

## Pakistan through the Lens of Afghan Media

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### **Abstract**

*The fall of the Taliban regime marked the rise of the vocal and vibrant media sector in the country. Today, Afghanistan has dozens of TV channels, radio stations, dailies, weeklies and other periodicals catering almost every stratum of society in the country. The role of media in interstate ties cannot be overlooked because media has come to wield immense soft power to shape public opinion and national policy in the globalized world. Afghanistan has a paramount place in geostrategic, security and economic calculus of Pakistan and vice versa. However, there is no scholarly work on how Afghan media frames Pakistan in its national discourse and debate. Thus, it is important to content-analyze Afghanistan's media discourse on Pakistan from the theoretical perspective of agenda-setting theory. The pioneering research work attempts to survey media landscape in Afghanistan and provides in-depth analysis of the Afghan media's discourse about Pakistan-its dynamics, drivers and implications for the bilateral ties. The perennially strained Pak-Afghan ties enhance the importance of the evaluation of Afghanistan's media narrative on Pakistan and how it can act as a bridge-builder between the two countries.*

**Keywords:** Afghan Media, Discourse, Agenda Setting, Pak-Afghan Relations

### **Introduction**

A single image imprinted by mass media on the collective consciousness of a population, can influence the course of history (Bowdish, 1998-99, p. 32). Arguably, media can be termed as a defining feature of the modern world that has been transformed into a global village owing to unprecedented advancement in mass communication technologies which have, in turn, led to a phenomenal proliferation of media around the globe (Winseck & Jin, 2011,p.20). Considering the growing outreach and soft power of post-Taliban Afghan media, it is imperative to factor in the role of Afghan media vis-a-vis Pakistan where Afghanistan lies at the heart of national security of Pakistan. Thus, for the first time, this research study seeks to explore and analyze the

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Afghan media's discourse on Pakistan, its nature, factors and impacts. It is important to find out how Afghan media views and covers Pakistan. To that effect, the content analysis of Afghan media is an appropriate tool to evaluate the discourse on Pakistan. It is now a widely used research tool being used in fields like mass communication studies, political science, literature, psychology, cognitive science, rhetoric, sociology, ethnography, gender studies and many other fields of social sciences suggest the following uses of content analysis ((Hansen et al., 1998, p.155; Berelson, 1952, p. 71):

- a. To reveal focus, frequency, trends, intentions in communicative content of institutions, groups and individuals
- b. To draw inferences about the source of the message (sender), the content of the message and the audience (receiver).

As far as the theoretical perspective, Agenda-setting theory of mass communication has been applied herein. The theory stipulates that media has the power to shape and mould public perception through frequency and concentration of media coverage of a particular social reality (Perloff, 2018, p.122). The origin of agenda-setting theory can be traced back to the first chapter 'The World outside the Pictures in Our Heads' of Walter Lippmann's seminal work, *Public Opinion* (Lippmann, 1922, p. 29). According to Lippmann, there is a connection between mass media's construction and projection of reality and the public perception about reality. To put it differently, mass media can influence public opinion on a social phenomenon (Herman and Chomsky, 2010, p. 59).

Media in Afghanistan was revived and received an impetus with the fall of the repressive Taliban regime in 2001. Despite being largely donor-driven, today media in Afghanistan is characterized as being relatively free, dynamic and vibrant. The revival and growth in the Afghan media are hailed as one of the most spectacular success stories of Post-Taliban Afghanistan. Therefore, this paper attempts to examine the media landscape in Afghanistan to explore and evaluate the tone and tenor of the Afghan media's discourse on Pakistan to take the gauge of the element of objectivity in the Pakistan-related media discourse and the impact of the discourse on the Pak-Afghan ties. Research work is abundant in the form of books, research articles, research papers, newspaper articles and other statistical data on Pak-Afghan ties. Nonetheless, the available pool of knowledge is silent about the Afghan media's peculiar narrative on the bilateral ties in the wake of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Furthermore, there is no literature on how the newly born Afghan media reports on Pakistan; what are the drivers of the Afghan media coverage and how it shapes perceptions and policies of both the countries.

## **Historical Background**

*A nation that has no newspaper lacks the means to say anything about itself or others. Media is the translator of the feelings of the homeland, the tongue of the nation, the soul of civilization, and the foundation of humanity (Schinasi, 1979, p.19).*

Mahmud Tarzi is hailed as the father of Afghan journalism (Schinasi, 1979). He was an outstanding intellectual to bring the Afghan society in tune with modernity. He continues to remain an inspiration for Afghan journalists in the country. He espoused the cause for the emancipation of Afghan society from traditional dogma and outlook, striving to foster modern Afghan nationalism based on the country's cultural and historical heritage. To achieve the end, he laid the foundation of *Seraj ul-Akhbar* in 1911 (Farhadi, 1977, p.12). Moreover, journalism began to flourish under Amir Amanullah Khan. Both pro-government newspapers and independent newspapers like *Anees* came out. *Anees* carried new ideas but it had to be closed down after a short period. Afghanistan is a country that has witnessed a constant clash between tradition and modernity, center and periphery. Thus, in the face of stiff opposition from conservative forces, the King and Tarzi fled Afghanistan. Consequently, media freedom in Afghanistan received a setback. Media freedom returned under King Zahir Shah in 1960. The removal of Zahir Shah led to disruption in media freedom. Since then, the country has never enjoyed the uninterrupted period of free media.

### ***Disappearance of Afghan Media under Taliban Regime***

The Taliban period is characterized as the blackest period the Afghan media had to suffer. Media infrastructure and media freedom were one of the worst casualties of the civil war and the Taliban's regressive and repressive policies against media in the country. It was a media blackout in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. Cinemas, television and video recorders were destroyed; journalists and artists fled as Taliban perceived visual images and art as repugnant to Islam, so a punishable sin (BBC Policy Briefing, 2012, p.9). Taliban allowed only one radio and a newspaper to broadcast Taliban messages and religious content.

### ***Re-Appearance in the Post-Taliban Period***

The iron curtain on media was removed with the fall Taliban in 2001. The overthrow of the media-freedom-averse regime liberated the Afghan media from its darkest period. The Afghan media went into revival and developmental mode development under US-led international alliance in the country. Thus, the US and Western monetary and technical aid and assistance have led to the mushroom growth of the media in Afghanistan with relative freedom of expression. The exponential development of Afghan media is recognized and highlighted as a remarkable success story in the wake of the Taliban regime.

## The Afghan Media at a Glance

S. No	Media Type	Main Medium
1	<b>Electronic Media</b>	Television, Radio
2	<b>Print Media</b>	Newspaper and Periodicals
3	<b>Social Media</b>	Mobile Phones, Internet

## Main Categories of Media in Afghanistan

The Afghan media landscape is immensely diverse in terms of ownership, content and agenda. Other than news and information function of the media, airwaves have become a means to play out ethnic, political and sectarian rivalries (Richard, 2013, p.30). The emergence of ethnic, religious and political media has led to sectarian strife, ethnicization of politics and radicalization in the country. Thus, the fractured Afghan media mirrors the fractured society in the country.

S. No	Category	Salient Features
1	Mainstream Commercial Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Television and FM radio</li> <li>• Print Media</li> </ul>
2	State-controlled Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radio Television Afghanistan</li> <li>• Print Media</li> </ul>
3	Ethnic, Religious and Political Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radio, TV and newspapers</li> </ul>
4	Taliban Media/Militant Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mainly web-based updates</li> </ul>

## Electronic Media Landscape

S.No	TV Channels	Facts and Figures
1	Tolo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The most popular and private national TV channel owned by Moby group the most successful media group in Afghanistan</li> <li>• 45% share of a national audience</li> <li>• Dominance in urban areas especially in the north</li> <li>• Broadcasts in Dari and its sister channel Lemar has service in Pashto with 6 % audience.</li> <li>• Tolo has 24/7 news service</li> <li>• Pro-West and liberal values</li> </ul>
2	Ariana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The 2<sup>nd</sup> most popular commercial private TV channel launched by Ehsan Bayat in 2005</li> <li>• 19% national audience, broadcasts in Dari, Pashto. Uzbek and English</li> <li>• With greater reach in rural areas than Tolo</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culturally conservative and politically cautious</li> <li>• Watched more for entertainment than news</li> </ul>
3	(RTA) Radio Television Afghanistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The oldest TV channel owned and operated by the state</li> <li>• 2% national audience share</li> <li>• Restored in 2002 with international support</li> <li>• Among the top three tv channels but behind commercial TV channels i.e., Tolo And Ariana</li> </ul>
4	1TV or Yak TV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A private channel Launched in 2010 by Fahim Hashimy, an entrepreneur</li> <li>• 5% audience share</li> <li>• Offers a mix of entertainment, news and public interest programs</li> <li>• Supports international presence but with regard for Afghan culture.</li> <li>• Aims to Counter Warlord Influence</li> <li>• known for hard-hitting current affair programs</li> </ul>
5	Shamshad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A private channel launched in 2006 by Haji Fazel Karim Fazel</li> <li>• 2% national audience, mostly in the eastern region</li> <li>• Target audience is Pashto speaking population in southern and eastern Afghanistan</li> <li>• Maintains recording studios in Pakistan as well, engaging artists from both sides of Durand line</li> </ul>
6	Sharq TV Arzu TV Hewad TV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based in Jalalabad</li> <li>• Based in Balkh</li> <li>• Based in Kandahar</li> </ul>

### **Radio**

<b>S. No</b>	<b>Radio Station</b>	<b>Broadcaster</b>
1	RTA radio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State-owned and run by Radio Television Afghanistan</li> <li>• Superior reach in the rural areas</li> <li>• 18% Nationwide Share</li> </ul>
2	Arman Radio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Launched in 2002 by Moby's group</li> <li>• The market leader among the new commercial radio stations,</li> <li>• 8% audience share nationwide</li> <li>• Much higher audiences in Kabul and other cities</li> </ul>

3	Killid Radio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founded by Shahir Zahine,5%</li> <li>• Audience Share</li> </ul>
4	Radio Liberty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Known as Azadi</li> <li>• Audience share of 14%,</li> </ul>
5	BBC Radio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The international broadcaster</li> <li>• Audience share 7%</li> </ul>
6	VOA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Known as Ashna</li> <li>• The international broadcaster</li> <li>• 6% audience share</li> </ul>
7	Radio France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The French international broadcaster</li> </ul>
8	Deutsche Welle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The German international broadcaster</li> </ul>
9	Voice of Turkey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turkey-based</li> </ul>
10	Ghag Radio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A local radio based in Paktia</li> </ul>
11	Baharak Radio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A local radio based in Badakhshan</li> </ul>

### *Print Media Landscape*

S.No	Newspaper	Ownership
1	Sada-e-Azadi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ISAF-owned</li> <li>• Largest circulation</li> </ul>
2	Hewad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hewad ("Homeland")</li> <li>• Government-Sponsored Daily</li> </ul>
3	Weesa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pro-Government Daily</li> <li>• <u>Weesa ("Trust")</u></li> </ul>
4	Anis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anis ("Companion")</li> <li>• Kabul based</li> <li>• Government-Sponsored Daily</li> </ul>
5	Hasht-e-Sobh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private and secular daily</li> <li>• ("Daily 8am")</li> </ul>
6	Mandegar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private daily</li> <li>• Mandegar ("Lasting")</li> </ul>
7	Arman-e Melli	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>("National Aspiration")</u></li> <li>• Private Daily</li> </ul>
8	Hamyanay Economic Daily	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pashto Daily</li> <li>• Launched In 2013</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Published by Afghanistan Group of Newspapers</li> </ul>
9	Daily Cheragh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kabul based daily</li> </ul>
10	Eqtedaare Melli Weekly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kabul based</li> </ul>
11	Daily Afghanistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private</li> <li>• Pashto and Dari Daily</li> </ul>
12	Afghanistan Times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government –Funded</li> <li>• English Daily</li> <li>• Based in Kabul</li> <li>• launched in 2005</li> </ul>
13	Daily Outlook Afghanistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private English Daily</li> <li>• Based in Kabul</li> <li>• Launched in 2004</li> <li>• Published by Afghanistan Group of Newspapers</li> <li>• First-Ever Independent and Largest English Daily</li> <li>• Readership Among Locals and Foreigners</li> </ul>

### ***Social/Public Media***

The advances in telecommunication technologies like cell phones and the internet have revolutionized the media landscape around the world. The phenomenal proliferation of the above-mentioned technologies has diluted the information monopoly of traditional media around the world (Mahoney and Tang, 2017, p.27). The advances in communication have given birth to a new dynamic and ever-growing social media driven by cellular service and internet. It has emerged an alternative source of information (Hassan and Sutherland, 2017, p. 188).

Apart from being a source of social networking, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are expanding the frontiers of media around the globe. In Afghanistan, over 66% of populations have access to cellular service or mobile phones (Altai Consulting, 2010, p. 34). However, poverty and poor telecommunication infrastructure have constrained the growth in the sector. As far internet, its usage is limited to 9.4% due to high illiteracy rates and economic backwardness of the population (BBC News, 2019). The use of social media is limited to urban youth and political class.

### **The Nature of Afghan Media’s Narrative about Pakistan**

*It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined, but this juncture is imperfect; discourse can be not only an instrument or an effect of power but also a point of resistance. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also*

*undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it* (Spurr, 1993, p. 85).

In Pakistan, there is an official ban on the broadcast of the Afghan electronic media and the circulation of its print media. So the only option left for the research into the Afghan media's perspective on Pakistan, are the web-based sources like web portal of different the Afghan news agencies, e-versions of the Afghan English dailies and the websites of a various media-related organization.

Besides, most of the Afghan media is vernacular media with Dari and Pashto as the major language. Therefore, it is pertinent to point out that only English language media sources of Afghanistan have been content-analyzed due to language barrier faced by the author. For brevity, the major events, developments and incidents, have been selected, listed, and content analyzed to glean the nature of the discourse from the coverage of those events and incidents. The following list of the events and incidents and their coverage by the Afghan media provides a window into the nature, dynamics and impacts of the Pakistan-related narrative in the media of Afghanistan. The following textual content analysis of major Afghan media sources abundantly reveals framing, angling and subjectivity in the reportage on Pakistan and the related coverage:

#### **a. APTTA-Pakistan-Afghanistan Transit Trade Agreement**

*Report Excerpt: The transit trade agreement among Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan will not be inked unless Pakistan respects APTTA agreement. Pakistan three years ago which allows Afghan traders to take their goods to other countries through Pakistan but Islamabad has created problems to Afghan traders* (Bakhtar News, 2013).

#### **b. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Visit to Kabul**

*Report Excerpt: India's military cooperation to Afghanistan comes within the framework of the strategic cooperation agreement signed between the two countries during former Afghan president Hamid Karzai's rule. The Indian government has provided more than two billion dollars in aid to Afghanistan to help it in its reconstruction process, training and capacity building programs* (Tolo News, 2015).

#### **c. Haqqani Group**

*Report Excerpt: Afghan government often complained about Pakistan double games and dishonesty in Afghan-led peace process as well as in anti-terrorism war in the region. Dishonesty of Pakistan was one of the main factors behind increasing of tension between Kabul and Islamabad. The Haqqani network is believed to be based in the Pakistani lawless areas, running big training centers. The network is an active partner of the Taliban group, being known as the military wing of the group. But the network mostly operates independently.* (Afghanistan Times, 2016).

#### **d. Attack on Indian Consulate in Balkh**

*Report Excerpt: The assailants, who attempted to storm the Indian consulate in northern Balkh province, “had links with the Pakistani army,” (Pajhwok News, 2016)*

#### **e. Treatment of The Afghan Refugees**

*Report Excerpt: The Afghan refugees became subject to harassment besides they were forced to leave the country following a deadly attack on a school late in 2014 that left scores of people dead or wounded in Peshawar city of Pakistan. (Khaama News, 2017)*

#### **f. Pakistan is A Hostile Country**

*Report Excerpt: In fact, with providing shelter for Taliban leaders, Islamabad hosting the enemies of the people of Afghanistan and supporting militarily the military forces of Taliban and then dispatch them to the soil of Afghanistan to fight against the security forces of this country (The Kabul Times, 2018).*

#### **g. Vilification Campaign Against Pakistan**

*Report Excerpt: An anti-Pakistan demonstration was staged by the activists of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), a civic movement of the Pashtun community against Pakistani security establishment for its direct and indirect involvement in human rights abuses against the suppressed ethnic Pashtuns, and the country’s state sponsored terrorism on both sides of the unauthorized Durand Line, resulting in Pashtun genocide by the notorious security agencies of Pakistan, dominated by the northern population of Punjab province (The Kabul Times, 2018).*

#### **h. Nexus between Pakistan and Terror Groups**

*Report Excerpt: An alliance of terror groups is emerging in Afghanistan as US troops pull out of the war-torn country. Pakistan-based militant groups including Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, the Afghan Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan have come together to carry out raids on Indian assets (1TV, 2020).*

#### **i. Pakistan and Taliban**

*Report Excerpt: Using militant Islamists as strategic assets in the region became a formal strategy for Pakistan after losing its eastern wing in 1971. Once the Taliban emerged along the Af-Pak border in the 1990s, Pakistan formalized the group as a cohesive unit. (Ariana News, 2020).*

### **Major Themes of the Discourse**

Out of the content analysis, the following themes or inferences emerge about the Pakistan-centric discourse in the media. The themes are the key constituents of the distinct narrative about Pakistan.

### ***Afghanistan's Aggregate View of Pakistan***

The Afghan Media maintains that Pakistan views Afghanistan as its backyard rather than treating it as an independent, equal and respectable neighbor (Rashid, 2010, p.177). Islamabad's Afghan policy is intrusive and hegemonic (Afghanistan Times, 2020). Pakistan's policy planners continue to look at the country through the lens of strategic depth policy which is detrimental to the core interests of Afghanistan (Khaama Press, 2013).

### ***Pakistan is a Terror sponsor and Safe Haven***

The Afghan media presents Pakistan as a sort of strategic ally of the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network that is being used by Pakistan as her foreign policy instrument to secure and safeguard its interests in Afghanistan (Zada, 2020). Besides Pakistan's support to insurgents, the media believes that Pakistan is not the only breeding ground of terrorism but also a haven for terrorists challenging the Afghan state (Asmatyari, 2014). The Taliban and Haqqanis plot, plan and execute terrorist attacks from their sanctuaries in Pakistan where they can stay with state support and blessing. Therefore, Pakistan is not the well-wisher of the people of Afghanistan as it harbors and nourishes the enemies of Afghanistan (Pajhwok Afghan News, 2020). Nonetheless, Pakistan's role in the development of Afghanistan fails to catch the due media attention in Afghanistan (Bakhtar News, 2020).

### ***Pakistan's Security Establishment***

Afghan media has been strongly critical of the security establishment of Pakistan for its alleged role in creating instability in Afghanistan (Pajhwok, 2020). The Army is the most powerful institution of Pakistan where the military enjoys veto power on the core national security and foreign policy issues (Center for Joint Warfare Studies, 2010, p. 46). Media asserts that Pakistan's Afghan policy has been under the tight control of military leadership rather than civilian governments in Pakistan. Moreover, the premier intelligence agency of Pakistan ISI is seen as the mother of all evils in the country (RTA, 2020). It remains the most hated and criticized foreign intelligence agency in the country.

### ***Cross Border Violations***

The Afghan media tend to hype up the Pakistani forces alleged cross border incursions into the Afghan border areas and villages (Afghanistan Times, 2019). There is an allegation of missile, rockets and artillery shelling inside Afghan territory by Pakistan. They term it as a violation of the sovereignty of the country (Afghanistan Times, 2020). Pakistan is held responsible for initiating shelling and heavy firing at the Afghan border areas and the security forces of Afghanistan. The blame for cross border

violations and border clashes is hurled at Pakistan without mentioning the similar cross border violations by the Afghan forces ((Afghanistan Times, 2020).

### ***Transit Trade Issue***

Media suggests that Pakistan use its transit value as a blackmailing tactic against Afghanistan stifling its economic development and growth (The Kabul Times, 2019). Afghan trade through Pakistani territory faces many discriminatory trade barriers which hinder Afghanistan's exports and imports and eventually economic development of the war-torn country (Afghanistan Times, 2020).

### ***Issue of Afghan Refugees***

The influx of the refugees and their continued presence in Pakistan has left multiple far-reaching impacts on Pakistan's society, economy and politics. According to UNHCR, Pakistan continues to host 1.4 million registered Afghans (UNHCR, 2020). Since 2002, 4,378,058 Afghans from Pakistan have been repatriated under the largest voluntary repatriation operation in the world (Relief web, 2019). Despite these facts and figures, the Afghan media aggressively highlights the real and perceived sufferings and ill-treatment meted out to them in Pakistan (Ariana News, 2019).

### ***Benevolent India and Malevolent Pakistan***

The media in Afghanistan projects India as a reliable strategic partner and true friend cooperating and collaborating in the progress and prosperity of the war-ravaged country (Pant, 2014, p.89). Indian economic and diplomatic engagement in Afghanistan attracts much media appreciation and attention (Tolo News, 2020,). Whereas Pakistan is portrayed as being jealous of the deepening economic and military partnership between the two nations. The Afghan media has been instrumental in building up the very undisputed and unassailable soft image of India (Ariana News, 2017). Pakistan is also actively engaged in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, but Pakistan's role remains unacknowledged and unappreciated in the media of Afghanistan. Pakistan's projects include Liaquat Ali Khan Engineering University (Balkh), 400-bed Jinnah Hospital (Kabul), 200-bed hospital (Logar), Rehman Baba School and a hostel for 1,500 children (Kabul), Nishtar Kidney Hospital (Jalalabad) and the dual carriageway from Torkham to Jalalabad (Dawn ,2014). Recently, Pakistan has increased the development fund for Afghanistan from \$385 million to \$500m (Dawn, 2014).

### ***Discourse Dynamics and Drivers***

The following factors and actors have been found involved as the drivers of the discourse about Pakistan in the Afghan media.

### ***Historical Mistrust and Ill-Will***

Pakistan and Afghanistan are two neighbors with multiple socio-cultural, ethnic and linguistic and religious commonalities binding the nations despite long-standing inter-state ill-will and hostility (Rizvi, 2014, p.38). The long history of acrimonious relations dates back to the emergence of Pakistan in 1947 (Cohen, 2004, p.129).

### ***Donor Influence on the Discourse***

The Afghan media is also heavily dependent on donor funding from the US, Western countries and INGOs that have played a pivotal role in the development and growth of the Afghan media in the wake of the fall of the Taliban regime (BBC, 2020). The countries like US, UK, Iran, Turkey, Japan, Germany, Canada, Italy, India, European Commission and the United Nations have been providing financial aid and technical assistance in terms of equipment and training to the Afghan media (United States Institute of Peace, 2020, p.21). Pakistan's sour relations with some of the above-named donor countries like India makes it a favorite target of media censure in Afghanistan.

### ***Unrelenting Insurgency in Afghanistan***

The media asserts that Pakistan provides safe sanctuaries in addition to material support to Taliban and especially Haqqani network operating from Pakistan with alleged support from Pakistan's security establishment that is a most powerful player in Pakistan's power equation (Tolo News, 2014). The blame game created a trust deficit between the two countries faced with the monster of terrorism and insurgency (Tolo, 2014).

### ***Indian Factor***

Owing to India's generous aid and assistance for reconstruction of Afghanistan, India enjoys a very good soft image in public, policy and media circles. India is viewed as a reliable partner and great friend of the people of Afghanistan where it has played an important role in the development of media in Afghanistan in the post-Taliban period. India is the largest south Asian donor of Afghanistan.

### ***Lack of Journalistic Ethics***

Non-observance of media ethics leads to sensationalism, fabrication of facts, distortion, exaggeration, falsification and spread of disinformation. As Afghan media is nascent media so professionalism in media is not up to the mark (International Media Support, 2013). Despite the media boom in Afghanistan, media ethics fall short of the desirable universal media ethics. The Afghan Journalists lack training, required qualification, professionalism and motivation. The lack of media ethics is also responsible for media framing and bias towards Pakistan in Afghan media.

## **Way Forward**

On 29 February 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a landmark peace deal to bring curtain the down on the 18 years of conflict, at Doha Qatar (BBC, 2020). However, there is a scant appreciation for Pakistan's critical role as the facilitator as acknowledged by the US (Mazzetti and Khan, 2020). It is reflective of the fact that media bias towards Pakistan is well-entrenched, systematic, and fueled by multiple and multifarious factors. Pakistan and Afghanistan are critical to each other's national security, economic development, peace and prosperity. However, there has been persistent tension between the two countries for decades. Both countries pursue the policy of zero-sum confrontation and ill-will. The element of trust deficit has permeated and poisoned the relations between the two neighbors. To control the freedom of speech in the name of national security, both the countries have banned each other's media in respective countries depriving the audience of alternate views, news and multiplicity of opinion.

Arguably, the lack of the element of objectivity in the Afghan media's discourse about Pakistan is the outcome of the multiple factors in addition to a general disregard for media ethics in among the media quarters in Afghanistan. The strained ties are a formidable hurdle in unlocking the economic potential of both the countries occupying very vital geo-strategic location in the region victim to interstate dispute, poverty, hunger, illiteracy and lawlessness. The pursuit of durable peace between the two countries is not only crucial for the peoples of both countries but also the regional and global peace and stability. In this regard, the media can play the role of bridge builder by replacing the current unhealthy discourse with constructive and positive discourse needed to mobilize public opinion for the cultivation of cordial and friction-free ties. Considering the pivotal role of media as shaper and molder of public opinion and its impact on foreign policy-making, the objective and constructive tone and tenor of the Pakistan-specific Afghan media-driven discourse is of critical importance to foster much-needed cordial and good unneighborly Pak-Afghan bilateral relations indispensable to unlock the untapped potential of both the countries' unique geostrategic location, man and material resources.

## **Conclusion**

Pakistan and Afghanistan are united by geographical proximity, socio-cultural similarities, ethnic and religious commonalities. However, both the neighbors have been a prison to past bitterness and present problems. The nascent media in Afghanistan is celebrated as an exceptional success story of the post-Taliban Afghanistan under US-led security coalition forces. The discourse is characterized by the distinct features i.e.,

it is anti-Pakistan, it lacks objectivity, it is the effect not the cause of the inter-state tension, it is influenced by the major donors, it reinforces trust-deficit, it earns Pakistan unpopularity, it vitiates the enabling environment for the reset in ties, it tarnishes Pakistan's international image, it overlooks Pakistan's genuine interests and contributions to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, there is little inter-media contacts and collaboration, It is important to note that the Afghan media's discourse about Pakistan is not any self-propelled phenomenon. The negative narrative about Pakistan is unproductive and unhealthy doing no good to the Afghan interests let alone Pakistan. Rather than acting as a bridge-builder, the Afghan media has turned Pakistan an easy and handy scapegoat to divert blame for Afghanistan's issues to external factors rather than mobilizing the public and policy opinion for soul-searching and course-correction. In addition to commercial and institutional interests, media has to live up to its social responsibility that requires media to play its due role in the socio-economic development of society by truthfully and objectively informing public and policymakers. Thus, media needs to objectively report and express its views on Pakistan, highlighting its wrong policies and appreciating its legitimate interests and contributions to the socio-economic development of the country. The Afghan media still in its evolutionary period and needs to mature into a genuinely free, professional and responsible media contributing its due in creating goodwill to enable Afghanistan in cultivating cordial and peaceful ties with its neighbors whose cooperation and support is indispensable for much-needed peace and prosperity in the country ravaged by wars and violence.

In sum, the media in Afghanistan needs to review, revisit and reinvent its futile and counterproductive discourse about Pakistan. It needs to make the way for a healthy, constructive discourse based on objectivity and honesty. It is not only in the interests of Pakistan but also in Afghanistan and the region.

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