DON'T LAUGH WHEN YOUR NEIGHBOR’S OVEN IS ON FIRE: COVERAGE OF AFGHAN CONFLICT IN THE ELITE PRESS OF CHINA, INDIA, IRAN, AND PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The study critically examines coverage of Afghan conflict and the relationship between elite press and the governments of the neighboring countries of Afghanistan. We analyzed how media framed Taliban in the context of foreign policies of the neighboring countries of Afghanistan having important stakes in the conflict-ravaged country. The study focused on the stated foreign policy positions of China, India, Iran, and Pakistan on the conflict in Afghanistan and the approach used by the elite press of these countries in responding to the initiatives of foreign office. We employed content analysis to analyze editorials of the elite English-language newspapers to investigate whether the relationship between press and media is elite-driven, adversarial, or independent. We found that the elite English newspapers followed the official foreign policy of their countries while covering war in Afghanistan and Taliban at a time when the entire region was in the grip of terror attacks.

Keywords: framing; Taliban; partisan media; media-foreign policy relationship; qualitative content analysis; elite press.

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan has been widely reported in the international media. From the rise of Taliban in early 1990s to the 9/11 terror attacks and subsequent overthrow of the Taliban government by the NATO-led allied forces, political turmoil and violent conflict in Afghanistan has made headlines in the international newspapers. International media in general and regional media in particular focus on conflict in

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Afghanistan as a news value and consider it a “sexy” instrument to enhance ratings and readership (Allen & Seaton, 1999; Lee & Maslog, 2005; Rasul & McDowell, 2015). Likewise, the interest of news media organizations in the coverage of violent conflict transfigures news frames as one of the highly significant aspects of the conflict reporting, which helps viewers/readers construct meaning from the coverage in addition to influencing decisions of the policymakers on important foreign policy issues (McLeod & Detenber, 1999). To understand the relationship between media framing of conflict in Afghanistan and meaning-making by the readers, this study scrutinizes not only the role of the media frames as discourse-producing mediators but also analyzes the complex and symbiotic relationship between the policymakers and media.

An and Gower (2009) rightly point out that media have become an important sociopolitical institution in all societies and enjoy the power to influence thinking patterns at governmental and individual levels through their framing of events, especially in crisis situations. However, media framing is not a completely independent process, as media are directly linked to the social and political institutions and “construct” social realities according to norms, mores, values, and laws of a country where they are stationed (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Zelizer & Allan, 2011). The news media cultivate realities and construct meaning for audience or readers and help them assign meanings to the world around them (Gerbner et al., 2002). In the process of covering conflict, however, the media transmit something more than plain information, as they are routinely used as a device to portray a nation’s external relations with other nation-states, (Herman & Chomsky, 2010; McChesney, 2008; McQuail, 2005).

Many scholars (Baum, 2005; Bennett & Paletz, 1994; Cohen, 2015; Robinson, 1999; Soroka, 2003) question if media, especially newspapers and television, are capable of reporting on complicated foreign policy issues involving conflict and whether or not state machinery guides or controls media in the name of patriotism and national interest. The extant literature does not offer a straightforward answer to these question, as the relationship between media and governments varies from astringent conflict to open cooperation in different countries of the world, and depends largely on the system of governance (Rasul, Robinson, & McDowell, 2016). Critical scholars, on the other hand, argue that contemporary technology-intensive and commercially-driven news media promote dominant ideologies and follow official policies because their political and economic interests are intertwined with those in the corridors of power (Bagdikian, 2004; Bettig & Hall, 2003; Norris, 1990; Vivian, 2006). According to this stream of thinking, media organizations historically come into being to fulfill social and political needs of a society, and, therefore, these are deeply nested within the dominant political and economic structures at a given time (Mosco, 2009). Accordingly, it could be argued that news media and official policymakers are allies when media covers conflict and rally-around-the-flag sentiment runs supreme in crisis situations (Zelizer & Allan, 2011). Considering academic significance of the news media’s proximity with the policymakers while framing violent conflicts and its subsequent influence on public opinion, I attempt to identify patterns of relationship between policymakers and English language newspapers in the neighboring countries of war-stricken Afghanistan in this study. I was interested in examining the nature of news framing in the selected newspapers and the impact of policymakers’ official position on the deductive frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) used by journalists while covering conflict with Taliban in Afghanistan.
Elite Newspapers and The Framing Conflict in The Neighboring Counties

Contrary to the mainstream literature on the relationship between media framing and foreign policy of the nation-states directly involved in conflict, this study contributes to the existing body of literature by focusing on the framing of conflict in the elite newspapers of the neighboring countries of a conflict-prone country. The elite newspapers were selected, as these newspapers are “often regarded as agenda-setters for other national media, particularly for international news” (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005, p. 408), in China, India, Iran, and Pakistan, which have had important stakes and historical relations with Afghanistan. In addition, elite press is conceptualized as widely circulated newspapers that influence policymakers’ deliberations and their decisions while formulating external policy (Altschull, 1995). In the elite newspapers, editorial commentaries carry special importance, as editorials reflect policy of the news organizations (Rasul, Robinson, & McDowell, 2016). To examine the relationship between official foreign policy and policy of the news organization, this study, therefore, examined the editorial coverage of conflict in Afghanistan in The China Daily (China), The Hindu (India), The Tehran Times (Iran), and Dawn (Pakistan) during January 2010 to June 2011. A focus on the editorials helped us determine the degree of influence exercised by the policymakers on the framing of Taliban by the selected newspapers from four countries having markedly different sociopolitical systems (Jan, 1993; Malik, 2003). In this region, newspapers are considered relatively free in India and Pakistan, while China and Iran exercise strict control on the freedom of expression per state policy and political system.

Whereas newspapers from the selected countries operated in isolation and there was no evidence of systematic cooperation between journalists and owners, the governments of these important regional powers were engaged in proactive diplomatic efforts to establish their sphere of influence in Afghanistan due to the strategic location of the war-torn country as a bridge between Central Asian States and South Asia (Jan, 2005). Considering the stated foreign policy position of the four countries, the relationship between China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan has passed through many phases ranging from short periods of détente to open hostility. Iran and China have been relatively neutral players while India has always supported anti-Pakistan forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan has strived hard to install friendly governments in Kabul through active interference (Rasheed, 1995). This geopolitical scenario opens a research window to critically examine the role of elite English newspapers in reporting the conflict with Taliban, and to what extent this reportage was influenced by the standpoint of the foreign office in the countries of the region.

However, elite newspapers’ influence on the formulation of foreign policy has several dimensions related to the complicated issues surrounding the national interests, strategies to achieve those interests, eliminating any obstacle that might arise in pursuit of those interests, installing friendly regimes in the neighboring countries, and understanding and utilizing international climate in pursuit of those national interests (Jan, 2005; Said, 1997). Bearing in mind the convoluted nature of these issues, it is a significant academic question if newspapers are powerful enough to have an influence on the foreign policy of a nation-state. Granted that news framing of conflict can create euphoria and it can also evoke anger, disgust or fear on a certain foreign policy issue (Bagdikian, 2004), but to say that it can overwhelmingly affect foreign policy would be a naivety (Malik, 2003). Academic literature also excludes newspapers as an important
arbiter of foreign policy, as powerful establishments led by military uses media to project a preconceived foreign policy (McChesney, 2008; Zelizer & Allan, 2011). Other researchers (Chomsky, 2010; Dennis & Merrill, 1996; McQuail, 2005) also argue that the media are expected to advance national interest nearly everywhere, and promote certain key values and behavior patterns, but especially so in times of war or other crises. The “yes-effect” and “no-effect” debate about the influence of newspapers, especially editorial coverage, on the framing of foreign policy is adequately explained by various models delineating relationship between media and foreign policy, which is briefly discussed in the ensuing section.

**Media and foreign policy: The (un)holly alliance**

This study deals with the portrayal of conflict in the elite press of four Asian countries having distinct political, cultural and economic systems and problems. A significant number of studies related to media-foreign policy relationship have been reviewed to provide theoretical foundations to this heuristically important area of research. The literature on how media affects or gets affected by policy makers includes studies based on the dominance perspective (Aday, 2005; Altschull, 1995; Chomsky, 1988; Cohen and Young, 1974; Gitlin, 1980; Gramsci, 1979; Robinson et al., 2009). The model, popularly known as advocative/elite-driven model of media performance, focuses on supportive role of the media in times of war or conflict. This literature category includes research related to the constructions of social reality that results from journalistic decisions about information to be included in a news story, use of language, choice of information sources, and emphasis on particular aspects of an event. The second model deals with literature analyzing oppositional/adversarial role of the media; and the third model suggests a mixed or Indifferent role of the media during international political crises among different nations. These models describe the relationship between state and media of a country, especially in wartimes (Robinson et al., 2009).

The upholders of elite-driven model view mass media as an instrument in the hands of a dominant class, elite, or other power-holding group (Cohen, 1963; Herman & Chomsky 1988; Knightly, 2003; McQuail, 2005; Robinson et al., 2009). According to this paradigm, the content of the press actively distorts the marketplace of ideas in favor of the view of the powerful (McChesney, 2008). Cohen (1963) suggested that in countries, where political power is highly centralized, the media of communication tend to become instruments of centralization. The media, in other words, are important devices in sustaining both constitutional and political positions at the center. In case of conflict with another country, the press articulates the views of the state and the big business (Herman, 1988; Knightly, 2003). The wartime media also supports elite perspectives and serves the military in order to shield the national interest determined by the ruling elite (Carruthers, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 1998; Zelizer & Allan, 2011). It is precisely for this reason that Chomsky and Herman (1988) argue that the media’s purpose in a free society is to manufacture consent among the governed, rallying the population to endorse elite decisions. However, in the process of creating a consensus, bleak war realities are systematically obscured and the official perspective is unquestioningly disseminated by the media (Aday, 2005; Bennet & Paletz, 1994).

However, in democratic societies, where political power is widely distributed, the media also serves a different set of purposes (Cohen, 2015). There are several cases where administrative requests for secrecy have been denied. For instance, President
Carter and many of his advisers were infuriated when, in 1980, NBC negotiated a deal with the Iranian militants whereby an interview with hostage William Gallegos was aired on the condition that the Iranian students could also present their point of view. Four years later, Brzezinski referred to the NBC interview as “an instance of an American network collaborating with unfriendly interests” (Jan, 2005, p. 39). In this case, harsh criticism by the government, and the implied demand for future restraints, were met with no sympathy in the press (Holmes, 1986). Similarly, in March 1980, the New York Times reported that high-ranking White House officials personally requested CBS executives to delete a portion of the 60 Minutes news program, which dealt with American relations with the Shah and activities of SAVAK (the Shah of Iran’s secret police). This attempt to suppress the news was flatly rejected by the television network (Brown, 1980, p. A11).

Several other studies (Becker, 1977; Brown, 1980; Robinson et al., 2009; Wolfsfeld, 1997) have concluded that the media do not necessarily support state actions because, in a free press system, the press is not supposed to be a facilitator in intergovernmental interactions. For instance, it is interesting to note that the New York Time opposed US foreign policy towards Pakistan if it was unfavorable to India (Ramaprasad, 1984; Becker, 1977). A few recent studies have attempted to document circumstances when media deviates from official policy by opposing elite perspectives (Entman, 2004; Robinson et al, 2009; Wolfsfeld, 1994).

There are a few studies indicating that the press neither dominates foreign policy nor surrenders to governmental manipulation and upholds its professional autonomy (Althaus, 2003; Entman, 2003; Tumber and Webster, 2006). According to this view during early policy stages, the media are neutral reporters of what government officials say about foreign policies because journalists lack the analytical capacity to examine these policies critically (Berry, 1990).

However, once foreign policy has been implemented, it becomes easier to comment on its successes and failures. According to this view, the terms of the relationship between the press and the executive branch evolved during the 1960s, particularly during the Vietnam War, which forged a new relationship between the press and the government. Chen (1983) revealed that both public and press advocated official policy toward the People’s Republic of China (PRC) throughout the years 1972 to 1978. However, on the issue of Taiwan, public opinion, opinion of the press and the official policy were all quite different. In a broad sense, the opinion of the press and official policy were more similar than were public opinion and official policy. Thus it seems that the press fell between official policy and public opinion. The British newspapers and BBC tried to maintain objectivity during Falklands War and Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003 (GUMG, 1985; Robinson et al., 2009).

To conclude, there is enough empirical support for the elite-driven or advocative model, according to which, media abandons objective journalistic practice and follows official foreign policy of a country in times of national crises (Aday, 2005; Altschull, 1995; Bennet and Paletz, 1994; Chandler, 2006; Chomsky, 1988; Gitlin, 1980; Gramsci, 1979; Knightly, 2003; Robinson et al., 2009). A few scholars are of the view that media plays an oppositional role in a liberal pluralist political system and deviates from official perspectives (Becker, 1977; Brown, 1980; Entman, 2004; Jan, 2005; Ramaprasad, 1984; Robinson et al., 2009; Wolfsfeld, 1997). A few researchers also believe that media’s role in conflict is neither advocative nor adversarial; rather media strives to maintain its
autonomy (Althaus, 2003; Chen, 1983; Entman, 2003; GUMG, 1985; Robinson et al., 2009; Tumber and Webster, 2006). However, scholars agree that media is deeply affected by unusual circumstances such as terrorism, conflict, and war and journalists compromise the norm objectivity depending upon political system, dominant ideology, and policy of the newspaper.

**Framing Terrorism**

Framing is an important concept which helps us understand as to how an incident is projected or portrayed in the media content. This concept would be beneficial in explaining the relationship between policy of the elite English press and the conflict in Afghanistan. Various dimensions of the concept of framing (Iyengar, 1991) have been adopted in this article to help develop an understanding of the editorial framing of the Afghan conflict and Taliban and its relationship with the foreign policies of China, Iran, India and Pakistan.

The first approach developed by Iyengar (1991) asserts that news content can be effectively examined by using thematic or episodic nature of content. Newspaper content can be framed in a thematic way which situates events in a broader historical context by discussing similar events, highlighting effects and drawing attention to the possible implications of these events. This type of framing provides a useful background to the readers in order to enable them to look at an issue from all possible angles. On the contrary, episodic framing focuses on an issue or event as a single, occurrence divorced from broader context. It uses emotional appeal by explaining the events by giving prominence to a snapshot of an issue. Iyengar (1991) argues that it is impossible to draw a clear line between episodic and thematic frames and the news stories mostly contain both types of frames; however, one frame will be visibly dominant which, according to Iyengar (1991), is decided by the readers. News stories containing thematic frames are considered to be a good source of learning for the readers. Nitz and West (2004) are of the view that most of the news stories covering politics contain episodic frames which trivializes the quality of public discourse and deprives the citizens of deeper understanding of issues. The second approach deals with the issues of responsibility and solutions. This category of framing determines the sources of problem and suggests adequate solutions to address complicated issues. It also focuses on individual and societal attributions which tend to be correlated with episodic and thematic framing (Iyengar, 1991 as cited in Nitz & West, 2004). Politicians have a tendency to blame each other which creates confusion among people as individual attribution of responsibility does not address issues comprehensively and citizens cannot make decisions about an issue.

Iyengar (1991) describing the third aspect of framing argued that tone of media content can play a pivotal role in forming public opinion. Newspapers can either advocate governmental policies or choose to play an adversarial role. The negative tone usually results in pessimism and leads the readers to attach less seriousness with important issues (Nitz & West, 2004). The fourth aspect of framing deals with the use of sources while commenting on significant social and political issues. Sources, of course, determine the nature of coverage and dependence on one type of sources is likely to produce a hegemonic discourse which will help strengthen status quo in the society (Iyengar, 1991). The fifth dimension of framing focuses on image versus issue frames. Today’s media is personality-centric and pays little attention to issues, which is adversely
affecting the existence of a healthy citizenry (van Zoonen, 2005). Image-based framing of politicians, especially during elections, keeps citizens oblivious of the policies of political parties and critical issues facing a society.

The final dimension of framing is the nature of issues covered by media. Even in this image-centric media world, issues are still important as they help politicians to set an agenda for the public (Nitz & West, 2004). The media can provide comprehensive understanding of the conflict when they employ thematic frames and refrain from episodic frames which lack the capacity to address complicated issues at length. By using aspects/dimensions of framing discussed in the preceding paragraphs, this article discovers the nature of frames associated with the construction of Taliban and conflict in Afghanistan in the elite English press of China, Iran, India and Pakistan. The concept of framing, therefore, is helpful to uncover the relationship between policy of media and foreign policy of the four regional countries towards Afghanistan where these countries had vital interests at stake.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The objective and balanced reporting of conflict has emerged as a critical question for media scholars. Although editorials reflect policy of a newspaper towards an issue and they are a commentary on significant sociopolitical affairs, yet it is assumed that media would strike a balance in its observations and opinions by presenting both sides of an event (McQuail, 1992, 2005; Merrill & Dennis, 2005). To examine as to how the elite press of China, Iran, Pakistan and India reacted to the foreign policy initiatives of these countries through editorial coverage of conflict in Afghanistan during 2010 and 2011, this article would rely on the following research questions:

1. How did the Dawn and The Hindu frame the official foreign policy of Pakistan and India on the conflict in Afghanistan?
2. How did The China Daily and The Tehran Times comment on the official foreign policy of India towards conflict in Afghanistan?
3. What similarities and differences were found in the portrayal of Taliban factor in Afghanistan by the elite papers of China, Iran, Pakistan and India in the contexts of their foreign policy standpoints?
4. What kind of editorial coverage (advocative, adversarial, indifferent) was offered to the conflict in Afghanistan by The Hindu and the Dawn in the context of Indian foreign policy?
5. How did The China Daily and The Tehran Times (advocative, adversarial, indifferent) editorially comment on the conflict in Afghanistan keeping in view the foreign policy of Pakistan?

**METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative content analysis has been used as a methodology, which is considered a popular technique to methodically and demonstrably dissect media content and different texts to understand characteristics of the texts and infer valid and reliable meanings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Forman and Damschroder (2008) stated that qualitative content analysis was applied to systematically analyze texts by employing a number of rule-guided procedures that helped researchers explicate media content and textual data. Despite issues surrounding accuracy and subjectivity of analysis in qualitative content analysis, this technique provided reliable and contextual answers to the
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questions related to complicated texts dealing with the coverage of foreign policy issues in newspapers and offered an in-depth, interpretative, and detailed analysis of the issues under study (Berg, 2004). As a first step, the universe or population of interest is defined, which in this particular case includes the editorials of the selected elite newspapers on the coverage of conflict in Afghanistan during the last one and half year. For the sake of making the study manageable the editorials of the above four newspapers are chosen to examine the nature of relationships between them and the political systems of their base countries (China, Iran, Pakistan and India) in terms of editorial treatment of conflict with special reference to Talibban in Afghanistan. Any editorial that appeared in the selected elite papers of China, Iran, Pakistan and India during the study period in which the predominance of the item deals with the subject of foreign policy initiatives on Afghan conflict and Talibban has been considered as the unit of analysis.

Key categories of the editorial content have been identified, and within those categories the framing of the items of the elite press of China, Iran, India and Pakistan has been analyzed. In order to reduce and avoid the bias of the qualitative approach, the researchers have reread the material several times so that the inference is consonant with all of the relevant portions and characteristics of the original communication material. This textual analysis is an interpretive approach seeking to bring forth the meaning of both manifest and latent contents found within a particular text and rooted within a particular culture and time. The approach used in this article helped in interpreting the latent meaning of the text. In this text-based study of the elite press of China, Iran, Pakistan and India, directional phrases, ideologies, idioms, catchy words/key words, slogans, tones (taking the form of pro and anti) have been identified in the texts of editorials. Descriptive phrases and adjectives (frequently used in highly opinionated items like editorials) used by editorial writers in the elite press helped to identify the direction of the editorial that could be positive, negative, and neutral.

An editorial was considered positive if it supported the foreign policy position of the state where the newspaper organization is stationed. It was categorized as negative if it opposed the declared foreign policy standpoint of the governments of China, Iran, India and Pakistan. A neutral editorial was the one that impartially commented on the conflict in Afghanistan by presenting perspective of all sides in a fair manner. The following key categories have been developed to analyze the coverage of attacks in Mumbai:

1. State as sponsor of terrorism. Editorials in this category castigated sponsorship of terrorist outfits by China, Iran, India and Pakistan in these countries;
2. Inefficiency of the Afghan government in controlling the Talibban. These editorials held concerned Afghan agencies and the NATO Alliance responsible for a failure in establishing the writ of the state in Afghanistan;
3. Rhetoric of war. These editorials commented on hawkish statements by the government, military, and politicians in the four countries that escalated tension in the region; and
4. Cooperation on curbing terrorism in the region. These editorials urged the need to enhance regional cooperation to root out the menace of terrorism from the region and suggested mechanics through which this objective could be achieved.
5. Taliban as an evil force: These editorials heavily criticized Taliban for destabilizing Afghanistan and the region and portrayed them as an evil force sponsoring terrorism.

Editorials falling in the above-mentioned categories are analyzed to discover the framing of Taliban and conflict in Afghanistan. The analysis also helps to find out the nature relationship between press and governments in China, Iran, India and Pakistan as many scholars have concluded that there is always a positive or advocative relationship between media and framers of the foreign policy of a country during conflict situations (Cohen, 1963; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McQuail, 2005; Robinson et al., 2009; Zelizer & Allan, 2011).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The Pakistani and Indian Elite English Press on Taliban

One elite newspaper each from China, Iran, India and Pakistan has been selected for this article. All newspapers (The China Daily, The Tehran Times, The Hindu and Dawn) are widely circulated and wield significant influence on public opinion and framers of the foreign policy.

The editorial commentary on Taliban and conflict in Afghanistan in all newspapers was closer to the foreign policy initiatives of China, Iran, India and Pakistan.

The Indian elite newspaper implicated Pakistani intelligence agencies in sabotage activities in Afghanistan. The Hindu, for example wrote on July 9, 2008, when Islamists bombed the Indian embassy in Kabul “After an assassination attempt on President Hamid Karzai in April 2008, authorities in Kabul had accused Pakistan’s Interservices Intelligence of involvement”. The newspaper claimed that the attack on Indian embassy was carried out in collaboration “with an active intelligence service in the region. It was totally in line with the statements of the Indian authorities in Delhi. Presenting Pakistan as sponsor of terrorism, The Hindu commented on October 13, 2009 “It also demonstrates to the world and the United States in particular that India’s contention as regards Pakistan’s continuing links with Jihadi terrorist groups is based on the ground reality”. The newspaper supported talks with moderate Talibans in its editorial on December 4, 2008. The newspaper also showed solidarity with Pakistani government when the terrorists attacked on military headquarters in Pakistan in October 2009; however, advised Pakistan to take a serious action against all militant groups and avoid considering those as friends which are fighting in Kashmir. The newspaper again commented on June 2, 2010, “Pakistan’s softly-softly approach towards groups with so-called strategic value against India gave the terrorist groups a special privilege”. The newspaper considered Taliban and its allied groups a threat for the whole region and urged on the need to curb terrorism from the region. The newspaper also supported anti-Taliban government in Afghanistan and encouraged initiatives by the international community to politically and economically strengthen Afghanistan. However, The Hindu contributed only seven editorials on Taliban, which shows that the newspaper had little interest in the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan.

On the contrary, Dawn showed deep interest in the Taliban phenomenon in Afghanistan. The newspaper’s interest in conflict in Afghanistan is comprehensible, as Pakistan being the front-line state has been directly affected by the instability in its northwestern neighboring state. The editorial policy of the newspaper advocated government’s position on the conflict. The newspaper criticized the allied forces in its
editorial on July 15, 2008 and argued that the “European forces…wanted to avoid causalities, and they had a long list of caveats for doing their job”. The newspaper also castigated Pakistani government for its timid actions against militants. For example, it wrote on July 19, 2008, “It is true that Islamabad’s policy towards the militants has been characterized by vacillation for nearly half a decade”. The newspaper adopted the oppositional model when it found Islamabad avoiding required measures against terrorist outfits. Dawn supported the idea of talks with Taliban with a pinch of salt. It welcomed occasional contacts with Jihadi leadership; however, wrote on October 7, 2008 “for Pakistan, talking to ‘moderate Taliban’ – an oxymoron at first glance – is not a new idea except that Islamabad’s experience, given its own gaucherie has not been very happy”. The newspaper condemned terrorist attacks on military headquarters in Pakistan and other Taliban supported sabotage activities. However, the focus of Dawn has been Taliban’s sinister pursuits within Pakistan. On July 19, 2010, the newspaper wrote “the Taliban are feared and hated in part because of their utter defiance of the country’s laws and their evident lack of respect for the rule of law and due judicial process”. Regarding Pakistan’s involvement in sponsoring Taliban, the newspaper commented on July 28, 2010:

There is nothing new in Wikileaks’ allegations that Pakistan’s intelligence apparatus is lending logistic or moral support to Afghan insurgent groups like the Haqqani network. This has been said dozens of times before, without any concrete proof proffered by either NATO or Afghan officials (p. 6).

The newspaper also urged on the Afghan government to enhance its capacity to govern Afghanistan. Overwhelmingly, the Dawn supported Pakistan’s official foreign policy towards Taliban and conflict in Pakistan and hence adopted the advocative model of media-foreign policy relationship. It, however, criticized Islamabad for its alleged support of some of the Jihadi groups. There was a convergence of views on this issue between the two newspapers.

The Chinese and Iranian Press on Taliban

The Chinese and the Iranian Indian elite English press framed the Taliban factor in Afghanistan keeping in view the official polies of their respective governments. The press in these countries is considered to be controlled by the government because of the political systems operative in these countries. China being a communist county follows the Marxist Model of press freedom where press is free to advocate polices of the communist party (McQuail, 2005). Zhang (2004) has argued that the Chinese media is tightly controlled by the Beijing authorities and on sensitive issues; media invariably follows the government policies. For the purpose of this research, the researchers have selected The China Daily that is considered an important English newspaper bridging communication between China and the rest of the world. The Chinese elite press supported talks with Taliban for a durable peace in Afghanistan. On June 20, 2011, The China Daily wrote that “President Hamid Karazai acknowledged that the U.S. and Afghan governments have held talks with Taliban emissaries in a bid to end the nations nearly 10-year war”. The newspaper welcomed talks between the warring factions and argued that only dialogue could ensure a lasting peace in Afghanistan.

The China Daily also urged on the world community to join hands in order to curb the menace of terrorism. In June 2011, when President Hu Jintao was visiting
Kazakhstan to attend the 10th anniversary of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the newspaper welcomed the joint declaration to fight the “three evil forces of terrorism, separatism, and extremism”. However, the newspaper also supported the use of soft power to win the hearts and minds of the people affected by war. Commenting on the use of soft power in the Afghan war context, the newspaper wrote on May 19, 2011, “Soft power projection is more subtle than hard military power, yet it is often more effective. It lasts longer by changing a generation of young people who go back home to influence their countrymen”. The position of the newspaper on the use of soft power was different from the position of the elite press of the other countries of the region who supported the use of military power to root out Taliban from Afghanistan. On the death of Osama Bin Laden, The China Daily expressed its concern by arguing that Bin Laden’s killing would not end the war against terror as “Al-Qaida’s franchises are all over the world”. Thus, the newspaper was predicting the continuation of the war despite advocating dialogue and use of soft power. The newspaper supported position of Pakistani officials who argue that both war and dialogue should go hand in hand.

Commenting on Pakistan’s role in the war against Taliban, the newspaper expressed more confidence in the Pakistani military’s ability to bring the war to end compared to the Afghan law enforcing agencies. The China Daily wrote on December 18, 2010, “From fighting natural disasters to countering terrorism and separatism, China and Pakistan stand beside each other”. Thus, China expressed her unequivocal support for the efforts of the Pakistani law enforcing agencies. The newspaper also supported international cooperation to help war ravaged Afghanistan build an effective governance structure. The newspaper argued on October 15, 2010 that ‘we can curb terrorism only if we integrate the issue of terrorism in the framework of ‘global governance’. The newspaper argued that the Afghan government and the allied forces have been unable to restore peace in Afghanistan and the war in the neighborhood of China could potentially create a problem for the adjoining Chinese areas. On May 7, 2010, The China Daily wrote, “Political instability in its neighboring countries poses a great challenge to China’s peaceful development. The ‘spillover effect of the unrest threatens the stability and security of China’s frontier areas”. The newspaper believed that China should play an active role in resolving the conflict in Afghanistan. This line of arguments is in harmony with the national interest of China and its role in the region.

The China Daily criticized Taliban for their obscurantist policies. The newspaper held Taliban responsible for unrest not only in Afghanistan but also in Pakistan. On March 12, 2010, the newspaper commented in its editorial that Taliban were a deadly force that believed in “torture and violation of human rights”. The newspaper appreciated the struggle of Afghan women who defied extremist policies of Taliban and fought for their rights. In a couple of editorials, the newspaper paid rich tributes to the Afghan women who stood up against “ideology of oppression bound to fail in the 21st century”. The China Daily focused on the need to improve capacity of the Afghan government to control the country effectively, curb terrorism perpetrated by Taliban, and unite the world to jointly fight terrorism in Afghanistan. The newspaper did not hold any country responsible for fanning flames of terrorism in Afghanistan. Neither did the elite newspaper advocate the rhetoric of war. It did support military action in Afghanistan but also favored dialogue and use of soft power to bring peace in the region. The content of The China Daily advocated the official policy of the government of China as do media in other countries in times of war or conflict (McQuail, 2005; Zelizer and Allan, 2011).
The Iranian elite English newspaper, The Tehran Times, functioned as a propaganda machine of the government against the U.S. The newspaper criticized the U.S. operations in Afghanistan and termed American policies responsible for the chaos and instability in the region. The newspaper even questioned involvement of Al-Qaeda in 9/11 attacks. On September 18, 2010, the newspaper wrote, “Much circumstantial evidence points to Osama and Al-Qaeda, but conclusive proof still lacks. One thing is certain: the attacks were planned and mounted from Germany, not Afghanistan”. The newspaper also alleged on October 2, 2010 that “millions of American taxpayer funds may have been paid to Talban fighters in southern Afghanistan to provide security for a U.S. development project”. Similarly, the newspaper claimed that NATO forces were merely fighting a war under the influence of U.S. officials. The Tehran Times followed the hawkish policy adopted by President Ahmadinejad, who leaves no stone unturned to blame the U.S. for all problems in the region.

The newspaper criticized the “civilian killing spiral in Afghan war” by arguing on March 10, 2011 that “civilian assassinations were up 588 percent and 248 percent in Helmand and Kandahar provinces respectively, the main stronghold of the Talibam and the focus of a U.S. troop surge”. The newspaper also supported Pakistan’s position by arguing that operation in the tribal area of Pakistan would not help eradicate Talibam. Commenting on the differences between Pakistan and the United States on the war against Talibam, the newspaper was of the view that war in Afghanistan could not be fought and won without active Pakistani support and both sides have been caught in a quagmire where cooperation is the only solution. However, the newspaper suspected American intentions to fight Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. On May 24, 2011, The Tehran Times commented that “the war in Afghanistan was ostensibly started to fight Al-Qaeda, but it gradually took a new direction that was based more on the United States’ national and regional interests”. The newspaper also quoted Western scholars opposed to the U.S. war policies.

Quoting Stephen Lendman on June 6, 2011, the newspaper wrote that “Obama today wages illegal wars against four countries and numerous proxy ones for unchallengeable U.S. dominance, at the same time spurning growing popular needs during a deepening Main Street depression”. Similarly, after the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the newspaper argued that NATO troops had no purpose in the region and the war should not be prolonged as the “evil force had been silenced”.

The newspaper avoided the rhetoric of war and advocated human rights by urging on Obama administration on June 19, 2011 to end the “Afghanistan war with women rights in place”. The newspaper had been consistently arguing the war was not producing results. The newspaper also extensively wrote on the Wikileaks and argued that the U.S. engagement in the region served its selfish interests at the cost of Afghan people. However, The Tehran Times advocated talks with Talibam and it wrote as early as August 30, 2010, “The Talibam will remain. They cannot be eradicated. They are the national resistance movement, just as the Mujahideen were during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. A dialogue with them is essential”. The content in The Tehran Times was inspired by the anti-U.S. sentiment prevalent among Iranian policy makers and the newspaper focused on criticizing the role of the U.S. in war against Talibam. The elite newspaper followed the elite-driven model of media-foreign policy relationship by supporting the official policy. It did not criticize the inefficiency of Afghan government to control the insurgency; it did not support war against Talibam; and it did not held
countries of the region responsible for this war. The coverage of The Tehran Times was different from other selected newspapers as its content was propagandist in nature that advanced the idea that the U.S. was an evil force occupying Afghanistan and killing people. On the other hand, elite newspapers of China, India, and Pakistan held Taliban responsible for the conflict and political chaos in Afghanistan.

**CONCLUSION**

It could be argued that the elite press of the four countries of the region supported foreign policies of the states where they were operating. Treatment of stories varies according to national and regional agendas of different countries. A crisis in one part of the world can easily be viewed elsewhere as irrelevant. The level of coverage (or refusal to cover) will often be a function of national interest and distance from the event. The lower the national interest and the greater the distance, the less likely it is that news organizations will have anything more than a passing interest in developing a story. There is no uniform media response that defies international borders and national identities. Therefore, the elite press of China, India, Pakistan and Iran advocated the agendas of their governments and closely followed policy designed by the political elite in these societies. The newspapers supported dialogue with Taliban to end the conflict; however, they also supported stringent measures against extremist elements. The capacity of the Afghan law enforcing agencies was questioned, and the elite press urged on the need to jointly fight terrorism. The Iranian elite newspaper adopted a relatively different tone by adhering to the propagandist tone of the Iranian top leadership. The other newspapers had similarities and differences in their content keeping in view the national interest of these countries. Thus, it could be concluded that media followed elite-driven model (Robinson et al., 2009) and framed the Taliban in episodic, image-based, and negative frames with most of the information flowing from official sources. This is in line with Iyengar’s (1991) typology of frames. The findings in this article also support thesis of McQuail (2005) and Zelizer and Allan (2011) who argue that media almost invariably frame the content related to conflict to support the foreign policy initiatives of a country in times of war and conflict.
REFERENCES


