

# The New York Times Editorials: Perceptions of Pakistan

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## Abstract

*Mainstream US print media, including newspapers like the New York Times, have generally held a negative view of Pakistan, painting a bleak picture of happenings in Pakistan. A study of the New York Times editorials on Pakistan from 2001 to 2013 shows that much of the discourse on Pakistan in the New York Times revolves around the war on terror, which is the primary focus of the newspaper's editorials. Media framing plays a significant role in shaping opinion and presenting stereotyped images that largely influence the recipients of the print and electronic media alike. Similarly, in the case of Pakistan, certain frames are employed to explain and analyse events and the entire discourse revolves around those reoccurring themes.*

**Keywords:** Perceptions, Media Framing, Pakistan-US Relations, Perceptions, Public Opinion, War on Terror

## Introduction

### *The US-Pakistan Relations and the US Media Coverage of Pakistan*

The US-Pakistan relations have seen many ups and downs during the last 68 years. During the Cold War, a policy of containment of communism in southeast and southwest Asia predominated the US approach and it found Pakistan a suitable ally for its strategic interests.<sup>1</sup> It was a marriage of convenience, but one that both partners sought quite eagerly.<sup>2</sup> However, Pakistan's standing in Washington has always been to the extent the US has found it useful to its own interests. It is therefore a relationship, which has been driven by Washington's strategic necessity, along with Pakistan's capacity for adapting to it.<sup>3</sup>

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Relations between Washington and Islamabad have a tendency to swing from one extreme to the other. The present phase of these relations is very different from the earlier phases: today US relationship with Pakistan is substantive, but more conditional than it was before 1990.

Mutual suspicions, incompatible goals and Pakistan's internal security challenges have all added to the existing problems of a fragile partnership. Today, the glue that makes US-Pakistan security cooperation work comes from the joint commitment to prevail in the war on terror.

Ever since Pakistan joined the US war on terror, it frequently makes it to the headline news in the US news media. However, Pakistan is mostly portrayed in a negative light. The US media generally describes Pakistan-US relations as difficult, tortured and uneasy in which both sides complain that they have been betrayed by the other to varying degrees.

A look at the New York Times (NYT) editorials, from 2001, the year when the 9/11 terrorist attacks took place, till 2013, will reveal how a mainstream media outlet like the NYT perceives Pakistan. This analysis finds NYT editorials with four to five dominant themes, at least one of which is a subject of every other NYT editorial on Pakistan. The NYT is an elite newspaper with large circulation and huge influence. It is also highly reflective of government policy.

### **The Focus of Editorials and Research Questions**

In order to identify the recurring pattern of image portrayal in an elite US newspaper like the NYT, a look at the frames employed to explain specific situations shows how perceptions are built in order to explain particular incidents. The frames used are deliberately employed to elucidate negative stereotypes. The two main issues identified, and the questions raised and addressed in this study are:

1. Which issues are raised repeatedly in the NYT editorials on Pakistan?
2. What does the use of words, language and content reveal regarding the US media's portrayal of Pakistan?

## **Employment of Frames**

The frames which have been repeatedly used in the NYT editorials framing Pakistan's portrayal can be divided into the following categories:

- War on Terrorism
- Nuclear Issue
- Pakistan-India Conflict
- Domestic Politics/ Weak Governance/Religion/Economy/Democracy

Before 9/11, the coverage of Pakistan in the NYT editorials was minimal. However, as the US invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks resulted in its enhanced cooperation with Pakistan, the latter started getting increased attention from the US media, including NYT, which would now give it more editorial space. Prior to 9/11, media coverage, especially editorials, regarding Pakistan mainly focused on India-Pakistan tensions, political instability and Pakistan's growing nuclear arsenal.

## **Media Framing and Manufacturing Consent**

The print media is a valuable source of information and has significant influence on public opinion. It is therefore imperative to look into the theoretical framework of "media framing" and see how certain news items are framed and brought before public. Framing has noteworthy influence on perceptions and in public opinion. The same is true of newspaper editorials: editorials are persuasive; they define a given situation and also give its evaluation.<sup>4</sup> According to Entman, media framing is best described as a "scattered conceptualisation" and is specified as:

"To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described."<sup>5</sup>

Frames are manifested “by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.”<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, framing theory argues, the frames used to highlight a specific situation and draw judgments also influence perceptions of the recipients of the news. The societal perceptions are extremely important as they can influence governments. The potential impact of media framing is enormous and is bound to create perceived realities, which are strong and lead to the formation of opinions. The major premise of framing theory is that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. Simply put, media framing is the way information is presented to certain audiences, and it is quite clear that the information is bound to reflect biases.

Framing basically involves the combination of words and phrases that convey a message and influence perceptions of audiences. Framing in newspaper editorials is very important because the editorials signal the importance of the topics to the public.<sup>7</sup> However, frames may be built around exaggerations playing on the fears as well as the prejudices of the public, and by drawing support from ideologies or dogmas, while ignoring the central issue.<sup>8</sup> The newspaper’s tone and character is important as it articulates the newspaper’s official position. Moreover, as the media is an important source of citizen knowledge about local as well as international issues, it contributes in a significant way to how social construction of reality takes place.<sup>9</sup>

According to Noam Chomsky, major decisions about how any society will function are made by governments. The media too is controlled by segments within the governments, including the decision makers. There are certain targets for propaganda, including the political class, which also plays a role in decision making as they are voters and may have significant influence on the happenings in the society. These groups of people who shape the society in one way or the other are the ones who have to be “deeply indoctrinated.”<sup>10</sup>

In Chomsky's opinion, the mainstream media plays a role in agenda setting and the general framework is set by the influential media houses. This is done by focusing on specific topics, framing of certain issues and confining the debate to certain topics. Moreover, this serves certain interest groups. The NYT is considered to be an important example so far as this debate about influencing and shaping of news is concerned. Chomsky argues that the NYT is an important newspaper in the US as well as globally as it has a lot of influence when it comes to shaping the perceptions of the public and how certain things appear to readers.<sup>11</sup>

It is, however, worth emphasising here that newspaper editorials can be prejudiced and have considerable effect on readers and their construction of social reality. Editorials are organised along three schematic categories: (a) the definition of the situation, (b) summary of the situation or news event and (c) an evaluation of the situation, along with recommendations.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, newspaper editorials also establish certain points of view, while rejecting and discarding others, and in doing so, they may be promoting the official/government perspective.

### **Findings of the Study**

The main aim of this research is to see how Pakistan is perceived in the NYT editorials. For that, editorials on Pakistan, from 2001 to 2013, are analysed. The analysis provides useful insights about how the US media generally perceives Pakistan.

Since Pakistan regularly makes it to the headline news in the US, NYT editorials give considerable importance to various developments in Pakistan. The analysis of NYT editorials on Pakistan shows that the US and Pakistan have been working at cross purposes and the mistrust between them has been quite obvious. Studying editorials and understanding their ideological underpinnings help explain the role of news media.

The employment of news frames helps understand and explain how certain news items are framed to form opinions and create certain impressions. The use of words identifies a frame and, as mentioned in the

previous section, certain words represent frames and these frames give meaning to the news items. Frames are mostly built around exaggerations and media framing entails perceived realities, which are helpful in identifying dominant meanings in a given text. Frames adopted by the media and the government largely influence perceptions in the society. The rationale for choosing the current phase of Pakistan-US relationship is to understand how this uneasy and difficult relationship between two countries is being perceived by one of the important players in the US media.

### **War on Terror**

The first frame under discussion is the war on terror, which has been the dominant theme of NYT editorials on Pakistan since 2001. The majority of these editorials included references to Pakistan's role in the war on terror and the level and magnitude of US support for Pakistan. The terms used in, and the tone of, the editorials do not present a fair and objective assessment of the situation. In the early post-9/11 period, most of the editorials describe General Pervez Musharraf as being in a very fragile position, although he had complied with the US demands and was fully supportive of the US war on terror. In one of such editorials, titled "Anxious days in Pakistan," on October 9, 2001, NYT, while referring to General Musharraf, says "United States must not let him dictate the conduct of war against terrorism."<sup>13</sup>

Many other articles in this period urge the US government to entice Pakistan with military and economic aid in order to achieve its goals in Afghanistan. These editorials depict the relationship between the US and Pakistan as transactional, based on a quid pro quo where the US provides aid to Pakistan "in return for Pakistani support for the American bombing campaign in Afghanistan."<sup>14</sup> Mostly, however, these editorials are skeptical about Pakistan's determination to fight terror.

The editorials from this period also show a somewhat sympathetic tone and mild praise for General Musharraf, though, in most cases, the editorials criticise him for his domestic policies, and failure to restore democracy. These editorials also urge the US government to put pressure on General Musharraf to restore democracy in his country. This brief

analysis of NYT editorials on Pakistan from 1999 to 2008, a time period which coincides with General Musharraf's rule in Pakistan, clearly shows that both countries were in an uneasy alliance.

The editorials in the post-Musharraf era largely retain the focus of Musharraf-era editorials, though some changes are obvious. These editorials are much more critical of General Musharraf's role and policies. The following quote from one of these editorials confirms this observation:

“A decade in power exposed his dictatorial tendencies; he suspended constitutional rule twice, declared a state of emergency in 2007, unleashed a violent crackdown against political opponents and fired the chief justice of the Supreme Court and five other judges.”<sup>15</sup>

Though the focus of these editorials remains on war on terror and the US-Pakistan relations in this context, their tone becomes much harsher. The words such as “irresponsible,” “radical fundamentalism,” “dangerous,” “frustration,” “duplicitous,” “double game,” and “double speak,” are frequently used to describe Pakistan's role in war on terror.

The editorials in this period show a new trend of lumping Pakistan and Afghanistan together, in a bid to imply that Pakistan is also a part of the problem. An example of this is seen in the editorial, “The Remembered War,” published on March 28, 2009, which said, “to disrupt, dismantle and defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan.” The editorial also said, “Mr. Obama's plan breaks welcome new ground by treating Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single coherent theater of operation. It finally sets benchmarks for measuring progress by Kabul and Islamabad.”<sup>16</sup>

Another recurrent theme in these editorials are the accusations against the Pakistani government and army of being complicit with the Taliban, whom, the editorials allege, Pakistan considers a strategic asset.<sup>17</sup> Thus the editorials in the post-Musharraf era are not much different as far as comments on Pakistan's role in the war on terror are concerned. The Pakistan People's Party government led by President Asif Ali Zardari is

subject of the same kind of criticism, which was leveled against the military dictatorship of General Musharraf.

## **Nuclear Issue**

Pakistan's nuclear programme is the subject of numerous NYT editorials. The US apprehensions about Pakistan's nuclear programme are reflected in all these editorials. The foremost fear expressed in these editorials is the possibility of Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists and being used against the US. The mistrust of Pakistan's nuclear programme is evident in such expressions as, "it has the world's fastest-growing nuclear weapons programme," and, "Relations with the United States have grown so distrustful that the Obama administration has reportedly stepped up its surveillance of Pakistan's nuclear program."<sup>18</sup> Pakistan's nuclear program is also mentioned with reference to Pakistan's hostility with neighbouring India. These editorials are titled in the way that not only reflects Indo-Pakistan antagonism but also raises alarm about the situation. An example is, "Another Face-Off for Nuclear-Armed Rivals."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the Abdul Qadeer Khan episode also gets particular attention and Pakistan is perceived to have officially sold nuclear warheads designs to Iran and South Korea. This episode is framed within the context of Pakistan's alleged irresponsibility as a nuclear armed country. The nuclear issue is mentioned repeatedly with cynicism and doubt.

## **India-Pakistan Relations**

Several of the NYT articles in this period comment on India-Pakistan relations. Mostly, these comments lack objectivity and impartiality, particularly when rivalry between the two countries is under focus. India is usually absolved of any responsibility, while Pakistan is generally described as the aggressor state. One of the editorials on Mumbai attacks, for example, says, "India has so far shown extraordinary restraint," and, "Pakistan's president, Asif Ali Zardari, must face up to his country's involvement - whether official or nearly so."<sup>20</sup>

Pakistan is accused of instigating trouble in the disputed valley of Kashmir, and of the deadly Mumbai attacks in 2008, which according to

the Indian government had originated from Pakistan. The editorials use similar tone, as used by the Indian government and media, in accusing Pakistan of having played a role in the deadly attacks. An example of this is, “The primary focus must be Pakistan. We are encouraged that India and Pakistan have resumed their dialogue, interrupted after last fall’s attacks in Mumbai by Pakistani-based extremists.”<sup>21</sup> The general tone of these editorials is judgmental and disapproving of Pakistan’s efforts to improve relations with India.

Likewise, Pakistan’s military buildup and its acquisition of nuclear weapons is attributed to its rivalry with India. Moreover, editorials on war on terror-related US aid to Pakistan accuse Pakistan of misusing this aid to build up its conventional capacity against India. In fact, these editorials try to create the impression that the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda is not being fought properly because Pakistan has been using this aid to augment its conventional military capacity against India, rather than to fight against terror. Thus, Pakistan is criticised also with regard to its relations with India.

### **Domestic Politics/Weak Governance/Economy**

While the above mentioned themes dominate the NYT editorials on Pakistan from 2001 to 2013, issues related to Pakistan’s domestic politics and economy also get some space in these editorials.

A prominent theme in the editorials on Pakistan’s internal affairs is civil military relations and their impact on Pakistan’s role in the war on terror. According to these editorials, the military has the real power when it comes to taking decisions with regard to Pakistan’s role in war on terror, whereas the civilian leadership has little say. This is expressed in sentences such as, “Fighting extremists should be grounds for common cause, but there is no sign that Pakistan’s military leaders get it.”<sup>22</sup>

Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) too is the subject of much criticism and condemnation, as it is accused of pursuing its own agenda, and is described as an increasingly dangerous counterterrorism partner of the US. The following comments are just one example: “There is evidence that they were complicit in hiding Osama bin Laden in

Abbotabad and that the ISI helped plan the Mumbai attack in 2008.’<sup>23</sup> These editorials also ask the civilian governments to reform the spy agency and bring it under control. However, a few editorials echo objectivity and praise Pakistani public for being courageous and the military for allowing the democratic transition to take place smoothly.

Pakistan’s weak economy and dependence on IMF also are mentioned in the editorials. Its weak economy is attributed to mismanagement, corruption and a very heavy investment in its military capabilities, which in turn are linked to Pakistan’s lack of investment in infrastructure, education, health and its burgeoning young population. A lack of investment in the above, these editorials assert, has thwarted the prospects of development and has resulted in misdirected military buildup focusing on its arch-rival India. Some of the editorials comment on the weaknesses prevalent in the Pakistani society, like its poorly performing education sector which is said to have spawned bigotry, intolerance and homegrown extremism, evident in the growing persecution of minorities. These problems, however, are mentioned somewhat objectively.

## **Conclusion**

The NYT editorials on Pakistan between 2001 to 2013 reveal an inherent bias, negative stereotyping and a lack of objectivity in their dealing of various domestic and international developments concerning Pakistan. The frames and themes used to describe Pakistan are the ones which reflect negativity and pessimism. The nature of the discourse is off-putting and remains the same throughout the period covered for this research, i.e from 2001-2013. A fact-oriented approach is seldom applied. The editorials repeatedly highlight certain issues by selectively using frames and employing words and phrases that create the impression of Pakistan being a long term problem. Despite the fact that NYT is a liberal newspaper, its editorials are extremely prejudiced against Pakistan, with only rare criticism of the US policies.

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