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## Media and Strategic Narrative in Pakistan: Reframing Communication for Sustainable Peace

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### Abstract

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This study seeks to reconceptualize the changing nature of strategic narrative in Pakistan owing to the pivotal position it occupies within Pakistan's security framework, both internal and external. The study endeavors to explicate the media discourse on violent extremism in Pakistan. Mass media is a contested arena where strategic narratives are reconstructed in order to control the actualization of required objectives and to drive legitimacy. The relative preponderance of escalatory framing by the media through the construction of threats jeopardizes the scenarios of a durable peace process. The study employed the qualitative research method based on data from the secondary sources selected on the basis of purposive sampling. Pakistan has been experiencing the recurrence of terrorism and extremism, which generate significant social, economic, and security consequences for the state. The crucial role of social media, in addition to legacy media, needs to be understood in order to significantly de-escalate the narrative construction by eschewing differences in favor of commonalities. Strategic narrative is pivotal in contemporary times to create a positive image of the state at both the domestic and international level. The study elucidates the connection between strategic narrative and media framing of salient issues. The construction of strategic narrative is a whole-of-government approach; however, media occupies a central position. The ubiquitous landscape of mainstream media primes consumers with certain schemas, and that proclivity would reassemble itself in human insecurities. This study extends the scholarly debate regarding how the media's potential can be employed to de-sensationalize the content in order to fulfill the social responsibility.

**Keywords:** media, extremism, peace, social responsibility.

## Introduction

The historical trajectories that evaluated the social impact of televised media were dominated by studies conducted in the West (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018). The re-orientation of media culture beyond the Western world, and especially Pakistan, requires socio-cultural understanding to develop media protocols for the re-evaluation of narrative construction. In the contemporary world, every nation faces multifaceted threats that require a complex understanding of the threat environment to understand the factors that are responsible for the propagation or continuance of ideologically-driven violence. In political communication, media frames pertain to the 'interpretative' aspect that answers 'how' any issue, event, or person is portrayed in the media, which resultantly gives meaning to that entity (Livingston & Nassetta, 2018). The strategic narrative emphasizes the pivotal role of the ideational dimension and language in shaping the behavior of domestic and international audiences regarding politics (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013).

During the conflict, the employment of strategic narratives is primarily aimed at undermining and reinforcing the legitimacy of kinetic or non-kinetic action guided by the state's objectives (Yanchenko & Humprecht, 2025). It is relatively hard to quantitatively analyze the holistic rise of extremism, since it encompasses hate crimes, minority rights, disinformation, radicalization among youths, and sectarianism. Pakistan experienced an upsurge of violent attacks by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (Abbas, 2021). Previously, the optimism attached to the dialogue process between the TTP and the state was hampered by the dual factors of the TTP's ideological synchronization with the Afghan Taliban and anti-TTP protests. The state tends to consider endogenous and exogenous factors, i.e., geostrategic aspects, while formulating policy related to terrorism (Rana, 2022).

The narrative and manifestation of violent extremism in Pakistan gained impetus through both internal and external factors (Yaseen &

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Muzaffar, 2018). The ethnic, social, and religious fault lines since independence have resulted in radicalization in the state. The alignment of Pakistan with the US during the Cold War and, later on, the War on Terror, shook the fabric of the social system in Pakistan. The rise of terrorism in Pakistan after 9/11 impacted the economic, social, and infrastructural facilities, resulting in direct and indirect costs. In 2026, the South Asian region received the worst average Global Terrorism Index (GTI) score. Pakistan ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in the GTI score. Due to the strained relations of Pakistan with its neighboring states and violence perpetuated by non-state actors, according to the Global Terrorism Index, the number of deaths from terrorism has at highest level since 2013 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026).

As a result of the increase in the occurrences of violent extremism, it has become pivotal to develop a pragmatic and sustainable framework for counter-narrative and counter-radicalization programs for policymakers. One of them is the employment of 'strategic communication' (Neal, 2014) by influencing through inclusive programs, i.e., community engagement, talks, and indoctrination by the relevant stakeholders. In Pakistan, an alternate strategy worked better, in which the credible voices of society are empowered at the grassroots level. Peace-building efforts and measures are manifested in society by focusing on the following aspects: structural injustices, improving relations between the parties involved in a conflict, and changing individual attitudes (Berghof Foundation, 2019). However, there are certain techniques adopted by the government to counter violent extremism. This article seeks to delineate the multifaceted nature of narratives owing to the socio-cultural and geopolitical positioning of Pakistan.

In the contemporary security environment, it is pertinent to analyze the needs of a strategic narrative for peacebuilding in Pakistan. A strategic narrative provides the intellectual space to untangle the complexities inherited in the employment of soft power (Roselle,

Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin, 2014), since scholars have delineated the level of discourse in strategic narratives (Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2020). Strategic narrative is primarily employed by the media as a significant tool to explicate the response of the state and how the conflict is represented to the audience by selection or deselection of certain frames. Strategic narrative explains the mechanism devised by the state, as an actor, for the maintenance of peace in society on the basis of logical construction of narrative through media. The contextual and social ontological understanding of society is important to ensure the potential efficacy of strategic narrative. The strategic narrative can be grouped into three levels, i.e., international, national, and issue narrative, that have their respective analytical spaces. The scholarly literature is primarily focused on media framing and journalistic practices in Pakistan during the conflict (Hussnain, Rehan, & Butt, 2026); however, the analytical connection between strategic narrative and media framing is scarce. The objective of this study is to examine the role of media in constructing the strategic narrative and communicative approaches for developing de-escalatory narratives. The study seeks to answer the research question: What are the communication and policy approaches for de-escalatory media practices and peacebuilding? The study posits that the employment of media content through the construction (Newsom, Lengel, Birzescu, & Vukasovich, 2022) of effective messaging frames is significant owing to security threats, both internal and external, encountered by Pakistan. The research article employs a qualitative research method to analyze the strategic narrative in Pakistan. The study is descriptive in nature, and the data is collected mainly from secondary sources. The study draws upon peer-reviewed research articles, newspaper reports, theses, policy documents, and relevant documentary sources. The sources of data are selected purposively based on their relevance to the research question and phenomenon under investigation.

**Strategic narrative and peacebuilding: role of**

## media in Pakistan

It is relevant in the contemporary milieu to analyze the role of strategic narrative for peacebuilding through media in Pakistan in order to counter violent extremism, since the enlargement of communicative spaces as a result of digital media, in addition to legacy media, provided multifaceted avenues for extremist elements to advance their political objectives. Since 9/11, the media history of Pakistan, especially conflict reporting, received monumental impetus. In Pakistani media, the mediated construction of reality is not unitary for media consumers; rather, they also incorporate input or influence from personal experiences and support from peers (Dharaiya & Pathak, 2025). The media in Pakistan projected the issue of the Taliban in both positive and unfavorable ways. The media discourse in Pakistan employs stereotype-induced framing based on negative images of the Taliban. The overall pattern of media coverage in Pakistan is negative with respect to the Taliban (Malik & Iqbal, 2011). In contrast, the English-language press in Pakistan employs more peace journalistic frames as compared to war frames in their coverage. The respective coverage coincides with the country's policy to focus on peaceful agreement for the long-term interest (Raza, Jan, Sultan, & Aziz, 2012). Moreover, the framing and media reporting do have an empirical impact on consumers, which resultantly prime the users to interpret the phenomenon based on a certain construction of reality. The scholarly literature illustrates the framing of issues, subject to the notion of saliency, i.e., crime, that may have an impact on media consumers' frame of thought (Valkenburg, Semetko, & Claes, 1999).

The state needs to dismantle this uneven advantage enjoyed by violent non-state actors to triumph over the asymmetrical conflict by forming a counter-communication plan by employing a combination of civilian and military instruments (Plundrich, 2024). Since the kinetic response to root out extremist ideologies globally did not yield the anticipated results, as

the major powers tried to wipe out the menace of terrorism through the “War on Terror” (Khan, Sohail, & Shah, 2021). Hence, the state needs a non-kinetic approach to drive the narrative of delegitimization regarding violent extremism through constructive intervention policies in collaboration with a whole-of-government approach.

In Pakistan, the sectarian issue is a significant source of contention that requires careful understanding to de-sensationalize the media content. The changing nature of the threat to Pakistan from Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and other violent non-state actors has reconfigured the security calculus, which requires the state machinery to deny space to delegitimize their violent mode of engagement. The kinetic measures undertaken by the state to quell the militancy achieved short-term objectives, as iterated in a report: “by using force against outfits such as [Lashkar-e-Jhangvi], the state has certainly achieved short-term successes.... but has not put hardline sectarian organizations out of business” (International Crisis Group, 2022). The moral standing of an organization is likely to impact if it is based on self-defense and the pursuit of democratic rights. Claims for and against the legitimacy of violence have been defended by both weapons and arguments (Cook, 2003).

The propagation of strategic narratives by the media needs to be restrained by certain qualifications in order to enhance the prospect of peace. In the Constitution of Pakistan, the freedom of speech is guaranteed, which is not absolute (Korai, Ghaffar, & Sammad, 2023). This aspect needs analytical understanding because the media is a tool through which people exercise their freedom of expression, and it is also up to the regulatory authority to ensure the safety of public spaces. A Supreme Court ruling that came in 2023 succinctly explicates the freedom of expression. According to the ruling, “the reasonable restrictions” flow from Articles 19 and 19A [the respective articles are related to freedom of speech and information] of the Constitution, and the statutory restrictions by and

International “Journal of Academic Research for Humanities (JARH) 6(3)” under the PEMRA Ordinance are to be interpreted in a forward-looking manner... to persistently advance and promote the constitutional values of tolerance, freedom, equality, democracy and social justice.” (Sigamony, 2023). The legal aspect exemplifies the re-interpretation of constitutional provisions and laws to objectively assess the nature of media content.

Moreover, under the National Action Plan, which rationalized the state’s objectives by political and security leadership after the APS attack in 2014 to tackle the menace of terrorism, there are certain media-specific provisions which are deemed important to be referred to here to operationalize the strategic narrative (Rana 2016). Some of the provisions related to media focus on the action taken against newspapers, magazines, and literature that promote extremism, hatred, and intolerance. The NAP places a ban on the glorification of terror outfits and terrorists, and also on the abuse of digital media for terrorism. In the NAP, equal focus is given to print, electronic, and digital media. Research shows that the mainstream media and electronic media assert more influence on political opinions in contrast to social media (Zaheer, 2019). Due to the intellectual flexibility residing in the strategic narrative, the construction of media frames should focus on de-escalation of conflict to attain the objective of peacebuilding. Since major societal segments resort to social networking sites (SNS) for political/entertainment purposes, and the national security is tied to social media owing to its propensity to spread disinformation (Abd, 2023).

In the media of Pakistan, there is a dearth of peace journalistic frames that contributes to the exacerbation of conflict (Siraj & Hussain, 2011). Moreover, the framing employed by the media in Pakistan with respect to India is tilted towards war frames, since Indian media equally adopted the same narrative about Pakistan (Khan, Adnan, Meer, & Yousaf, 2021). The role of media was also highlighted by the judiciary in Pakistan.

The findings of the commission, headed by Justice (r) Qazi Essa, which was constituted after the deadly attack in Quetta, noted the role of media coverage in the proliferation of propaganda. The report noted that the media gave less coverage to the victims and seemed to propagate terrorist propaganda, which is a breach of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA). The findings also delineated the modalities attached to the irresponsible statements issued by officials after the attack (Malik H., 2016). The findings of the report shed light on the importance and nature of media coverage, since the state securitizes the issue by augmenting the media discourse to gain legitimacy for military operations. The media has the power to influence the beliefs and perceptions of media consumers and enable it to reshape their thinking, but the state should not discount the narrative power of non-state actors who wage violence against the citizens. As argued, "... narratives used by Jihadis are largely based on facts, but there is still a significant portion that contains elements of fiction" (Fayyaz, 2015).

The narrative propagated by violent extremists needs to be countered through a bottom-up approach, rather than a predominantly state-centric narrative, based on a participatory lens with gender-oriented perspectives. The media discourse in Pakistan focuses primarily on the episodic coverage of an event without resorting to thematic frames to apprise consumers of follow-up and contextual understanding. Moreover, the framing strategy in the mainstream media of Pakistan gives preeminent focus to security forces, which insinuates that the considerable impact is borne by the security forces (Gul, Farooq, & Afridi, 2020). The mainstream media give coverage to voices that are critical of security forces and prefer to use the lexicon of "fighters" rather than "terrorists," which impacts the formation of public opinion (Atique-ur-Rehman & Hussain, 2020). The modern form of terrorism is "media terrorism", since it is the duty of the media to report on events, but at the same time the nature of framing attracts the consumer's attention,

International "Journal of Academic Research for Humanities (JARH) 6(3)" which invariably seems to augment the extremists' "media competency" (Jarab, 2005).

Social media act as an important locus for communicative practices. The use of social media by extremists was anticipated to reassert the ideological divisions in society (Kugelman, 2012). Militant groups use social media to advance "cyber radicalization" to promulgate their ideology of extremism; as a result, Pakistan faces multifaceted issues that require a comprehensive approach to counter the propagation of radical ideas (Suhaib & Adnan, 2020). The media needs to project holistic coverage to debunk the legitimacy of violent extremism. However, the power of narratives reflects the center of power in the state to tell the story. States have more resources than non-state actors to employ for an alternate narrative. A national-centric media is imperative to achieve substantial success, taking into consideration the leverage enjoyed by the non-state actors on social media. Media in Pakistan needs to deconstruct the violent incidents through contextual post-incident reporting (Salamat & Salamat, 2023).

The state of Pakistan employed a strategic narrative for national and international audiences by taking part in diplomatic practices to constructively resolve the active conflicts. The reception of these activities were received favorably at the national level. According to a survey reported in national media, the majority of Pakistanis view the key mediation efforts to resolve the crisis between the US and Iran as a major 'national victory' and expressed pride in Pakistan for augmenting the state's global image at the international level (Arab News Pakistan, 2026). Through these activities, Pakistan positions itself as holding values that favor peace and stability in the region, since Pakistan shares a long border with Iran.

### **Strategic narrative in contemporary scenario: forward approach**

1. The above-mentioned discussion illustrates the pivotal role of media in the dissemination of strategic narrative through the process of framing for peace-building in

Pakistan (Khan, M.K., & Pratt, C.B., 2022). The entrenchment of extremist narratives has taken decades to take hold and would require long-term efforts to counter the extremist narrative. The constructed narrative to counter extremism requires an alternate reality with context-dependent identity, values, and worldviews for legitimacy in the state and for audiences as well (Khan A. , 2013), since media is a constructive tool to project the strategic narrative.

2. For sustainable peace and stability in South Asia, media diplomacy can play a significant role based on geopolitical dynamics (Zhukova, 2023). Peace in Pakistan is not primarily vital for human security; rather, it is equally pertinent to augment economic prospects through foreign direct investment. It would be difficult for human and socio-economic development to take root in a nation where the youth are preoccupied with divisive rhetoric (Nda-Isaiah, 2022). Journalists are also expected to provide coverage with diverse, humanitarian, and multi-dimensional perspectives. The construction of strategic narrative needs to take the “diplomatic sensitivity” into account while reporting on extremism, since the narrative is framed to gain legitimacy at the international level by keeping in view the systemic dimension of politics (Roselle, Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin, 2014).
3. The employment of strategic narrative is a whole-of-government approach; however, in this article, the role of media is highlighted to formulate the peace environment guided by inclusive rhetoric with substantial legitimacy. The change in the media landscape is relevant to analytically examining the strategic narrative. The de-weaponization of media language to control the ladder of escalation of extremist coverage needs to be curtailed. Scholarly analysis has pointed out the need for conflict-sensitive reporting that focuses on conflict and avoids the stereotyping of respective partisans (Glazzard & Reed, 2021). The editorial assessment of content related to

violence and extremism needs to avoid generalizations. The reporting mechanism of events must bifurcate into on-site reporting and opinionated analysis. Otherwise, the conjunction of these two aspects would subjectively prime the viewers with a particular interpretation. The visual coverage of any terror incident demands ethical reporting to avoid the re-looping of disturbing visuals and the cultivation of fear among the media consumers. Individual eyewitness accounts should not take precedence over the victims of the incident to limit the multi-faceted dimensions of causes and effects.

4. Media literacy is significant among youth to acquaint themselves with the effects of media reporting and its constructed meanings that would be difficult to decipher if audiences lack the media literacy necessary to recognize such constructed meanings. The state needs to organize workshops on media literacy with instructional programs at educational institutions to prime potential users with knowledge of critical viewing.
5. The editorial assessment of public knowledge should calibrate with the socio-cultural milieu of the society. The terror incident should be treated with a thematic framework in order to understand the underlying causes.
6. The true spirit of media regulations articulated in the national action plan (NAP) requires the implementation and periodic accountability of media content. The framework is effective if the strategic narrative complements the national action plan. There are certain suggestions propounded by think tanks to incorporate Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) to discredit and disrupt the spread of violent extremist messages. It requires a conducive relationship between law enforcement agencies and social media companies (Macdonald & Staniforth, 2023). Scholars have offered a model of “ethical

scaling” to moderate content in the online sphere in contemplation of the socio-political and ethnographical milieu of the respective society, and to offset the epistemological orientation propounded by rationalism grounded in machine learning in order to address the structural issues.

7. The employment of multi-media technology would assist the process of peacebuilding in Pakistan. Documentaries on the re-absorption of extremist segments in society without coercion from the state are an important multi-media tool. The production of non-fiction storytelling with interactive dynamics would also project an alternate version of reality for peacebuilding. Interactive documentaries based on the successful integration of radicalized elements into society, and the rebuilding of national narrative around successful projects, are pertinent in this regard. Interactive documentary offers new conventions for organizing and presenting audio-visual narrative (De, 2009). The scholarly literature illustrates that documentary can play an essential part in peacebuilding by explicating the multiple angles in the post-war scenarios (Premaratna, 2021). The synergy between state and private media is required to produce docudramas for self-reflection and hyper-mediation on the thematic nature of extremist violence (Bennett, 2010).

## Conclusion

This study endeavors to re-evaluate the operationalization of strategic narrative within the context of Pakistan. It analyzes the media discourse on violent extremism in Pakistan and what the essential policy recommendations are that need to be undertaken in order to germinate the seeds of sustainable peace. Pakistan has been experiencing the onset of violent attacks which impact the country's security outlook. The information regarding the attacks is received by consumers from the mass media. The media act as a significant tool that might impact the perception-making process of content consumers. The NAP and legal framework

International “Journal of Academic Research for Humanities (JARH) 6(3)” engender the formation of media content in favor of national security. Pakistan needs to build a discourse around the strategic narrative with socio-cultural understanding. The findings illustrate the importance of the construction of an effective strategic narrative in alignment with contemporary technological advancements and the policy framework, i.e., NAP, and, in addition to the role of media, requires a whole-of-government approach. The strategic narrative with de-escalatory frames is important for both domestic and international audiences. The key methodological limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary sources of data that may constrain the empirical evidence. Further research needs to examine the tools needed to develop a comprehensive narrative to counter the fault lines in society.

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