ghani administration, and their call for continued support to the international community after the takeover consequently leads us to the question

1. Did the mainstream Pakistani Urdu newspaper Jang show a pro-Taliban bias in its editorials during the takeover of Kabul in 2021?

Within the context of the hyper-nationalistic, hawkish reportage on the Afghan refugees by the local Pakistan , it becomes essential to inquire whether the coverage changed in respect to Taliban, given that its considered that they allegedly enjoy close relationship with the Pakistan Army.

This inquiry leads to the development of the subsequent research question:

2. Did Jang’s editorials follow the Pakistani state foreign policy on Afghanistan during the takeover of Kabul in 2021?

Additionally, one might inquire whether, under censorship or otherwise, if the Jang newspaper followed the state narratives on Afghanistan by prioritizing national security interests or included any nuances that incorporated the vulnerability and struggles of the Afghan people including women and minorities.

5. Methodology

The mixed-methodology method was used in this research to allow the researcher to have a holistic view of the issue at hand by drawing strengths from both quantitative and qualitative methods, as the researcher aimed to achieve a broad picture of the Jang group's editorial process in relation to the Afghan Taliban takeover.

The researcher took into account the qualitative content analysis as it involved a thorough review of each editorial written on the issue at hand to grasp the underlying premises, emphases, and alignments with Pakistan's official foreign policy toward Afghanistan. This approach addresses the limitations of quantitative methods, which may not fully capture the subtleties and complexities of editorial positions (Kracauer, 1952). Qualitative methods of research are restricted to the analysis of the data with the analysis of the text, and they differ from the quantitative approach on the basis of how codes are generated and put into equations in academic research. The qualitative codes, contrary to the quantitative counterparts, are broader and are more helpful in ascertaining the new contexts introduced through the coding and counting process analytically (Morgan, 1993). The researcher deemed it fit that the aspects that the qualitative methods would reveal more contexts that may have been missed through the application of quantitative methods only.

The second reason of the mix-methodology was inspired from the reasoning given by Corbin and Stauss (1990) as they maintained that qualitative content analysis is viewed through the prism of qualitatively inclined readers who look into the research through “quantitative canon”, but as Schreier (2012) pointed out the preference for quantitative content analysis in the English-speaking countries has played a role in the preference of one research method over another. On

top of that, it is also important to note that the qualitative methods have a different approach towards generating categories, using data, and the treatment and analysis of it (Forman, Damschroder; 2007).

However, withstanding Morgan (1993) argument who maintained that while a quantitative approach throws its weight behind seeking answers of “what” and “how many”, it is the qualitative method that reveals the answers of “why “and “how”, leading the researcher to find important hidden patterns in the data crucial to make a final understanding of the subject. But he also maintained that solely using this approach for research design can be deemed “controversial” for not being quantitative enough. On the other hand, quantitative method provides the statistical data for the research but in order to understand the meaning of the individual participation, their point of view, and experiences, it is important to illustrate through the subject’s own words via the qualitative method techniques like interviews to deepen our perspective on the individual variations and point of views (Yilmaz, 2013).

In the words of Krippendorff, (2004), taking only quantitative indicators on specific political information even with large amount of quantitative data would be extremely insensitive and shallow. Taking a cue from the work of Alexander L. George on his book *Propaganda Analysis* (1959a), Qualitative Analysis to research on the news content analysis can be systematic, reliable and valid especially to analyse the discourses linked to foreign propaganda in psycho therapeutic assessments, in ethnographic research or more especially in discourse analysis.

This research has used the qualitative content analysis as its main sources of findings on the premise given by (Krippendorff, 2004) that quantification is not an end in itself and the researchers should know the distinction between quantification for testing statistical hypothesis

and indicators that show results something other than what is counted.

5.1 - Data collection methods

5.1.1 Quantitative Analysis

Hence to make this research meet the criteria of high reliability and validity, this study also took into account the quantitative content analysis to quantify the patterns present in the Jang editorials. In the words of (Newman, 2014), quantitative measurements prompt certain techniques with the aim of encompassing empirical evidence in the social setting through numbers, further adding that this number-oriented research method allows the researcher to move from abstract ideas into specific data collection which gives a complete picture of a uniformed, standardized and compact way to know a pattern or result. The biggest strength the quantitative content analysis brings to the fore is that it complements the findings of the qualitative research within a framework that is value-free, logical, and deterministic, giving the face of objective reality to a social phenomenon (Yilmaz, 2013).

To compile the initial sample for analysis, a researcher may examine keywords, themes, or even entire articles (Wimmer & Dominic, 2011). During the initial reading, I examined the articles thoroughly and then chose to focus on the prominent themes, a method recommended by (De Vreese, 2005).

In this research, the quantitative component categorizes the editorials based on themes such as ‘pro-Taliban’, ‘anti-Taliban’, ‘pro-USA’, ‘anti-India’, ‘human rights issues’, ‘critical of Taliban policies’, ‘critical of the Ghani administration’, ‘action on TTP’, ‘pro-Russia’, ‘neutral on Taliban’, ‘pro-China’, and ‘urging support from the international community’. The themes were taken into account based on the researcher's knowledge of the Pak-Afghan.

The categorization was made by the researcher by noticing the recurring themes of the editorials by reading every single article within the time frame. Establishing a timeframe is critical for the research as it sets the perimeters “for defining the universe from which the sample will be drawn” (Linström & Marais, 2012, p. 29). A month time frame between August 15, 2021 (The exact day of the fall of Kabul) to September 15, 2021 was established to read the Jang editorials on the Afghan Taliban takeover. This manual selection of the articles ensured that the researcher picked relevant editorials.

By quantitative content analysis of the Jang editorials on various issues surrounding the Taliban takeover via coding on predetermined themes and sub-themes, we aim to get a complete picture of the broader issues that are considered pivotal by the newspaper. The sample size does not permit percentage-based conclusions; it was the frequency of themes across the editorials that provided important insights into the newspaper’s focus areas. Given the lack of a standard codebook for analyzing editorials on such specific events, these categories were derived inductively.

5.1.2 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative approach gave the researcher the liberty to engage deeply with text in a bid to uncover connections and meaning, and to interpret as well as analyze the information presented.

In the words of (Wood, 2000), this approach enables the researcher to derive insights from the experiences and meanings conveyed, and to unravel the text in a comprehensive manner.

An additional facet of the qualitative approach is its applicability within specific cultural and political contexts, which was duly required for this research. (D'Angelo and Kuypers, 2010) threw their weight behind this approach as it aids researchers in deducing the implications of certain frames or themes within particular social settings.

Nonetheless, this approach also brings its own sets of limitations in terms of validity and reliability issues as much of the content analysis is dependent on the researcher's interpretation of the text. An additional challenge that arises from the inductive approach that has been used in this research is the inherent subjectivity in themes identification. As the coding schemes and categories are rationalized by the researcher there remains a question on its result being influenced by the researcher's perception (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Reese et al., 2001).

The researcher analysed all the editorials within the stated time period taken from Jang's official website and translated them into English from Urdu from Google Translate. Furthermore, the researcher also used his own knowledge of Urdu to make some of the text accurate to the best of his understanding of the language and context.

The editorial passages were contextualized, summarized, and viewed in complement with the historical contexts to reach the nuances of the arguments present in the editorials. It was through this research method that the recurring themes like anti-India sentiments present in the editorials were seen as a pattern that can be plausibly considered the Jang newspapers' official editorial policy. Moreover, it also allowed the researcher to understand the gradual change of editorial policy line on certain issues within certain passage of time.

5.1.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with key journalists who were behind the editorials during the takeover period provided deeper insights and enhanced the quality of the research. This format allowed flexibility, enabling the exploration of new research avenues that may emerge during discussions (Atkinson, 2017).

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary method of data collection via purposive sampling strategy helped the researcher to identify our key interviewees.

Interviewees include former chief reporter Zia ur Rehman, Jang Digital Editor Manzar Turk, Jang Editorial Editor Suhail Warraich, and editorial members Mazhar Abbas and Dr. Tauseef. These discussions are aimed at understanding the considerations and influences impacting the editorial content during the Taliban's return to power. The journalists were picked from the same editorial department to ensure uniformity in their backgrounds.

The semi-structured interviews (transcripts published in this research work) were setup after giving consent forms and taking the approval of the researchers for their identities to be revealed. The interviews were taken within a span of a week in the first week of April 2024. The interviewees were all based in Pakistan and all male. The researcher attempted to reach for a female voice but due to the nonavailability of female staffers in the Jang editorial department was left with no options than to go with only male journalists.

The interviews primarily focused on the questions of the journalists' opinion on A) Where does Jang stand on the ideological prism, B) Did censorship play a role in the editorials, C) How editorials focused on Pakistani foreign policy are usually penned, and D) Whether there was

dissent in the editorial room during the time of Afghan Taliban takeover. E) What is their opinion on Pakistan's foreign policy in regards to Afghanistan? Based on the journalists' response follow up questions were asked.

This qualitative research is apt for exploring theoretical frameworks in the line of the Hierarchy of Influences model (Shoemaker and Reese, 1991, 2014). The said model sheds light on five levels of influences: individual, routine, organizational, institutional, and social system, play a role in shaping news content. The qualitative method complimented with a nuanced understanding opened up the opportunities of exploring new themes and patterns during the conversation. Followup questions through two-way dialogue opened up space for probes. (Roulston and Choi, 2018) for a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons behind why Jang newspaper chose to cover the Afghan Taliban takeover in 2021 in a particular light.

The questions were drafted in a particular order that prompted open-ended discussion on the research topic, that were dictated by the response of the interview participants (Roulston and Choi, 2018).

The interviews were recorded after getting the consent of the participants and were transcribed through Google Pinpoint. The transcripts were then focused in detail by putting into action the frameworks of Hierarchy of Influences model (Shoemaker and Reese, 1991, 2014) to ascertain recurring themes and patterns.

6.0 Results and Analysis

6.1 Quantitative Overview

The analysis begins by quantifying the frequency of editorials within broad categories related to the Afghan Taliban takeover through thematic analysis. Table 1 indicates that the most frequent type of editorial (19) were pro-Pakistan articles, as the editorials appreciated Pakistan's role in influencing the political dynamics in Kabul, supported Islamabad's advocacy for inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue, regional connectivity, and consistently called for the international community to support Pakistan's call for regional peace and financial support after the Afghan Taliban takeover.

Following this, there were (14) pro-Taliban editorials that shed a positive light on the takeover since the beginning of the takeover, the editorials framed it as a watershed moment that can provide a new start in the region, it lauded the Taliban's return to power and expressed hope that the militant group would form a new inclusive government as according to the aspirations of the people of Afghanistan.

The third most common recurring theme remained the anti-India editorials (11), which primarily centred on blaming India for aiding and abetting anti-Pakistan militant organizations in Afghanistan and terror activities in the region. These editorials reflected a strong right-wing hyper-nationalist tone as it framed the Taliban takeover as a strategic defeat for New Delhi while a victory for Islamabad as the latter had more proximity with the group than the former.

Next, there were (9) editorials that echoed Pakistani foreign policy statements that called for the international community to continue its engagement in Afghanistan through financial support even after the departure of the US forces and the return of the Taliban to avoid economic fallout and instability in the region.

The fifth most prevalent themes remained anti-US editorials (8 instances), which described the US withdrawal as a "humiliating defeat" and the Taliban's resurgence as a "heroic act of resistance", completely discerning the fact that Pakistan remained a non-NATO ally in the entire US campaign in Afghanistan. The US invasion of Afghanistan was considered a catastrophe on the region but the editorials chose to omit all the cooperation between the Pakistani state and the US in the entire years of the war.

Additionally, there were 8 neutral-themed editorials that neither fully supported nor criticized the Taliban's policies, which were predominantly present at the start of the takeover. However, the neutral editorials soon turned to Taliban-supportive editorials as the takeover sustained with time. The neutral editorials maintained Pakistan to adopt a cautious approach to the developing situation in the neighboring country while keeping all the possible outcomes in the equation.

Editorials critical of the former US-backed Ghani administration numbered 5, as they accused the previous regime of perpetuating anti-Pakistan sentiments while remaining in close collaboration with India to destabilize Pakistan. The regime's downfall was presented as strategically beneficial for the country.

Pro-China and pro-Russia editorials numbered 4 each, as editorials advocated for an increased role in the region for these countries in post-US Afghanistan. Addressing Pakistani state interests, three editorials strictly echoed the Pakistani state's demand to the Afghan Taliban group to take firm action against the Tehreek-e-Taliban militants, based in Afghanistan, particularly following a terror attack in Pakistan.

Lastly, there were minimal expressions of concern regarding the human rights of minorities and women under the Taliban regime, with only 2 editorials. Additionally, a single

editorial criticized the Taliban for failing to fulfill their international and domestic commitments during the observation period.

Table 1 - The frequency of categories in the editorials between August 15, 2021 (The exact day of the fall of Kabul) to September 15, 2021

Jang Editorial Topics	Frequency
Pro-Pakistan	19
Pro-Taliban	14
Anti-India	11
Urging support to Taliban from international community	9
Anti-US	8
Neutral on Taliban	8
Critical on Ghani administration	5
Pro-China	4
Pro-Russia	4
Urging Action on anti-Pakistan militant group - TTP	3
Human rights issues	2
Anti-Taliban	1

Table 1: The Frequency of Categories in the Editorials between August 15, 2021 to September 15,

2021

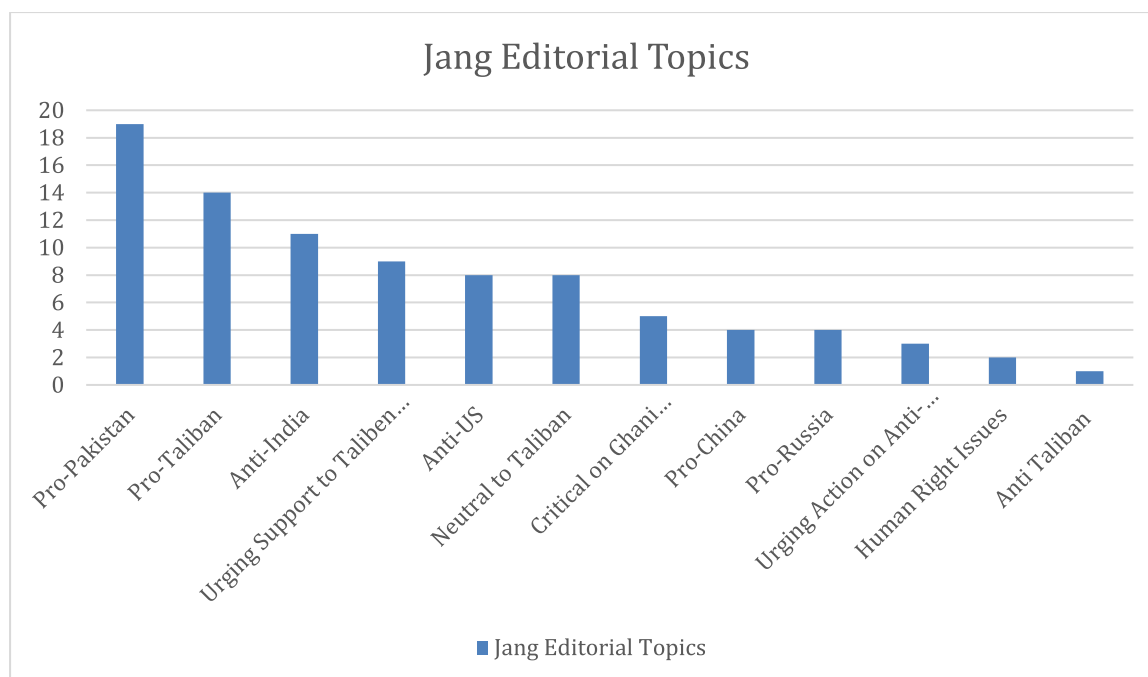


Figure 1: Jang Editorial Topics Frequency Chart

6.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

A deeper qualitative content analysis provided contextual nuances in underlying narratives linked to the Afghan Taliban takeover this research gained insights into the thematic distribution and orientation of the Pakistan's biggest newspaper's editorials.

The Jang newspaper adopted a hawkish pro-Pakistani position in its editorial coverage by closely mirroring the state's foreign policy without evident divergence. The editorials virtually played the role of a propagandist instrument that was pushing the state narrative while direly lacking critical commentary. The Jang newspaper editorials defended Pakistan by countering any criticism that centred on Pakistan's alleged support for the Taliban throughout the war despite being a US-Afghan ally by calling it a cynical move to shift blame for the US and its backed Afghan regime's failure on Pakistan.

Assuming the role of a propagandist rather than a classic journalistic entity, it was interesting to note the framing of the newspaper's editorials on the US departure from Afghanistan. Despite Pakistan being a non-NATO ally in the war against terrorism, the newspaper celebrated the Taliban takeover by describing the US withdrawal as a "humiliating defeat" and considered the takeover after a span of two decades as the culmination of "historical resistance against an occupying force." The anti-US editorials included strong opposition to the freezing of the Afghan state bank accounts in the US, and the Jang editorials called the move a blatant contradiction of President Biden's pledges of continued support for Afghanistan. It is noticeable that the anti-US tilt of the Jang newspaper coexisted with a favorable view of Russia and China's potential engagement in the Taliban-controlled Afghanistan's future development.

But while the anti-US sentiments remained at the fore in the editorials, it was the jingoistic stance on India that completely reflected all the Pakistani state's apprehensions in regard to New Delhi; the paper even wrongly blamed a terror strike inside Afghanistan on India that later claimed by ISIS. The editorials endorsed narratives favored by the Pakistani military that accuses India and the former Afghan regimes under Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani of being behind terror activities inside Pakistan. Consequently, the Taliban's takeover was deemed as strategically beneficial for Pakistan and could begin a fresh start for the region without the baggage of Indian influence complimented by the US-backed Afghan regime. By calling New Delhi a peace spoiler, the editorials viewed the change of regime as a major diplomatic defeat of India that serves Pakistan's interests in the region.

The editorials expanding to the Pakistani foreign policy encouraged international recognition of the new Taliban de facto government in Afghanistan for the opportunity to seize

stability in the region while disparaging the previous US-backed Afghan government for its alleged anti-Pakistan policies for Indian appeasement. Likewise, the Pakistani foreign policy, the Jang newspaper, did not explicitly demand international recognition for the Taliban but framed the situation as the global support for Afghanistan as a necessity to aid an economically-dependent nation.

But it is very important to note that all the support by the Jang newspaper to the Taliban militants was given on the grounds of Pakistani strategic interests in the region rather than any ideological proximity with the group's conviction for political Islamism. The pro-Taliban or neutral stance was tempered down on the the protection of human rights, particularly concerning women and religious minorities, aligning with human rights values. Moreover, the newspaper left no stone unturned in adopting an anti-Taliban editorial stance following a terror attack inside Pakistan that was linked to a militant group based inside Afghanistan. The editorial reiterated the Pakistani state's position that friendly bilateral relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan is dependent on the Taliban's stern actions against the militant groups involved in terror activities inside Pakistan.

In summary, the Jang newspaper's editorial stance during the Afghan Taliban takeover was a right-wing, nationalistic, pro-state narrative that endorsed the Pakistani foreign policy while eschewing a dissenting perspective. This so-called journalistic approach ignored the broader interests of the Afghan citizens, including marginalized groups, particularly women and children, as it merely focused on the Pakistani state interests through a geopolitical lens. The support for the Taliban and disdain for the US-backed Ghani administration stemmed from the perceived pro-India policies by the previous Afghan regimes - but the support remained conditional as the threat from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) showed that the newspaper, like the Pakistani state, aligns with

the Taliban group with conditions attached.

6.2.1 Interviews

The interviews conducted over online on the request of the journalists included Suhail Warraich, the editor of the editorial page, and editorial team members Manzar Turk, Mazhar Abbas, former staff members Dr. Tauseef, and Zia ur Rehman.

Social system level

Authoritarian states all over the world invest their substantive time and resources on controlling and suppressing dissent than putting their focus on the the well-being of their citizens, Pakistan fits the criteria to be one (Jilani, 2019). It is a country that has witness authoritarian practices in its chequered history that includes election rigging, state-sponsored propaganda against opposition, ill-gotten financial incentives to journalists, legal actions against rights groups and journalists critical to state policies and censorship (Akhtar & Pratt, 2017).

On the question of censorship in relation to the coverage of the Afghan Taliban takeover, the editor of Jang newspaper categorically maintained that censorship is a reality that can not be ignored in the Pakistani media from the establishment (an euphemism used for the Pakistani army)

During our interviews with the journalists from the editorial department of the Jang newspaper, the military's influence in the Pakistani state framework emerged as one of the key themes. Almost all journalists highlighted the overreaching role of the Pakistani establishment (an

euphemism used for the Pakistani army) in controlling the media narrative.

One of our interviewees Suhail Warraich, the editor of Jang Editorial department maintained: *“The state looks at us through a very critical lens. It may forgive and give leniency to the mistake of others but for us it is a different ball game. We have suffered state oppression in different times because of being in clash with the state narrative, this is why for the sake of the well being of the press and its employees, we understand that it is in our interest to always remain cautious when it comes on writing editorials centering on the state policies that it considers sensitive.”*

He maintained that the state censorship is an undeniable reality that can not be ignored as the Jang press has been a victim of it in the past. *“The censorship is of course a reality in Pakistan and we have been a victim of it”*.

Another prominent journalist of the Jang newspaper, Mazhar Abbas, maintained that: *“the newspaper owners including Jang owner are cautious about what is being printed because it can attract coercive state measures because of the reach and impact of the paper.”*

In extension to Abbas’ point, one of the key themes that kept emerging from the interview’s response was the fact that media owner and state bonhomie also play a huge role in the coverage of the issues at hand. An unwritten arrangement between the Jang owner and the powers-that-be dictate the journalism reportage and analysis. Journalist Zia ur Rehman, a renowned Pak-Afghan expert who was part of the Jang’s editorial team during the time of the takeover and now working as a Pakistan correspondent for The New York Times maintained:

“There is no dichotomy or division between owner and editor, at the end of the day it is the owner who gives the final nod on what is going to be printed. The owners for the sake of their business interest obviously align with the state and that in reality is the Pakistan Army. However, the journalists within the editorial rooms sometimes try to give their independent opinion in context to Afghanistan but in a way that it does not alarm the authorities. Rather than censorship, in the context of Afghanistan we see that there is self-censorship adopted by the journalists in view of not attracting any trouble with the state. People don’t really want to touch those domains that are considered to bring trouble in the future. A big part of the blame lies with the opportunism of the media owners.”

Dr Tauseef, a former staffer of the newspaper, remained critical of the journalistic outlet’s penchant to remain close to the military establishment, suggesting that the newspaper by policy follows the directives of the military adding that the editorial coverage of the Jang newspaper echoed the state policy offering little critical or dissenting narrative on the policy, but a sugarcoated version of the state’s press release, shaped in a journalistic piece.

“Pakistan’s foreign policy is formed, executed and regulated by its deep state - Pakistan Army. The Jang newspaper follows the agenda of the deep state. The Urdu newspapers - most prominently Jang - are the prime source of opinion-making in the country.”

Social institutions level

External institutions also play a paramount role in the editorial coverage on the Afghan Taliban takeover in 2021. The interview respondents pointed out that the lack of financial

incentives on Afghanistan also play a role in how the Jang newspaper's coverage in particular. According to Manzar Elahi Turk, the editor of Geo.tv (Jang newspaper's sister website) and a member of the editorial team, the Jang newspaper also tend to give an easy pass on the coverage of Afghanistan by blatantly associating itself with the state narrative because of the low revenue on its reportage and analysis.

“The country is not interested in in depth coverage of Afghanistan so are the advertisers. The revenue and interest of the people play a very prominent role here. The Jang newspaper also sides with the state narrative on the issue because its major finances comes from the state advertisements, it does not want to risk its revenue by going critical against it”.

Dr Tauseef highlighted that the lack of revenue from the Pashtun belt neighbouring Afghanistan compare to the urban center heartlands of Pakistan also play a major role. The newspaper pursue the state policy rather than people's interest because it is captive to the taste and perception of urban elite readers that find themselves aligned to the narrative of the Pakistani state especially in regards to Afghanistan.

“The monopoly of the urban readers for the Jang newspaper does not give a reason to pursue independent, critical journalism on the peripheries of the country including on developments linked to Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The Jang newspaper does not think that Afghanistan is worth the hill to die on by clashing with the Pakistan army. It is a risk without any financial dividend.”

Organizational level

The researcher noticed that the ideological spectrum the media organization stands at also holds an influence over the journalism standing on national and international issues. The journalists interviewed for this research all held a very different perception of on what ideological grounds the Jang newspaper stands on.

There was a divergence of opinion on the question of where does Jang press stand on the ideological spectrum especially on foreign policy issues. The editor, Warraich, considered that the department under his watch stands as a center-left paper. *“In the past the Jang newspaper ideologically aligned towards right wing on ideological spectrum but under my editorship I believed today it is a paper with center-left ideology.”*

But on the other hand, the rest of the journalist interviewed for this paper maintained that the newspaper has always maintained its tilt towards right or center-right position on local and international issues. But the dichotomy present on this particular question was best summarized: *“Jang newspaper does not have any permanent ideological position. It varies according to situation. But having said that generally the Jang newspaper can be said that it is a right-wing paper but it accommodates liberal and leftist voices as well in the opinion section. I will disagree that it is a center-left paper because if it is, then the newspaper should be representing the same ideological position in every of the issue which it does not.”*

The shape-shifting ideological position of the Jang newspaper is perhaps maintained to establish a cordial state-media relations for shared interests. Expanding further into this, Dr Tauseef maintained: *The (Jang) newspaper’s agenda has remained to protect the interest of the military from its news, editorials, and even cartoons. They portrayed military generals as hero and those against them as traitors, but it underwent a gradual change in 1983 when the family*

ownership was passed on to Mir Shakil ur Rehman. It tried to go towards the progressive-centrist approach but overall the mindset is still pretty right-wing. The religion-nationalism of the Pakistani state is established through this newspaper but there are some instances when the paper moved away from its ideological position. Today, the Jang press with all its right wing tendencies still give space to the left and liberal voices. It is not as right wing as it was 20-30 years back.

Media routines level

This level of analysis focuses on the organizational set of rules that journalists adhere to in an organization. Jang newspaper is the case study here. These routines include how they select the topic of editorials, frame the narrative and build their case on what grounds. These routines are common in the entire global journalism industry (Ferrucci and Kuhn, 2022).

From our interviews that we gathered from the senior editors on their coverage of the Afghan Taliban takeover we saw that the key theme that kept recurring was ‘protection of national interest’. Four out of five journalists interviewed by the researcher admitted that the biggest factor that was taken into consideration on the said editorials was the Pakistani state’s defined national interest. The routine adopted to write the editorials centered on pushing the Pakistani state’s security narrative as according to the journalists.

Manzar Elahi Turk, the chief editor for Jang newspaper’s digital operations, maintained that editorials on archival India remain a completely different equation, as the editorial understanding remains that being critical against India is the basic criteria of national interest

that must be followed. On Afghanistan, it is the state's bilateral relationship that has the biggest influence on the editorial judgment.

Let's keep aside India in this equation. We totally toes the line of national interest there; and our national interest lies against what India does. We don't have to be cautious there because there is nothing there to be cautious about There are no existing relations right now. But when it comes to the diplomatic relationship with the United States of America, China, Iran and Afghanistan, there are some other factors that are taken into consideration. For Afghanistan, for instance, it is a neighbourly Muslim nation but the diplomatic engagement of the day - the state policy - with them are the most prominent factor that is taken into consideration in the editorials. The editorial team always have that consideration that our work should not deteriorate our diplomatic relations especially with China and the United States of America. The India factor, our relations with Afghanistan after 9/11, the Afghan Jihad all were influencing factor; perhaps that is why the men on street and journalist in editorial room had a positive outlook towards Taliban.

The chief editor of the Jang editorials, Warraich, extended the same point by saying that it is virtually a customary norm to ensure that the state interests are protected in the editorials focusing on Afghanistan, but he argued that critical opinions are also given under his watch but through an advisory demeanour.

We protect, promote and secure the national interest through our platform. But that does not mean that we are never critical about the state's foreign policy, indeed we are, we try to give our advisory take on the state's policy but of course the biggest priority is the national interest on the issue.

Mazhar Abbas justified the ‘national-security first’ criteria for editorials on Afghanistan in the Jang newspaper on the grounds that there remains a huge risk of state push back if it is not followed.

While a disclaimer can be given on opinion pages that this is author’s personal opinion and the newspaper does not necessarily subscribe to his views, the editorial is newspaper’s opinion. The newspaper owners including Jang owner is cautious about what is being printed because it can attract coercive state measures because of the reach and impact of the paper. The state is pretty sensitive there.

Zia ur Rehman maintained that editorial discussions on series of editorials on Afghanistan were held in the meeting rooms, where diverse opinions were put for discussions as like any other issue but in the end the narrative that centered on security reasons had the word because of the influence of the owner in the day-to-day journalistic affairs of the newspaper.

The study by (Chomsky, N., & Herman, E, 1988) on manufacturing consent through mass media noticed that one of the prime filters is media ownership. Mass media firms are corporations often part of bigger conglomerates with the focus of maximizing profits, and hence their focus is more on pushing narratives that ensures their smooth financing than quality journalism.

In relation to Afghanistan, there are indeed diverse voices within the editorial team. There is indeed division between pro and anti-Taliban voices but when it comes to the security perspective, the entire newspaper follows the narrative and policy guideline given by the security forces. The reason being that there is no dichotomy or division between owner and editor, at the end of the day it is the owner who gives the final nod on what is going to be

printed. The owners for the sake of their business interest obviously align with the state and that in reality is the Pakistan Army.

Journalist level

(Shoemaker and Reese, 1991, 2014) argue that the journalist at an individual level is the most influencing factor when it comes to determining the journalistic content, variables like experience, political ideology can be put into the equation to study the extent of this influence (Ferrucci and Kuhn, 2022). While Dueze (2005) has given his perspective on the issue by maintaining that one of the most fundamental truths of journalism is that the professional journalist is the one who has a huge say in what society sees, hears and reads about when it comes to matters of the world; in the context of Afghanistan we see that the journalists held a completely different point of view than what was presented in the editorials.

Every single journalist interviewed for this academic research expressed their reservations over Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan including on the Afghan Taliban takeover. The current editor Warraich noted:

Pakistani foreign policy on the Afghan Taliban takeover was wrong on my many accounts. Our biggest issue is our confusion on what should be our foreign policy for Afghanistan. The biggest lesson that we should learn from our ordeals is that we should not interfere in their internal matters and if they are interfering we should give them a

proportionate response. We should not conspire against them neither let them conspire against us. We called them our brothers, celebrated their takeover - now they have become a problem, we first cheered for American presence in Afghanistan then called for American withdrawal from the region. There is definitely something wrong with our foreign policy. We are still unsure what should we do.

But what is interesting here to note that even while being critical on the Pakistani state policy on Afghanistan, Warraich maintained his disagreements solely on security-policy grounds, showing how much influence the security perspective dominates in the Jang newspaper's editorial board rooms.

Sharing his personal opinion, Turk maintained that the lack of consistency in policy in regards to Afghanistan has adversely impacted on the Pak-Afghan relations.

Pakistan has always been confused about Afghanistan. The powers that decides everything in Pakistan are also confused whether we have to support them, be neutral or be against them. I find our foreign policy to meddle in internal matters of other countries counter-productive that has not given positive results to us. The US exit was supported by Pakistan but when they left our issues multi folded, because the people we considered our allies devised policies that were in their own interest not ours. To counter them, we sent back their refugees now it has stopped. The lack of consistency in our policy in our foreign policy especially in regards to Afghanistan. As a Muslim brother, our sympathies lies with them but then the relatively open border has economically hurt us because of dollar smuggling. We are not certain what our state policy would be in terms of Afghanistan because every new regime follows a new policy.

Another editor, Mazhar Abbas, also took the state's not the Afghan people's interest in giving his personal opinion on the issue, as he criticised Pakistan welcoming Taliban takeover due to populist sentiments, and expressed his concerns over the proximity with Afghan Taliban and TTP.

The Pakistani foreign policy went with the general public sentiments on ground that was friendly towards Taliban. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who we consider a terrorist group assisted the Afghan Taliban in their insurgency against the Americans, now today they are stationed, harbored in the Afghan safe havens. I think our foreign policy during the takeover could have been better.

Extending the same security-centric narrative, Zia ur Rehman maintained that welcoming Taliban was a bad foreign policy decision because the new Taliban government is not interested in addressing Pakistani grievances.

Pakistanis could not understand the new Taliban phenomena. Our leverage over Taliban has finished with them in power. Before, the world used to ask us to broker talks with them, now they are directly in contact with them. We are having a tense relationship with them since their takeover; they are not addressing our grievances on refugee crisis, TTP and trade issues.

While all four journalists maintained their criticism on the Pakistani state decision on the security grounds, without taking the rights of Afghan people into the perspective, Dr Tauseef was the closest in his criticism on the humanitarian grounds.

It is a disaster. An extension of the age-old disastrous foreign policy that has engulfed the region into violence. The Taliban takeover has not ended the war but has inflamed it further. The Pakistani state can say whatever on it through its official or unofficial spokesperson the reality remains that we have always bet on the wrong horses.

But despite maintaining a consensus that was critical on the Pakistani state policy, the view is not present in the published editorials. There remains a huge discrepancy on what was being said to the researcher by all the journalists and their work on the editorials, reflecting a case of structural censorship being observed by the Jang newspaper. At best, the editorials offered ‘advisory takes’ to the state of Pakistan on their Afghan policy but did not go beyond in expressing their dissent over the official policy.

Editors Warraich, Turk, Abbas and Zia have maintained that there was no pressure from the state quarters on editorials but despite that the nationalistic tilt by the newspaper courtesy populist sentiments on ground or perhaps grounds to align with the state narrative produced editorials which even were not reflection of the analysis of the editorial board but strangely no voices of dissent were raised against it.

On the whole, the interviews with the Jang editorial staffers revealed a pattern that it adopts a cautious approach, especially on issues that center on national security; the editorials take a hawkish nationalist stance critical of India as it is considered the politically correct and appropriate stance while internally acknowledging the complexities and challenges of such a stance. There exists diverse views among the current and former editorial board members on the ideological positioning of the Jang newspaper, but there exists a certain uniformity of views on the structured censorship present due to the media owner-state nexus, what is important here

to note that all the journalists in the interview expressed their reservations over the Pakistani foreign policy on Afghanistan - sans majorly on national security reasons - but despite that consensus, the said view does not reflect in the editorial pages - which clearly shows that there may not be coercive censorship at play on the issue but the journalists continue to censor dissenting thoughts on matters deemed sensitive by the Pakistani state. The results showcase a strong irony where the journalists admit that the state narrative influences their editorial judgments and the state policies in regards to Afghanistan have been far from protecting the interests of Pakistani people, however, they assume it as their duty to 'protect' the national interests as determined by the Pakistani state policymakers.

7 - Discussion

The study set out to explore two research questions: *Did the mainstream Pakistani Urdu newspaper "Jang" show a pro-Taliban bias in its editorials during the takeover of Kabul in 2021?* and *Did Jang's editorials follow the Pakistani state foreign policy on Afghanistan during the takeover of Kabul in 2021?*

The results show that the the Pakistan's most circulated newspaper pro-Taliban inclination is prominent in its editorial coverage of the Kabul takeover in 2021 in its visible alignment with the Pakistani state foreign policy. The coverage is a reflection of the Pakistani state's position in its consultations with the international community, including Western nations, regional powers, and the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC). This study vindicates Media Conformity Theory by showcasing that its not only applicable to the US press but also can be generalize in the Pakistani context as well. The theory appears to be valid till the fact that Jang newspaper indeed toed the official state policy line, however, if we go into the reasoning behind it which is offered in this research, it appears that the inclination towards the state narrative has a lot to do with the

nature of the state. The media narrative on Afghan Taliban matches the observation of (Siddiqa, 2017) who suggested that the Pakistani media operates in unison to propagate the state's narrative. However, the reasons of US media siding with a state narrative in its reporting on a foreign war appears to be completely different from a security state like Pakistan, which shares an acrimonious history with Afghanistan, and where policies are often made by unelected military officials than elected state representatives.

The controlled nature of the media in Pakistan in connection with Afghanistan is also observed in its reportage of the Afghan refugees within the country as well, The reportage alligns and promotes the agenda of the dominant powers-that-be in the country. (Ghufran, 2006; Siddiqa, 2017).

It is important to notice that the Jang news coverage also borderline touches the realms of propaganda. Taking the inspiration from the work of (Chomsky, N., & Herman, E, 1988), it was indeed noticed that the media ownership did play a very prominent role in the editorial judgment of Pakistan's biggest newspaper because of owner's potential financial interests, additionally, the fear of common enemy, which in this case is Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, also left little or no space for dissent from the official state narrative.

The quantitative analysis revealed the recurrence of certain themes, including pro-Pakistan, pro-Taliban, anti-US, anti-India, and anti-Ghani administration in the editorials that remained a pivotal diplomatic position of Pakistan on Afghan issues, while qualitative content analysis provided deeper insights into the editorial rationale of the Jang newspaper on the Taliban's takeover. The Jang editorials adopted a hawkish, hyper-nationalistic stance by looking at the Taliban takeover by viewing the events through a security-centric rather than people-centric lens. The security frame adopted by the Jang newspaper, which also dominates in the Pakistani power corridor, cherished the Taliban takeover primarily because it considered the former US-backed

Ghani administration as contrary to Pakistani interests due to their allegedly close diplomatic ties with India. The editorials assumed the charge of defending Pakistani national interests to the extent that it did not shy away from blaming India for terror attacks inside Afghanistan that were later claimed by ISIS. The editorials, however, did not retract its erroneous claims. The India-focused editorials welcomed the Taliban's takeover as a new beginning for the region while advocating for an internationally supported, inclusive government under the militant group while leaving no stone unturned to declare Pakistan as a responsible international state by reiterating its role in facilitating the safe evacuation of Western nationals.

The Jang newspaper's inclination towards the home state's policy is identical to the New York Times coverage during the month prior to the start of the 2003 war with Iraq found by (Melkote, S. R 2009) , as like the New York Times held a negative bias in their coverage especially toward Saddam Hussein, WMDs, the UN and France, Germany and Russia, the Jang newspaper following the state policy held their bias against India, and the US-backed former Karzai administration. The Jang newspaper took an anti-US stance in the entire episode of the takeover and considered the US exit as a "humiliation," but nothing substantive was written on Pakistan's alliance with the US throughout the last two decades as a non-NATO ally. The editorials called for increased engagement of Russia and China in the region against the backdrop of the US exit and continued diplomatic assistance to the Afghan people.

Following the Pakistani policy line, the Jang newspaper adopted a strong position against the Taliban following terror attacks inside Pakistan that were claimed by a terror group based inside Afghanistan. The bonhomie swiftly ended as it threw its weight behind the state of Pakistan in demanding Taliban authorities for decisive action against the terrorists. The reaction reflected the shared vision with the Pakistani state that illustrated a pragmatic acceptance of the Taliban contingent purely because of Pakistani security interests. The newspaper took hawkish stance

against the Taliban reflect the newspaper's tendency to take a hawkish stance than the official sources in times of the security challenges coming from the neighbouring country. The same tendency was found in the US media by (Zaller, J; Chiu, D, 1996) as they saw that the US media reporters appeared to be more hawkish than the state in times of a conflict that involved a communist foe.

While the qualitative and quantitative analysis research gave the perspective on the themes that the Jang newspaper focused on and the editorial content it provided on those subject areas, it was the interviews with the current and former editorial staffers of the newspaper that revealed a nuanced picture of the functioning of journalism in a security state like Pakistan. The editors had a consensus that the Jang newspaper's editorial policy during the takeover was independent as it faced no serious state pressure to steer one particular narrative; however, according to the journalists, it was heavily influenced by the structural desire to align itself with the state policy, broadly reflecting the publisher's interest.

The editorial staffers maintain a cautious approach to geopolitical issues linked to India and the USA as it is considered as one of the 'red lines' for the deep state, it is pertinent to mention here that the Jang editorial staffers also maintained reservations over the Pakistani state policy for Afghanistan. Broadly it was categorized as ineffective and misguided, but a sentiment that is intriguingly missing in the editorials published during the period studied. This tendency reflects the broader media environment in Pakistan that includes Jang newspaper as well which is structural censorship complimented with the media owners' desire to be in the good books of the state authorities. The structural censorship observed in Pakistan, especially in the context of the Afghan Taliban takeover, appears to be a voluntary choice with the ambition to associate the newspaper with the state's strategic interest in Afghanistan by avoiding any dissenting perspective that may contradict the official position. Overall, the argument of (Bennet and

Pfetsch, 2018) found its relevance in the study that elite traditional press support policymakers during important international events.

This acceptance of the security-centric policy virtually gave an editorial endorsement to the theory of strategic depth being practiced by the state of Pakistan, which calls for establishing Pakistani influence in Afghanistan to counter India. Hence, the biggest opinion-making news outlet in the country for its strategic interest put its weight behind the theory of strategic depth without any overt coercive measures from the state quarters. But the same is true on the other side of the border, the Hindu, a progressive newspaper from India, chose to align its coverage with the Indian government policies. It is noted by (Hussain, S., Jehangir, A. 2024) that the Indian media also remain closely aligned with the government and put its weight heavily behind the official sources during time of international crisis.

The interviews with the journalists have showcased one more important point that the continued practice of viewing Afghanistan through state security interest is not only a reflection of state policy but it has now a popular discourse in a broader constituency within Pakistan. The Jang editorials, hence, were not only a reflections of structured censorship that perpetuates the strategic depth narrative but also a popular discourse within Pakistani society. The complexity of these dynamics includes the complexity of these dynamics, where editorial decisions may stem from an imagined nationalistic vision that believed the US withdrawal was good for the region, and the incoming Taliban is the result of a just struggle.

One of the other key factors behind the dominance of the state narrative in the Jang newspaper's editorial department appears to be the lack of ethnic diversity in the newsroom. The five senior journalists that this researcher interviewed who made up the editorial department of the biggest newspaper hailed from the country's major urban centers, specifically Karachi and Lahore. The notable absence of the voices from the Pashtun heartland, which shares a border with

Afghanistan, in the editorial room may have adversely affected the coverage. The presence of journalists from regions most adversely affected by the war could potentially challenge the media-state bonhomie or at least provide a tampered-down alternate perspective to the dominant state narrative. The under-representation of Pashtun journalists, especially in journalistic pieces concerning Pashtun issues, further perpetuates the dominance of the state's narrative without sufficient scrutiny or counterbalance.

Taking Jang as a standpoint, it can be said with certainty that as like the study of (Hussain, S.; Jehangir, A., 2024) that found a pro-Taliban, heavily pro-state coverage of Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in Pakistan's English newspaper, Dawn, the Jang newspaper also threw its weight behind the state narrative in its editorials on a conflict occurring in a neighboring state but a nuanced argument that can be made here is the fact that in Pakistan the influence of media owner is more pronounced than journalists in shaping the editorials. In a security state like Pakistan, where the military has a dominating role, it can be observed that the nexus between media owners and the state shapes the narrative on critical issues including foreign conflict, with journalists playing the role of a second fiddle. The quantitative and qualitative analysis in this research showcased the journalistic positions being taken by a newspaper while the interviews with senior journalists revealed the dynamics in action of media owners calling the shots on editorial directions from behind the scenes. The Jang newspaper's editorial coverage of the Afghan Taliban takeover has given an example of how the power dynamics concentrated between the media owners and the state have monopolized the flow and framing of the information and analysis.

Following the state narrative, Jang's expression of support for the Taliban takeover was not due to its ideological affinity with the militant group but more because it aligned with Pakistan's

strategic interests centered on countering India in the region, influenced by the public opinion and catering to the demands of the media owner-state relations.

This academic research reveals the existing gap in the Pakistani news media industry for independent voices that are more focused on pro-people journalism than following the precedent of being pro-state especially on global issues. There is a palpable need for mainstream platforms that give preference to the rights and interests of the people over the strategic interests of the state. The mainstream legacy media in Pakistan appears to be in a consenting alignment with the state without considering it a professional dishonesty or an ethical dilemma.

8.0 - Limitations

This research focused exclusively on the editorial coverage of the Afghan Taliban takeover by the Jang newspaper, which, although a leading voice in Pakistani journalism, represents the editorial policy of only one news media outlet. This study, hence, warrants further research on how other mainstream Urdu newspapers in Pakistan cover international developments that are considered vital to the national interests of the country. There exists a gap in academic research on the editorial pathways of Pakistani Urdu journalism that serves millions of readers and viewers all over the world through print and digital platforms.

An ethnographic study of the workings of the Jang editorial department during such a critical event has the potential to provide more substantive insights, looking at the aspects related to the positioning of state authorities, the influence of media owners, and the journalists' line of thought. An important area for future research would be to examine the opinion pieces published in the Jang newspaper to assess whether they strictly followed the editorial stance or provided space for dissenting views on the state policies.

Conclusion

The Afghan Taliban takeover showcased a new chapter with potential impact beyond the region; hence, the relevance of this research carried significance for both academic and policy-making realms, particularly among the Western academicians and policymakers to understand the opinion formation in Pakistan, which continues to exert its influence for its strategic interests. This study aims to not only fill the research gap on the intersection between Pakistani media and state power but also to offer a nuanced understanding of the media operations in a quasi-democratic state security state which on paper is a democracy but in essence, the concentration of power is restricted to the security authorities rather than elected public officials.

On the research question

1. Did the mainstream Pakistani Urdu newspaper “Jang” show a pro-Taliban bias in its editorials during the takeover of Kabul in 2021?

The Jang newspaper editorials looked at the Afghan Taliban takeover through the prism of Pakistani national interests, finding itself with utmost similarity with the Pakistani state’s foreign policy statements on the issue. One of the prime grounds for the Jang editorials to showcase its Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021 was its reasoning that the Taliban’s return to power ended the Indian influence in Afghanistan, barring New Delhi from allegedly using Afghan soil to carry out terror strikes inside Pakistan. The editorials predominantly considered the Afghan Taliban takeover a strategic win for Islamabad while a humiliating diplomatic defeat for New Delhi.

The research shows that the blatant pro-Taliban bias was not present since the start of the

coverage of the developments; in fact, the newspaper initially maintained a neutral position, which gradually transitioned to strong support as the Taliban takeover appeared imminent complimented with the Pakistani state's support to the militant group. The supporting talking points were exactly taken from the Pakistani foreign policy statements, including condemnation of the previous US-backed Afghan regimes, urging support from the international community to extend their diplomatic support to the Afghan people. The rights of Afghan people were also mentioned in the editorials centering on respect for human rights, especially for minorities and women in the country and other marginalized groups, but were overshadowed by the above-mentioned subjects, reflecting the priorities of the editorials.

The newspaper editorials did not go contrary to the state foreign policy but also at times did not strictly follow the Pakistani foreign policy guidelines either, following the popular sentiments, the Jang newspaper celebrated the US departure from Afghanistan, welcomed the Taliban takeover as the success of a resistance group, and showed its massive tilt for Russia and China in the context of future development in Afghanistan. This was not a strict Pakistani foreign policy guideline but a per-dominant narrative that was present in the society.

But the pro-Taliban coverage swiftly ended after a series of terror strikes inside Pakistan as Islamabad blamed members of a terror organization based in Afghanistan to be behind it. The support turned into calls for strict action against the group, with the assertion for the respect of Pakistani sovereignty, hence making it once again clear that the blatant pro-Taliban tilt by the newspaper was purely due to its consideration for Pakistani strategic interests rather than ideological affinity with the militant group.

2. Did Jang's editorials follow the Pakistani state foreign policy on Afghanistan during the takeover of Kabul in 2021?

The divergence from the pro-Taliban editorial coverage based on the standing points

present in the Pakistani foreign policy statements to a rather strict laceration, if not hostile editorials, shows that the Jang editorials followed the state narrative. The newspaper, when it appeared, left no stone unturned to criticize the Taliban when it saw that the Pakistani interests were being compromised or ignored.

The Jang newspaper's support of the Taliban also stemmed from the grounds presented in the press conferences of the Pakistani Foreign Office, including the calls for continued diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan, which was, in reality, a de facto recognition of the new Taliban administration.

But at times, it is also noticed that the newspaper drifted a little far from the official Pakistani stance on the situation, not going contrary to it but following the popular sentiments by putting out hostile editorials against the US role in Afghanistan and calling for the expanded role of China and Russia in the region.

Interviews with the journalists behind the Jang editorials suggest that there exists a strong proximity between the media owner and the state on multiple issues, the discrepancy between the private views of the journalists reflects that there is a plausibility of structural censorship being observed in the biggest Pakistani Urdu news media outlet that ensures the newspaper follow the state's narrative.

This research contributes to understanding how major newspapers in security states like Pakistan steer complex geopolitical narratives while balancing national interests with journalistic integrity. The findings suggest that while Jang purports to uphold national interests, this often comes at the expense of editorial independence and critical journalistic practices.

Summary

Tato práce poskytuje komplexní analýzu redakčního zpravodajství předních pákistánských urdských novin Jang o nástupu afghánského Talibanu k moci v roce 2021. Prostřednictvím podrobného zkoumání úvodníků v novinách položených vedle prohlášení pákistánské zahraniční politiky výzkum objasňuje, jak převládající tvůrce veřejného mínění v rámci bezpečnostního státu interpretuje konflikty nebo politické otřesy v sousedních zemích. Provedením této analýzy studie obohacuje akademické diskuse o souhře mezi národními zájmy a médii a zdůrazňuje inherentní vztah mezi státem a mediálními subjekty. Kromě toho se tato práce snaží empiricky rozšířit teoretický rámec teorie konformity médií tím, že ji aplikuje v pákistánském kontextu k vyhodnocení její platnosti a důsledků. Toto úsilí nejen vrhá světlo na dynamiku vlivu médií podle státních direktiv, ale také zlepšuje naše chápání chování médií v geopoliticky citlivých prostředích.

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List of Appendices

Appendix no. 1: Interviews with the Jang editorial page staffers

Appendix 1: Interviews for the Thesis

1. Manzar Turk - Editor Geo.tv - Member Jang editorial board - Male

2. Sohail Warraich - Editor Jang Editorial - Male

3. Mazhar Abbas - Team Member - Jang Editorial - Male

4. Zia ur Rehman - Former Jang staffer - Male

5. Dr Tauseef - Former Jang staffer - Male

Appendix 2: Manzar Elahi Turk - Member Jang group editorial board - Editor Geo.tv

1. Where do you position Jang Newspaper in ideological spectrum?

Manzar: In my opinion it is a center-right paper. But it is important to note that the Jang group owns two newspaper: Jang News and The News. The latter is in English. You will find difference in the voice of both the newspapers. The Urdu medium newspaper in general in Pakistan is inclined towards conservatism but not totally though as in many of the cases the response of the newspaper is gauged by the situation. Because we have a strong reach all over Pakistan to even the segment of the society that are not strictly tolerant hence we have to be very cautious. We make decisions based on the social acceptance of the issues in hand - we can gradually or slowly educate them but we can not bombard them with information that they can not understand.

2. What factors are taken into consideration by the Jang editorial department on writing editorials linked with the foreign policy.

Manzar: Let's keep aside India in this equation. We totally toes the line of national interest there; and our national interest lies against what India does. We don't have to be cautious there because there is nothing there to be taken care of. There are no existing relations right now. But when it comes to the

diplomatic relationship with the United States of America, China, Iran and Afghanistan, there are some other factors that are taken into consideration. For Afghanistan, for instance, it is a neighbourly Muslim nation but the diplomatic engagement of the day - the state policy - with them are the most prominent factor that is taken into consideration in the editorials. The editorial team always have that consideration that our work should not deteriorate our diplomatic relations especially with China and the United States of America.

3. Was there any dissent in the editorial meetings when devising editorials centered on Afghan Taliban takeover

Manzar: The reactions were centered on the anti-American premise. The general society, including the editorial board, were looking at the Afghan question with a zero-sum approach. They said that the US presence was harmful for the region's interest, and because of them our situation deteriorated, the US- backed Afghan government was pro-India. The impression was that the anti-Pakistan insurgency are instigated by New Delhi with Afghanistan being a safe haven. The general editorial opinion had some sympathy for Taliban. If there was no pro-Taliban editorials, there were no anti-Taliban editorials either.

4. Can you tell us the general interest of the people on this issue?

Manzar: To be honest, the country is not interested in in depth coverage of Afghanistan so are the advertisers. The revenue and interest of the people play a very prominent role here. The Jang newspaper also sides with the state narrative on the issue because its major finances comes from the state advertisements, it does not want to risk its revenue by going critical against it”.

5. Did our good bilateral historical relations with Taliban also influence the editorial judgment?

Manzar: The India factor, our relations with Afghanistan after 9/11, the Afghan Jihad all were influencing factor; perhaps that is why the men on street and journalist in editorial room had a positive outlook towards Taliban.

6. Censorship is an elephant in the room in Pakistan. Are editorials written while taking into consideration the state’s narrative, or becoming cautious of not crossing the state’s red line.

Manzar: Censorship is a reality that we can not deny. The powers-that-be enforce censorship, but what we have seen that the editorial rooms now self- censor content especially in regards to Afghanistan without even the dictation. But I can say with confidence that I have not personally witnessed any directive during the takeover where

the state has told the media to portray Taliban as hero or villain. We covered Afghanistan with independence with no pressure. But that being said the majority saw Taliban with less skeptic way than the previous regime which we believed facilitated terror bombing inside Pakistan. The editorial board took the widely held opinion that while the American forces if not spread the terror inside Pakistan, did not stop it either. The editorials reflected the public view that maybe the region will be

peaceful if the US leaves Afghanistan, and it can improve our situation. Pakistani media has a lot of polarization, we have seen increased in it lately, hence there is a lot of danger of push back through negative campaigns because in our country it is not a difficult task to arrange mob attacks; the space for dissent is shrinking leading to violence. The media houses face disastrous reaction if it goes against the popular opinion perpetuated by the state. Jang press prefers to give dissenting opinion in subtlety, between the lines, but not in a hard-hitting manner that may warrant a negative reaction.

7. How as a journalist do you view personally the Pakistani foreign policy on the Afghan Taliban takeover.

Manzar: Pakistan has always been confused about Afghanistan. The powers that decides everything in Pakistan are also confused whether we have to support them, be neutral or be against them. I find our foreign policy to meddle in internal matters of other countries counter-productive that has not given positive results to us. The US exit was supported by Pakistan but when they left our issues multi folded, because the people we considered our allies devised policies that were in their own interest not ours. To counter them, we sent back their refugees now it has stopped. The lack of consistency in our

policy in our foreign policy especially in regards to Afghanistan. As a Muslim brother, our sympathies lies with them but then the relatively open border has economically hurt us because of dollar smuggling. We are not certain what our state policy would be in terms of Afghanistan because every new regime follows a new policy.

Appendix 3: Sohail Warraich - Editor Jang Editorial

1. Where do you position Jang Newspaper in ideological spectrum?

Sohail: In the past the Jang newspaper ideologically aligned towards right wing on ideological spectrum but under my editorship I believed today it is a paper with center-left ideology.

2. What factors are taken into consideration by the Jang editorial department on writing editorials linked with the foreign policy?

Sohail: The state foreign policy is the biggest factor that is taken into consideration before writing editorials especially on Afghanistan issue. We protect, promote and secure the national interest through our platform. But

that does not mean that we are never critical about the state's foreign policy, indeed we are, we try to give our advisory take on the state's policy but of course the biggest priority is the national interest on the issue.

3. Censorship is an elephant in the room in Pakistan. Are editorials written while taking into consideration the state's narrative, or becoming cautious of not crossing the state's redline.

Sohail: I can confirm that there was no pressure from any state quarters to dictate us on what to write and what not to write in the editorials. It was all our call. The censorship is of course a reality in Pakistan and we have been a victim of it but on this particular issue of Afghan Taliban takeover in 2021 there was no directive or guideline. But we are of course cautious.

4. Can you please elaborate what does it mean to be cautious as an editor?

Sohail: The Jang newspaper has the biggest share in the market, with the maximum reach, hence it makes it the most effective opinion-maker of the country. We are a strong player in the country. Our news, opinions, editorials, even cartoons have an impact on the country. While it makes us stand out from the rest, it is also true that the state looks at us through a very critical lens. It

may forgive and give leniency to the mistake of others but for us it is a different ball game. We have suffered state oppression in different times because of being in clash with the state narrative, this is why for the sake of the well being of the press and its employees, we understand that it is in our interest to always remain cautious when it comes on writing editorials centering on the state policies that it considers sensitive.

5. Was there any dissent in the editorial meetings when devising editorials centered on Afghan Taliban takeover

Sohail: I believe we reflected the general sentiment of the people and state of Pakistan in our editorials. I don't remember any dissent or debate within the editorial rooms.

6. How as a journalist do you view personally the Pakistani foreign policy on the Afghan Taliban takeover.

Sohail: In my opinion, Pakistani foreign policy on the Afghan Taliban takeover was wrong on my many accounts. Our biggest issue is our confusion on what should be our foreign policy for Afghanistan. The biggest lesson that we should learn from our ordeals is that we should not interfere in their internal matters and if they are interfering we should give them

a

proportionate response. We should not conspire against them neither let them conspire against us. We called them our brothers, celebrated their takeover - now they have become a problem, we first cheered for American presence in Afghanistan then called for American withdrawal from the region. There is definitely something wrong with our foreign policy. We are still unsure what should we do.

7. What is your personal opinion about Taliban as a group and its governance?

Sohail: I don't subscribe to their views and mode of governance. It is an armed group that is imposing their views through the barrel of gun.

Afghanistan today is not a free society. It does not have freedom of expression, it does not give freedom of choice neither freedom to practice religion of one's own choice.

Appendix 4: Mazhar Abbas - Team Member - Jang Editorial

1. Where do you position of Jang Newspaper in ideological spectrum?

Mazhar: The Jang newspaper can be placed center to the right on the ideological spectrum. I believe that it has a professional approach to give news. It does indeed give news. We overplay or underplay news, we may have some tilt, traditionally we have been a right wing paper but it is always our priority to not miss, ignore or hide news.

2. What factors are taken into consideration by the Jang editorial department on writing editorials linked with the foreign policy.

Mazhar: First of all we need to understand one thing and it is that unlike in English papers, editorials in Urdu newspapers are not powerful. It pretty much reflects Pakistan's state policy as it can be seen when the US forces left Afghanistan - and even if the editorials are critical on the state, they are pretty much diluted to the extent that the state does not consider it offensive.

The reason behind it is the fact that while a disclaimer can be given on opinion pages that this is author's personal opinion and the newspaper does not necessarily subscribe to his views, the editorial is newspaper's opinion. The newspaper owners including Jang owner is cautious about what is being printed because it can attract coercive state measures because of the reach and impact of the paper. The state is pretty sensitive there.

We have observed that generally people were celebrating US withdrawal than Taliban takeover, and the editorials generally took that public pleasing editorial line without any caveats.

3. Was there any dissent in the editorial meetings when devising editorials centered on Afghan Taliban takeover

Mazhar: We generally don't have any dissent or disagreement on such matters in the meeting editorial rooms. Even if there is any, we opt for writing advisory editorials which centers on suggesting the Pakistani state authorities to adopt which course of action rather than criticizing the state foreign policy.

4. How as a journalist do you view personally the Pakistani foreign policy on the Afghan Taliban takeover.

Mazhar: Of course it is a testing time for both the countries. It does not matter what one thinks of another but the Pakistani foreign policy went with the general public sentiments on ground that was friendly towards Taliban. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) who we consider a terrorist group assisted the Afghan Taliban in their insurgency against the Americans, now today they are stationed, harbored in the Afghan safe havens. I think our foreign policy

during the takeover could have been better.

Appendix 5: Zia ur Rehman - Team Member - Jang/The News

1. Where do you position Jang Newspaper in ideological spectrum?

Zia: Jang newspaper does not have any permanent ideological position. It varies according to situation. But having said that generally the Jang newspaper can be said that it is a right-wing paper but it accommodates liberal and leftist voices as well in the opinion section. If looks closely there are times when the newspaper is seen not supportive of Pakistan's policy on Taliban takeover in 2021 but in subtle, hidden words. I will disagree that it is a center-left paper because if it is, then the newspaper should be representing the same ideological position in every of the issue which it does not.

2. What factors are taken into consideration by the Jang editorial department on writing editorials linked with the foreign policy.

Zia: In relation to Afghanistan, there are indeed diverse voices within the editorial team. There is indeed division between pro and anti-Taliban voices but when it comes to the security perspective, the entire newspaper follows the narrative and policy guideline given by the security forces. The reason

being that there is no dichotomy or division between owner and editor, at the end of the day it is the owner who gives the final nod on what is going to be printed. The owners for the sake of their business interest obviously align with the state and that in reality is the Pakistan Army. However, the journalists within the editorial rooms sometimes try to give their independent opinion in context to Afghanistan but in a way that it does not alarm the authorities.

3. Censorship is an elephant in the room in Pakistan. Are editorials written while taking into consideration the state's narrative, or becoming cautious of not crossing the state's redline.

Zia: Rather than censorship, in the context of Afghanistan we see that there is self-censorship adopted by the journalists in view of not attracting any trouble with the state. People don't really want to touch those domains that are considered to bring trouble in the future. A big part of the blame lies with the opportunism of the media owners.

4. How as a journalist do you view personally the Pakistani foreign policy on the Afghan Taliban takeover.

Zia: Welcoming Taliban to power was a wrong foreign policy decision perhaps due to the fact that the Pakistanis could not understand the new Taliban phenomena. Our leverage over Taliban has finished with them in

power. Before, the world used to ask us to broker talks with them, now they are directly in contact with them. We are having a tense relationship with them since their takeover; they are not addressing our grievances on refugee crisis, TTP and trade issues.

Appendix 6: Dr Tauseef - Former Jang staffer

1. Where do you position Jang Newspaper in ideological spectrum?

Dr Tauseef: Jang Newspaper has historically been a right-wing newspaper that has always promoted fundamentalist approach. The newspaper's agenda has remained to protect the interest of the military from its news, editorials, and even cartoons. They portrayed military generals as hero and those against them as traitors, but it underwent a gradual change in 1983 when the family ownership was passed on to Mir Shakil ur Rehman. It tried to go towards the progressive-centrist approach but overall the mindset is still pretty right-wing. The religion-nationalism of the Pakistani state is established through this newspaper but there are some instances when the paper moved away from its ideological position for instance the famous Lawyers' Movement, where the lawyers all over Pakistan started a movement for restoration of former Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry who was sacked by the former military general President General Pervaiz Musharraf. Today, the Jang press with all its right-

wing tendencies still give space to the left and liberal voices. It is not as right wing as it was 20-30 years back.

2. What factors are taken into consideration by the Jang editorial department on writing editorials linked with the foreign policy.

Dr Tauseef: Pakistan's foreign policy is formed, executed and regulated by its deep state - Pakistan Army. The Jang newspaper follows the agenda of the deep state. The Urdu newspapers - most prominently Jang - are the prime source of opinion-making in the country. The Jang editorials, which are the stance of the newspaper, are weak and are written for the sake of writing, they don't give the reader any valuable opinion or critical thought but rather a sugarcoated version of the state's press release on issues.

3. Censorship is an elephant in the room in Pakistan. Are editorials written while taking into consideration the state's narrative, or becoming cautious of not crossing the state's redline.

Dr Tauseef: There is no clear cut coercive censorship by the state right now in Pakistan. It is not official or given any legal cover, but it happens. It happens through guidelines given by the army to the media owners. The intelligence

agencies and Jang newspaper work in tandem, a lot of the journalists from the Jang newspaper attend annual workshops held at the National Defence University. There are clear red lines when it comes to the foreign policy, and those red lines are put to protect the state interests laid out by the army. Let's say it is an institutionalized censorship practiced by the media including Jang newspaper to protect the interest of the media owner and the state.

4. Was there any dissent in the editorial meetings when devising editorials centered on Afghan Taliban takeover.

Dr Tauseef: Afghanistan is not big of an issue for the Pakistani journalist to express their dissent or disagreement from the official state policy. There was none. At best there were advisory editorials, calling for restraint on certain matters, but nothing more than that. It has also a lot to do with the financial interests as well. The monopoly of the urban readers for the Jang newspaper does not give a reason to pursue independent, critical journalism on the peripheries of the country including on developments linked to Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The Jang newspaper does not think that Afghanistan is worth the hill to die on by clashing with the Pakistan army. It is a risk without any financial dividend.

5. How as a journalist do you view personally the Pakistani foreign policy on the Afghan Taliban takeover.

Dr Tauseef: It is a disaster. An extension of the age-old disastrous foreign policy that has engulfed the region into violence. The Taliban takeover has not ended the war but has inflamed it further. The Pakistani state can say

whatever on it through its official or unofficial spokesperson the reality remains that we have always bet on the wrong horses.

