

## Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy; An Exploratory Study of Pakistan U.S. Relations

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### Abstract

*Media has played a vital role in shaping the bilateral relations between Pakistan and the U.S. The U.S. media has a global presence and it has been used as a tool of U.S. foreign policy to determine the asymmetric nature of bilateral relationships. Despite different approaches of Democrats and Republicans towards Pakistan in the last two administrations, the U.S. media has only kept the hard issue alive leaving less space for positive trends to promote good relations. In comparison, Pakistan's media influence is limited to domestic circles only and has not been able to produce tangible results in shaping the U.S. public opinion leading to a change of mindset in the U.S. policy circles. This paper will explore what circumstances have led to the U.S. ascendancy in the Pak-U.S. bilateral relations leaving limited scope for Pakistan to maneuver in the foreign policy domain by using national media as a foreign policy tool.*

**Keywords:** Public Opinion, Foreign Policy, Policy Circles, Fake News.

### Introduction

Media and Public opinion have become important features to shape the foreign policy of a state. Steve Smith, Amelia Hadfield and Timothy Dunne say, "the processes by which these opinions come to influence the government policy include direct elections, opinion polls, and the representation of public concern via media (Smith, Hadfield, & Dunne, 2016). The overall public opinion tends to have two kinds of effects on foreign policy: first, it can contain the maneuvers of a statesman on foreign policy and secondly it can shape the priorities of foreign policy makers. When we think of sub-groups of public opinion i.e. lobbies, special interest groups, civil society, class and caste system and to some extent the religious groups, they can have a significant impact on foreign policy. The presence of these groups is powerful because they are knowledgeable, highly motivated and they have the ability to mobilize the masses on a particular policy issue. An interest group that strongly favors a specific policy, but is unable to convince decision makers of the policy's merits, may try to have an indirect impact on decision making by mobilizing and shaping public opinion (Dür, 2019).

In the recent past, Silicon Valley, high tech companies, LGBTIQ and multinational corporations in the U.S. have strived hard to influence the choices of the U.S. policymakers. In the highly literate societies, the citizens come up with their own worldview. People are more free to choose what sources they are going to choose for the news. However, this freedom of choice of sources for news may be influenced at the time of an event. For example, the event of 9/11 and wall-to-wall news coverage propelled the American public to embarrass much aggressive foreign policy. Mass media in the USA play significant role in the process of foreign policy making through their contribution as observer, participants and catalysts.

The U.S. media keeps reporting for the American viewership about the national security threats. In 2003, many Americans supported the Iraq war but the entire public opinion went against the Iraq war in 2007 as the Americans were less enthusiastic about overseas issues pertaining to the U.S. foreign policy. The transformation of the medium of media from print and electronic media to social media has also transformed the role of media and public opinion in the foreign policy. According to a study, “Americans check their phone on average once every 12 minutes – burying their heads in their phones 80 times a day” (Smith, 2019). The trend of social media usage has been increasing in the U.S. as a new study by Reviews.org’s revealed in 2020 revealed that 66% of Americans check their phones 160 times every day (Prieger, 2020).

However, the use of social media in the U.S. has opened up the potential threats of adversaries i.e. Russia and China who have equal access to American social media users. In 2017, a report by the State Department of the U.S. revealed that “Russians had sent expertly tailored messages carrying malware to more than 10,000 Twitter users in the Defense Department (Calabresi, 2017). This preposition has made the policy makers to bring the security matrix as the hostile states can endanger the national discourse by feeding fake news and propaganda. In the process of media transformation, it is becoming difficult to separate good news from fake news. This transformation has also questioned the formation of public opinion. The social media feeds and growing role of artificial intelligence has made the foreign policy making process more vulnerable when looked through the prism of public opinion. In the age of information, the access of adversaries to the national media of a state through the internet raises the question on the authenticity of public opinion. The ongoing debate in the U.S. about the Russian and Chinese involvement in the U.S. elections is an important case study to unearth what role an adversary can play in the foreign policy choices of a state by constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing the public opinion through social media.

The phenomenon of social media has also brought in the question of state sovereignty into the mainstream debate of foreign policy. As Henry (1997) put forth their argument that “the Internet may, however, be a different type of information technology that possesses characteristics that make it more dangerous to sovereignty than prior revolutions in print and electronic communications. Information technology has made the secrecy very hard. Foreign policy making process is no more a backroom issue rather it is facing the vulnerability of being influenced and detected. Digital information is complex as it comes from all the directions and goes to all the directions.

At the same time, the global consensus on ‘right to have the internet’ has made it more difficult for the states to restrict and limit the access of internet and information. In 2016, the United Nations decided to add another point to its article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The section 32 of the article 19 of UDHR includes, “The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet (Howell, & West, 2016). that is a well throughout addition after lobbying by the international human rights organizations. The freedom of using the internet is directly proportional to the presence of more perspectives on a particular issue regardless of the severity of the perspectives for the national interests of the states.

### **U.S. Media as a tool of U.S. Foreign Policy**

Pak-U.S. relations change with the change of administration in the U.S. The pattern of Pak-U.S. relations at the time of Democrats and Republicans is different. It is a pertinent fact that there can be a little chance of radical change in the foreign policy of a country. Despite this preposition, U.S. foreign policy behavior has been oscillating between the foundational principles of U.S. history. The U.S. foreign policy revolves around the fundamentals of capitalism, democracy, freedom and equality. The U.S. policymakers think that “U.S. global interests would be advanced if the world contained more democracies (Lynn-Jones, 1998). However, there are narrowly defined meanings to these fundamentals when interpreted from the

perspectives of Democrats and Republicans. Both the political parties primarily attribute different meanings to the fundamentals of American foreign policy.

There is a symbiotic relationship between the U.S. foreign policy and U.S. media. The U.S. media is also divided in line with the political partisanship. The media outlets i.e. CNN, Washington Post, Foreign Policy Magazine etc have been found pro Democrats whereas the outlets i.e. Fox News and The Wall Street Journals have been found pro-Republicans. The main source of this difference is politics that is based on liberal (pro Democrat) and conservative (pro Republican) leaning respectively. This media bias When it comes to Pakistan, both the liberal and conservative media outlets choose controversial themes including terrorism, fundamentalism, civil-military relations, human rights and media freedom. The US media, like in many other countries, just picks up on the most sensational aspects of a region and runs with it for maximum attention, ignoring the many exciting things happening in Pakistan (Haider, 2016).

The only difference between liberal and conservative media outlets in the U.S. regarding their reporting on Pakistan is the number of news productions. A close examination of the U.S. media suggests that both liberal and conservative outlets are almost unanimous on the themes like terrorism, militancy, fundamentalism and war on terror. However, when it comes to human rights and media freedom, the liberal outlets produce more content whereas conservative outlets do not pay considerable attention to these topics. One reason behind the difference between the number of reports is that liberal media outlets i.e. CNN has a proper bureau office in Pakistan where Sophia Saifie is working as a bureau chief in Pakistan. On the other hand, the conservative outlet i.e. Fox News has not opened any bureau office in Pakistan and only relies on the reporting of Associated Press, which is an official agency of the U.S.

Going by the foundational principles of the U.S. foreign policy, there are two major prepositions; America as the beacon of liberty and America as a crusade. We can divide both the prepositions in line with the political bipartisanship wherein the Democrats tend to follow 'America as the beacon of liberty' whereas the Republicans tend to follow 'America as a crusade'. Despite the fact that both the slogans are the byproduct of a sense of 'white man's burden' both the Democrats and Republican parties are selective in their choice of foreign policy principles.

'America as the beacon of liberty' (Orgeta, 2011) means that the U.S. has got a divinely ordained responsibility to accommodate (inward approach) the pro freedom, liberty, democracy and human rights forces by bringing them to the U.S. 'America as a crusade' (Hegseth, 2020). means that America has a global responsibility (outward approach) of teaching the western values to the world. Both the Democrats and Republicans believe in these American ideals. However, when it comes to practice in the administration of respective parties, the conduct of U.S. foreign policy towards the world is differently oriented. Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to prioritize promoting democracy in other nations, promoting and defending human rights abroad, and helping improve living standards in developing nations (Pew, 2018).

## **Pakistan's National Media and Pakistan-U.S. Relations**

Media and public opinion in Pakistan, in terms of Pakistan's foreign policy, is a new phenomenon. The current media landscape and its role in influencing, if not shaping, the foreign policy of Pakistan starts with the subsequent events after 9/11. The mushroomed growth of electronic and multimedia platforms opened up the opportunities for the journalists with the background in the disciplines like international relations, conflict and conflict resolution, defense and strategic studies etc. The media's role becomes even more important in realising the sensitivity of some of the core issues Pakistan faces at both regional and international level (Chandio, 2019). At the same time, this transformational phase made the traditional journalists irrelevant in terms of influencing the foreign policy making processes. However, the overwhelming domestic centric content in Pakistani media has overshadowed the analysts with background in foreign policy analysis matters.

The corporate outlook in Pakistani media is another aspect when it comes to shaping the foreign policy issues. The news reporting on domestic TV channels, daily talk shows, editorials in the newspapers and opinion articles on mainstream Urdu and English press are predominantly filled with domestic content. At the same time, there are tabloids, weekly and monthly magazines that have been providing some space to the content pertaining to international relations, however, the larger portions of these outlets have been driven by local political issues.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and growing threats of terrorism especially after 2005, Pakistani media started reporting on the foreign policy issues that were directly relating to the domestic problems. One of the most triggering issues among them was war on terror. Pakistani media started reporting on drone attacks that were being carried out by the U.S. forces inside the Pakistani territory. In the beginning, the reporting on war on terror was in line with the state narrative. It was so because there was no proper war-zone reporting by the private media channels and most of the reporting was done after the feedback from the state organizations. With the passage of time, private media houses started monopolizing the news reporting that was detrimental not only for the U.S. interests but also for narrowly defined national interest of Pakistan.

There is another very interesting trend of media reporting and public opinion with reference to Pakistan-US alliance against war on terror. The overall reporting from 2002 to 2007 and the public opinion, as a byproduct of media reporting, was favorable for the alliance. The collaboration on WoT was beneficial for Pakistan as most of the U.S. sanctions were waved off. The spill-over effects of WoT inside Pakistan introduced a paradigm shift in the media reporting leading to a shift of public opinion. In Pakistan, the acts of US, like drone attacks in Pakistan territory, Raymond Davis issue and raid on OBL compound have seriously damaged the image of the super power in the eyes of the Pakistani media (Hussain, 2011). It is argued that this shift was not independent from the state policy rather the spill-over effect was seen as a potential threat to the state's sovereignty. Thus, the change in the Pakistani media reporting on foreign policy issues, especially on WoT and Pak-U.S. relations was the byproduct of a change of mindset within the policy circles of Pakistan.

The subsequent events of Raymond David Case, OBL incident, Salala Check post incident and Kerry Lugar bill brought both the U.S. and Pakistan as loggerhead. The changing pattern of relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan brought major changes in the Pakistani media. Pakistani media was divided into different groups. One group of media persons was out rightly aligned with the state narrative. The second group was aligned with the U.S. narrative. However, there was a third group that was aligned neither with the U.S. nor with the state of Pakistan; rather it had adopted an independent approach in its coverage of war on terror.

From 2006 onward, we can see a change of heart within the media persons leading to a changing public opinion. The insistent demand of the U.S. to "do more" appeared as the most controversial phrase leaving a lot of question marks on the alliance. This is also a critical juncture when the media started criticism of the Pak-U.S. alliance against WoT. The incident of Lal Masjid further triggered the debate on the alliance leaving little space for General Pervaiz Musharraf to justify Pakistan's position on the issue of WoT. The event of Lal Masjid increased the terrorist incidents afterward. A report by Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) highlighted a clear increase in the terrorist incidents after the Lal Masjid fiasco.

Media took the strain on Pak-U.S. relations as an opportunity to criticize General Pervaiz Musharraf. The editorial policies of the media houses played an important role in the shared belief among Pakistanis that they could effectively unite to oppose Musharraf's leadership (Bajwa, 2016). In this phase, the media can be seen as an independent entity in setting its editorial agenda and methods of reporting on foreign policy issues. The state and its machinery attempted to transform the media channels through legislation by introducing new laws under Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). One prime example of media curb was that President Musharraf persuaded the UAE media watchdog to shut down two satellite news channels of Pakistani origin: GEO and ARY (Peerzada, 2007). However, it was seen as a curb on the media and the matters got worse when the local journalistic bodies aligned themselves with the



international bodies of journalism. Since then, Pakistan has been portrayed as the worst place for journalism (IFJ, 2007).

The foreign exposure to the Pakistani media has emboldened the role of media houses in influencing the foreign policy matters. The change of regimes from military to civilian rulership since 2008 has further complicated the role of the media especially when it comes to foreign policy making processes. The democratization process in Pakistan and a constant strain in the civil military leadership since 2009 has increased the volume of media debates especially on Pak-U.S. relations. The democratic regimes of Pakistan People Party and Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) from 2008 to 2018 kept the foreign policy front weaker leaving the space for the national media in furthering its input, if not influence, in shaping the foreign policy of Pakistan.

The presence of foreign media in Pakistan is another very complex issue to be explored. The opening of bureau offices of foreign media, licensing to the foreign media houses and the beginning of freelancing in media in Pakistan have further complicated the issue of the role of media in foreign policy and public opinion. A large presence of foreign media journalists inside Pakistan and their connections with the local journalists implicates two things. One that the foreign media will report the other side of Pakistan, away from an image of a terror-infected country, and the second that the foreign media remains in search of negative side of Pakistan including the issues of war on terror, militancy, separatism, insurgency and nuclear terrorism.

The foreign media in Pakistan has two important aspects when it comes to Pak-U.S. relations. The U.S. views the presence of foreign media as a foreign policy tool to shape the public opinion in Pakistan. The U.S. embassy is running its own magazine “Khabar-o-Nazar” and assisting the Newsweek Pakistan through the international Newsweek Magazine (Dawn, 2018). The largest U.S. backed network of media in Pakistan is Voice of America and Associated Press with its bureaus in Pakistan. Besides, the major American news forums including New York Times, Washington Post CNN, Fox News and CBS have their bureaus in Pakistan.

On the other hand, Pakistan looks at the presence of foreign media as a problem to its reputation especially when it looked through the foreign policy prism. The constant transportation of content from Pakistan to the international community through the U.S. media has worsened the “image” problem of Pakistan. The U.S. journalists are viewed as a threat to the image of Pakistan. However, it leaves Pakistan with no choice but to face the critical reporting of foreign media. The legal provision, instead of defining the code of conduct, has become another point of criticism in Pakistan where many foreign journalists view the legal regime through the prism of ‘curb on media freedom’ (CPJ, 2019).

Foreign media, at the same time, is seen as a blessing in disguise. Since, Pakistan has a ‘soft power’ issue, the foreign media provides a greater but expensive opportunity to transport Pakistan’s soft image in the international community. When we use the term foreign media, it is mostly constructed as western media. However, the rise of non-western media in the global scene is a new phenomenon. The first two decades of the twenty-first century have seen a growing influence of Russian, Chinese and Turkish media. It has posed a challenge to the western media hegemony especially the ideals of the U.S. media set by the foreign policy makers of the U.S.

The rise of non-western media has provided Pakistan with an opportunity to ameliorate its image problem. As compared to the U.S. and western media, media in China, Russia and Turkey is seen more amenable and align with Pakistan’s foreign policy requirements of soft power projection. Pakistan and China have signed a formal agreement to enhance cooperation in the field of media . (APP, 2010). At the same time, it has created an opportunity for Pakistan’s foreign policy makers not to bother about what the western and the U.S. media is projecting about Pakistan. The public relationing processes in Pakistan is now more keen to counterbalance the “western propaganda” by engaging the non-western media for promotion of tourism, economic stability, positive social trends and political stability.

The changing trajectory of the role of media in foreign policy of Pakistan is not limited to image projection only. Rather the improvement of image in the non-western media has been possible after the improvement of bilateral relations with Russia, China and Turkey. Since the non-western media are state enterprises or controlled by the states, any bilateral improvement of relations is likely to usher a good image projection. However, in the case of the U.S. and western media, the improvement of bilateral relations may not improve the image of Pakistan. The notion of liberal media in the west and bipartisanship in the U.S. act independently regardless of improvement of bilateral relations.

During the Trump administration, the process of normalization of bilateral relations was well received in the U.S. media. The visit of PM Imran Khan to the U.S., meetings with President Donald Trump, address to the UN General Assembly and address to the Pakistani-American community was well projected in the U.S. media. Meanwhile, the Afghan Peace Process and military-to-military cooperation have been in the positive trends of the U.S. media. Despite the positive trends, the U.S. media simultaneously kept the negative trends alive especially the issue of human rights, women rights, minorities rights and most of all fundamentalism and terrorism.

### **Evaluating the U.S. Media in the Last 2 Administrations**

The modern diplomacy trends put a lot of significance to the role of media and public opinion in shaping the foreign policies of states. The size of the U.S. media and its global outreach has two important aspects. First, it has the capacity to shape the public opinion in the U.S. and secondly it has the capacity and outreach to shape the public opinion abroad. (Select USA). In case of Pakistan, the U.S. media not only shapes the opinion of the U.S. public about Pakistan but also has achieved the means to shape the public opinion in Pakistan - indirectly influencing the foreign policy circles. It is interesting to note that global viewership of the Voice of America had reached 278 millions in 47 languages (USAGM, 2020).

On the other hand, Pakistani media is a new phenomenon. It shapes the public opinion inside Pakistan but it does not have a global outreach, thus, its reporting does not make any impact on the U.S. public opinion and U.S. policy circles. Resultantly, Pakistan has to rely on the U.S. media to cultivate a pro-Pakistan public opinion in the U.S. for the desired results from the U.S. policy circles. During the visit of PM Imran Khan to the U.S. Pakistan hired a lobbying firm Holland & Knight to get the desired space in the U.S. media and in the policy circles of the U.S. This leads to another very intricate issue of financing. Content production in the U.S. media is expensive especially when it comes to influencing the policy circles. The lobbying process has been producing tangible outcomes but in patches as it has not succeeded in improving the overall perception about Pakistan (Qureshi, 2019).

A brief understanding of the U.S. foreign policy and difference of meanings to the foreign policy priorities between Democrats and Republicans make it a substantial case to understand the behavior of U.S. media. During the Obama Administration, the U.S. media i.e. CNN, NYT, WP, VOA etc was not only critical but also hostile towards Pakistan. Meanwhile, the conservative media outlets i.e. Fox News and Wall Street Journal were also found highly critical in their reporting about Pakistan. However, the U.S. media in the Trump Administration was divided in its hostility towards Pakistan. For example, the liberal media outlets i.e. CNN, WP etc were found negative but Fox News and Wall Street Journal were either not reporting or reporting mildly on Pakistan.

The bilateral relations during the Obama Administration were more hostile as compared to the Trump Administration. Despite the initial onslaught by President Donald Trump, Pakistan enjoyed comparatively good relations with the U.S. Pakistan's foreign policy during the Obama administration was reduced to five major issues i.e. drone attacks, Kerry-Lugar Bill, Raymond Davis case, Salala Incident and war on terror. However, bilateral relations during the Trump Administration remained limited to Afghan peace process, military aid and Kashmir.

During the Obama Administration, the impact of U.S. press on the regional media i.e. Middle Eastern and South Asian media was immense. More precisely, the reporting by the U.S. media was aligned with the hostile policies of regional countries including India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. According to a study of Pew Research Center, 3 percent of Pakistani respondents said they believed U.S. policies toward India and Pakistan favored India (Afzal, 2020). However, during the Trump Administration, despite some early alliance between the U.S. and Indian media content, U.S. media did not create any impact on the regional media.

## Conclusion

Foreign policy and diplomacy are two different parameters when viewed in the context of public opinion. The role of the media in foreign policy is increasing but the rise of social media in the media landscape has generated more problems than solutions for the foreign policy makers. The clout of U.S. media in Pak-U.S. bilateral relationship has a bigger space to operate whereas the Pakistani media has not been able to make a substantial effect on the U.S. policy circles. The large presence of the U.S. media in Pakistan and its reporting on bilateral relations have not only created a considerable impact on Pakistani media but also influenced the policy circles in Pakistan. Resultantly, the asymmetric relationship between Pakistan and the U.S. has further provided the edge to the U.S. in the media domain as well.

As the Pakistan U.S. relations have been mired in hard politics, there is a limited ground of soft imaging and positive trends in the bilateral relations. Pakistan has been a front line partner of the U.S. in the WOT and remained in the limelight of the U.S. media but this partnership and relevance has been counterproductive in terms of Pakistan's image in the U.S. Despite Pakistan's frontline role in the WOT and sacrifices, the U.S. media and public opinion has been suspicious of Pakistan's role. The constant framing of Pakistan as a state affected by violence, terrorism, political and economic stability are the byproducts of the media reporting in the U.S. This imaging of Pakistan has been reproduced in the media content of the U.S. and as a part of U.S. foreign policy technique to keep Pakistan in the bad image of the U.S. public.

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