

# The US Decision to Withdraw Its Forces from Afghanistan: Analyzing the Pakistani Media Approach in the Context of Policy Debate

Jamaluddin<sup>1</sup> and Painda Mand<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

*To investigate the connections between the government and media, this study examines how the Pakistani media has covered the policy issue of the U.S. forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan. The primary conclusions of the research validate the central tenets of the media-policy interaction model (Robinson, 2000, 2017). The Pakistani media primarily promoted "peace journalism," calling on the international community to devise plans for turning war-torn Afghanistan into a peaceful nation while also conveying the concerns of policymakers [the elite consensus, which is the premise of Bennett's indexing theory] regarding the policy issue of Afghanistan. The way Pakistan views Afghanistan in terms of its top policy priorities is reflected in the way that the Pakistani media framed the withdrawal of U.S. forces from a peace journalism perspective.*

**Keywords:** The U.S. withdrawal, Afghanistan, Taliban, Print Media, Policy uncertainty.

## Introduction

The way the U.S. has handled Afghanistan shows that there has not been a clear policy about the U.S. pulling its troops out of the country. The uncertainty surrounding Afghanistan's future among global political actors, especially the United States, from the Bonn conference on December 5, 2001, to the [recent] formal withdrawal of American forces, resulted in a situation that caught people's attention worldwide. It's interesting to note that the war in Afghanistan has been a major foreign policy issue for the superpower ever since the U.S. launched a military campaign against Al Qaeda and the Taliban government in 2001 in retaliation for the terrorist attacks of September 11 and September 11, 2001. The United States has lost about 2,400 soldiers in Afghanistan over the previous 18 years, and the expense of military operations has approached \$750 billion (Thomas, 2018). Different actors around the world have different perspectives on the U.S. military's withdrawal from Afghanistan. There were indications that the Taliban were toughening up, and the U.S. appeared to be in a hurry to reach a deal (Behuria et al., 2019). Before the events of 2018, the Taliban was permitted to open an office in Doha, Qatar (BBC, 2013) to facilitate communication with the United States and other international organizations. Nevertheless, the peace talks were subsequently called off because the Taliban claimed that the United States had broken its promises (Jibran, 2019).

Earlier to the ultimate departure, former President Donald Trump of the United States announced the withdrawal of half of the American forces from Afghanistan on December 21, 2018 (AFP, 2018). Simultaneously, he issued an order for the U.S. forces to pull out of Syria entirely. The Pakistani media interpreted this as an attempt to appease Trump's political base, characterizing the move as;

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<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Media and Communication Studies, University of Swat. Email: [jamaluddin@uswat.edu.pk](mailto:jamaluddin@uswat.edu.pk)

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, Media and Communication Studies, University of Swat.



*"the right decision was made for the wrong reason and executed incorrectly. The reality of Donald Trump's presidency may be stranger than fiction. Still, Mr Trump's latest sudden decision — to immediately withdraw all U.S. troops from Syria — may be a case of reverse wag the dog" (Dawn, 2018).*

On the other hand, U.S. President Joe Biden announced the ultimate withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan in his speech on July 8, 2021, and clarified that "our military mission in Afghanistan will conclude on August 31." However, he explained that they had trained approximately 300,000 active members of the Afghan National Security Force and had given them all the resources, training, and equipment needed to handle the situation in their nation. (Room, 2021). At this stage of the policy shift, it was contended that if America withdrew from Afghanistan, it would become less credible and face ongoing dangers from militants in Afghanistan. However, when the United States formally started its troops from Afghanistan, another unclear factor—the country's internal security—arose in these unclear policy circumstances. Thus, reiterating its stance, the United States said it will support the Afghan government in addressing the issue of the Taliban's reappearance by continuing airstrikes there until foreign forces withdraw (Amanda, 2021). In addition, the U.S. administration pushed Afghan leaders and the government to work together to create the future that the people of Afghanistan deserve and desire (Room, 2021). However, Pakistani media strongly linked the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan to instability that emerged due to the changing political landscape (Din & Latif, 2021). This article looks at the coverage of the Afghanistan issue by the Pakistani media about Pakistan's policies toward Afghanistan, its neighbor, where the Taliban took power following the U.S. withdrawal of its forces. According to Crisis Group (2022) Pakistan's foreign policy toward Afghanistan, particularly in light of the country's evolving political landscape, primarily promotes a narrative of peace in the post-withdrawal scenario;

*"Islamabad will probably not cut its close ties with the new rulers in Kabul. It should use those ties carefully, to nudge the Taliban toward compromises on governance, including on respect for basic rights and adherence to counter-terrorism commitments that might win them greater favor abroad and help ease Afghanistan's humanitarian tragedy".*

### **Objectives of the Study**

- (1) To examine the Pakistani media coverage of the withdrawal of U.S. forces in the context of policy certainty.
- (2) To evaluate the Pakistani media approach towards international communities and the peace process at the time of policy shift in the war-affected Afghanistan

### **Literature Review**

The government's position determines how the media covers policy matters, mainly when violence occurs. When there is uncertainty about the issues, the media can provide critical coverage (Robinson, 2017); when there is elite consensus and policy certainty, the press can give supportive coverage (Bennett, 2010; Robinson, 2000). Many academics in the area of political communication, such as Althaus (2003), Entman, (2003), and Lawrence (2023), are interested in researching the relationship between the media and the government. They primarily examined policy issues when examining the current relationship status between the government and the media. There is debate among academics and researchers about whether or not the majority of the literature in the field of political communication assesses the

relationships between the media and governments of developed. In contrast, the media is said to consider the government's policy guidelines when reporting on any policy issue. Thus, scholars like Hallin (1986) and Robinson (2000, 2017), who concentrate on the Western democratic system, assess the media's function during "humanitarian crises" and intrusions, particularly the U.S. invasion in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America (Vietnam).

Conversely, the media will always adhere to government policy directives, which is untrue, though, as press freedom and the standards of journalism encourage the media to present opposing viewpoints as well. The press primarily uses disagreements among elites on policy issues as an opportunity to critically frame specific foreign policy matters (Bennett, 2010). Viewing the two perspectives on the role of the media in shaping policy issues, the scholarly work of various researchers—including Herman & Chomsky, 2010; Entman, 1991; Bennett & Lawrence, 1995; Hallin, 1986; Robinson, 2017; Zollmann, 2015—is dominated by both conventionality and criticism. Within this framework, the writings of Hallin (1986), Robinson (2017), Herman and Chomsky (2010), and Bennett (2010) challenge media independence while also offering guidance for the media to fulfill its role autonomously.

According to the theoretical framework of policy certainty, certain studies suggest that the American media takes an uncertain stance regarding foreign policy, covering the issues based on their country's current political climate (Althaus et al., 1996; Kaufmann, 2004; Kellner, 2007). Some other studies found that the media, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, typically followed governments' foreign policy directives during international crises (Bennett, 2010; Carpenter, 1995; Reese & Lewis, 2009) as in the case of Afghanistan, the U.S. media was rife with warlike frames and themes like "America Strikes Back" and "America's New War," which were intended to defend the Bush administration's military policies. Unlike the above studies, which evaluate the media relations with their respective governments based on conflict/war outside their home country, Din and Hussain (2021) evaluated the Pakistani media coverage based on two arguments, i.e., "*issue at home*" and "*issue at a distance*." In contrast, the issue, at a distance, predominately shapes independent media coverage, as in the case of Western media that usually cover conflict/ war from spaces. Hence, unlike the U.S., Pakistani media reported the Afghanistan crisis as '*the issue at home*' as it had plausible effects on Pakistan's policy. This study aims to investigate the Afghanistan issue in light of the withdrawal of U.S. forces and its possible impact on the relationships between the Pakistani government and the media.

## Theoretical Framework

Numerous research studies have theoretically contributed to the range of scholarship on media-government relationships in the context of policy issues, such as Aday (2010), Lawrence (2023) and Livingston and Eachus (1995) these studies primarily examined the state of relationships between government and media during humanitarian crises and conflicts, applying and presenting various theoretical perspectives (Din & Hussain, 2021). This article theoretically investigates how the media covered the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan within the frameworks of the policy-media interaction model (Robinson, 2000, 2017) and indexing theory (Bennett, 2010). The latter theoretical perspective contends that while policy uncertainty prompts critical coverage of conflict, humanitarian crises, or any other policy issue, policy certainty shapes supportive coverage in the media. The former theoretical perspective supports media coverage of government on policy issues whenever there is elite consensus. The study at hand is primarily concerned with how the media has framed the policy issue of the U.S. withdrawal from its relationship with the government of Pakistan, which is strategically adjacent to Afghanistan.

## Research Methodology

To analyze the Pakistani government's response to the shifting political landscape in Afghanistan, the researchers conducted content analyses of four carefully selected Pakistani newspapers: *The News*, *Dawn*, *Nawa-e-Waqt*, and *Express*. The researchers focused primarily on policy issues that impact the relationship between the government and media, as discussed in academic works on political communications such as Robinson (2000) and Bennett (2010). The study's time frame spans from September 01 to October 31, 2021. In contrast, news stories about the U.S. withdrawal were collected from the selected newspapers' front, back, and international pages. The researchers gathered a total of 375 news articles that were published on the subject of the U.S. and its allies' withdrawal from Afghanistan while using the census sampling technique. After carefully examining the media coverage, the researchers identified four representative frames—peacebuilding, the international community's role, insurgency/violence, and instability—to explore the relationship between the Pakistani government and the media in the context of the U.S. withdrawal. According to Gamson and Modigliani (1989) frames help researchers grasp the main idea and a distinct picture of the subject. They [frames] also make it easier to categorize media coverage into three categories: supportive, neutral, and oppositional (Entman, 2007), which helps analyze the media inclination toward a specific slant category.

Despite this, the news coverage is also categorized according to the "dateline" of the stories—that is, if the reports are from Kabul, Washington, Islamabad, New York, or some other city—while stories whose dateline is not from any of the cities above are coded as "other." The datelines indicate that news reports from Islamabad purportedly emphasized the policy stance of the Pakistani government. A coding sheet was created to assist researchers in analyzing media coverage and, from there, determining media-Pakistani government relations based on a range of U.S. withdrawals. The researchers educated two independent MPhil-qualified coders and assigned them the task of coding fifty news stories on the selected issue, with one of the co-authors coding the same stories to gauge the degree of agreement on the coding process. Two attempts were made, whereas the final one was executed following adequate training of independent coders regarding coding schema. After testing the co-author and independent coders' inter-coder reliability [Cronbach's alpha] for the slant categories, it was calculated  $\alpha = 0.91$ .

## Policy Certainty and Uncertainty- Conceptual Definitions

When the government has well-defined policies, in such a situation, the government sets the agenda, and "the media coverage is unlikely to influence policy" (Robinson, 2000). Conversely, political ambiguity brought about by a lack of a clear position on policy matters "leads to critical coverage that may exert some influence on the policymaking process" (Robinson, 2017).

### a. Operational Definition of Policy Certainty

A narrative is considered to be of policy certainty if:

- The government has a well-defined policy on the issue of U.S. forces withdrawal.
- The government promptly responds to other parties.
- It [government] carefully considers shifting political conditions when designing its economic, political, and security policies.

### b. Operational Definition of Policy Uncertainty

A story is considered to be about policy uncertainty if:

- Absence of a clear policy position or uncertainty in the government's attitude.
- The government has no political backing.

- Putting off answering other parties to the policy dispute.

### Discussion and Analysis

The relationships between the Pakistani government and media are evaluated in this study, which centers on the issue of Afghanistan in the context of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region after nearly 20 years of military operations. The researchers have examined these relationships in the context of policy matters, as the unwelcome development of militants returning to restive Afghanistan may have an impact on Pakistan's foreign policy toward its neighbor, Afghanistan. The study's objectives guided the discussion in the study's subsequent paragraphs, followed by recommendations for future research in this area.

**Table 1: Coverage of the Afghanistan crisis in Pakistani newspapers based on the certainty of policy**

Sources	Policy Certainty	Policy Uncertainty	Total
Dawn	74	52	126
The News	51	38	89
Nawa-e- Waqat	59	36	95
Express	36	29	65
Total	220(59%)	155 (41%)	375(100%)

$X^2(1, N=375) = 11.27, p=0.01$

Table 1 above illustrates how policy certainty affects media coverage of Afghanistan in Pakistani newspapers, particularly with regard to the withdrawal of US forces. Out of the 375 news stories published in all four chosen newspapers, 59% fall into the category of policy certainty, while the remaining 41% reflect policy uncertainty in the Pakistani government's policy line on the issue of Afghanistan. These findings suggest that the selected newspapers are more inclined towards the government's policy line. On the other hand, the individual analysis of the selected newspapers on Afghanistan problem reveals that daily Dawn leads in both policy certainty and uncertainty. Comparatively speaking, the other newspapers also presented the Afghan issue in the framework of clear policy. According to statistical findings about the media and their approach to the Afghan crisis in the context of policy certainty ( $X^2(1, N = 375) = 11.27, p = 0.00$ ) reflect a significant correlation between media coverage and the issue of policy certainty.

**Table 2: The nature of media coverage of the issue of Afghanistan after the US forces' withdrawal in selected newspapers**

Sources	Supportive	Neutral	Oppositional	Total (N%)
Dawn	60	33	33	126
The News	47	24	18	89
Nawa-e-Waqat	62	27	06	95
Express	38	19	08	65
Total	207(55%)	103(28%)	65(17%)	375(100%)

$X^2(2, N=375) = 86.46, p=0.00$

Table 2 above demonstrates the coverage of the Afghan issue by Pakistani media, where the issue of Talibanization surfaced following the US withdrawal from the war-torn nation. The results demonstrate that Pakistani media presented the issue more favorably in relation to the government's policy stance, as evidenced by the overall supportive coverage (55%) of the 375



news stories published in all four selected newspapers. This is followed by neutral coverage (28%) and critical coverage (17%). The statistical findings relating to the nature of media coverage on the issue of Afghanistan, i.e.,  $X^2(2, N = 375) = 86.46, p = 0.00$ , indicate that there are significant differences in the approach of the media towards the issue of Afghanistan.

**Table 3 The way that selected newspapers have covered the Afghanistan issue in relation to policy certainty and uncertainty**

Issue of Certainty	Supportive	Neutral	Oppositional	Total (N%)
Policy Certainty	192(93%)	21(20%)	07(11%)	220 (59%)
Policy Uncertainty	15(07%)	82(80%)	58(89%)	155 (41%)
Total	207(100%)	103(28%)	65(100%)	375(100%)

$$X^2(2, N=375) = 222.92, p=0.00$$

The findings indicate that policy certainty dominates the supportive category by 93%, while policy uncertainty primarily shapes the neutral and oppositional categories by 80% and 89%, respectively. The above table No. 3 depicts the media treatment based on issues of certainty [policy certainty and policy uncertainty]. According to Robinson's (2000–17) scholarly work on the policy–media interaction model, which suggests that supportive coverage would be shaped in cases of policy certainty and oppositional or critical coverage would be triggered when there is policy uncertainty in the government's policy line, these findings clearly show that the issue of certainty has the potential to affect how news coverage is determined. According to the statistical results, there is a significant correlation between media coverage and the issue of policy certainty ( $X^2(2, N = 375) = 222.92, p = 0.00$ ). These findings also relate to the effects of policy certainty on the nature of media coverage on the Afghan crisis. The aforementioned results, which are displayed in tables 1 through 3, highlight how Pakistani media has covered the Afghan issue in relation to policy certainty. They show that policy certainty has a significant impact on how media covers policy issues; in Pakistan's case, policy certainty had a major influence on media coverage of the US forces' withdrawal, resulting in more positive coverage.

**Table 4 Places/ dateline wise Media coverage of the issue of Afghanistan in selected newspapers**

Sources	Kabul	Washington	Islamabad	New York	Other	Total (N%)
Dawn	45	15	32	12	22	126
The News	19	09	31	08	22	89
Nawai Waqat	21	05	55	05	09	95
Express	16	02	37	02	08	65
Total	101(27%)	31(08%)	155(42%)	27(07%)	61(16%)	375(100%)

$$X^2(4, N=375) = 153.49, p=0.00$$

The locations, or datelines, from which the majority of the news about the Afghanistan crisis has been sourced are displayed in table No. 4 above. The results show that the dateline of Islamabad shaped (42%) as the primary source of news stories in all four of the chosen newspapers about the issue of the withdrawal of US forces. Whereas the media emphasized Pakistan's position on the matter, particularly on the basis of peace and seeking the role of the international community. On other hand, 25% of the selected press reported the news stories under the dateline "Kabul," which put the issue more in the perspective of insecurity and

violence. The chosen newspapers covered the remaining two datelines, namely Washington and New York, at a rate of 8% and 7%, respectively. However, 16% of the total news coverage (375) came from stories published in other parts of the world, which this study referred to as "other." According to the statistical results,  $X^2(4, N = 375) = 153.49, p = 0.00$ , there is a significant correlation between datelines and media sources- the selected newspapers.

**Table 5 The way that Pakistani media has covered the Afghanistan issue within the framework of peace journalism**

Sources	Peace building	Role of International Community	Insurgency/Violence	Instability	Total (N%)
Dawn	30	52	12	32	126
The News	31	31	11	16	89
NawaiWaqat	32	38	8	17	95
Express	15	28	8	14	65
Total	108(29%)	149(40%)	39 (10%)	79(21%)	375(100)

$X^2 (3, N=375) = 69.02, p=0.00$

The aforementioned table No. 5 demonstrates how the chosen newspapers appear to be more inclined to frames that reflect the perspective of peace journalism and the policy stance of the Pakistani government in this study, such as peacebuilding and the role of international communities. Peacebuilding initiatives accounted for 29% of the 375 news stories in total, with the role of international communities accounting for 40% of the stories. In contrast, all four of the selected newspapers framed 10% and 21% of their news stories heavily in terms of insurgency and instability, respectively. The statistical results concerning the media's approach to peace journalism, specifically  $X^2(3, N = 375) = 69.02, p = 0.00$ , suggest a noteworthy correlation between the type of coverage and peace journalism. The above table presents the overall findings, which, when interpreted in the context of the discussion that follows, show that Pakistani media, in reporting the Afghanistan crisis, was strongly pro-peace and encouraged the international community to contribute to a peaceful Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

This article examines how the Pakistani media covered the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. The issue of withdrawal affected both Afghanistan and US foreign policy, and it may also have an impact on Pakistan's stance toward both its neighbor, Afghanistan, and its strategically significant ally, the US. The research, which is theoretically carried out in light of substantial claims from Bennett's (2010) indexing theory and the media-policy interaction model (Robinson, 2000), revealed that news coverage of policy-related issues, such as the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, is influenced by policy certainty. The study's conclusions show that the selected newspapers gave more prominent space to the Pakistani stance when reporting on the policy issue. Thus, Pakistani media was found to be much more interested in adopting the government's perspective, which resulted in more news in the context of peace journalism, particularly during the period of shifting political circles in Afghanistan. These findings are in line with Pakistan's policy toward its neighbor, Afghanistan, which is primarily focused on peace initiatives.

## Suggestions for Future Studies

The current study makes some of the following recommendations for scholars and journalists:

1. The media should prioritize peace journalism-related content during a conflict over regular news coverage.
2. The media should prioritize objective reporting over complicated or breaking news reporting, particularly during conflict.
3. Additionally, the media ought to provide more specific coverage of the incidents that have resulted in or may result in fatalities.
4. Since the scope of this study is restricted to the content analysis of four particular Pakistani newspapers, future researchers may undertake comparison studies.
5. Analyzing the cross-national media approach toward conflict or policy issues would be an excellent contribution to political communication.

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