Changing Narratives: An Evaluation of Pakistan's Public Diplomacy Efforts Under Imran Khan

RAVALE MOHYDIN
TRT World Research Centre, Turkey

In today's multipolar world, asymmetric power relations are common as nations compete to strive and gain greater access to scarce resources, such as influence and a positive national brand. Discussing the nuanced relationship between nation branding and public diplomacy, along with best practices for both, this article analyzes Pakistan's past international image through a historical sociopolitical lens as a case study. Then, it evaluates the country's public diplomacy efforts, including those linked to the U.S. war in Afghanistan, undertaken especially by the Pakistani government under Prime Minister Imran Khan. A growing congruence was detected between Pakistani and Western officials' communications, potentially signaling a change in perception of Pakistan, particularly in light of regional security and its relationship with the West.

Keywords: public diplomacy, Pakistan, Imran Khan, nation branding, U.S. war in Afghanistan

Nuances of Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy

We live in a hyper-connected world where international relations are not based on an international agenda that necessarily prioritizes security only, focusing more on the growth of economic interdependence among nations today (Carbone, 2017). In many cases, a country's image lends credibility to its products: French wine and Italian fashion are some examples (Martin Roll, n.d.). The country from which a product or service originates has a large effect on its perceived quality, viability, and likability in the minds of people "by lending credibility, respect and status" (Martin Roll, n.d., para. 5) because of the associations conjured in consumers' minds related to the country of origin.

While competing for attention and influence, it is more difficult for some countries than others because of outdated stereotypes or internal socio-political turmoil and economic problems (Fan, 2008). Most people do not have time as they "navigate through the complexity of the modern world armed with a few simple clichés" (Anholt, 2013, p. 3) that form the backbone of their opinions. As per Melissen (2005), with countries like France putting "enormous efforts into managing their country's reputation" (as cited in Fan, 2008, p. 15) since the 17th century, governments of many developing countries have now also started to invest in telling the story of their countries. have now also started to invest in telling This exercise, aiming

Ravale Mohydin: ram210@mail.harvard.edu
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to influence foreign audiences, has now become known as "country branding" or "nation branding" (Anholt, 1998). To compete for influence, countries manage and control their branding by either actively repositioning themselves (Gilmore, 2002) or, as per Anholt (1998), by having a "consistent and all-embracing national brand strategy" (as cited in Fan, 2008, p. 16). Succinctly, nation branding is the "application of branding and marketing communications techniques to reshape the international opinion of a country" (Fan, 2008, p. 16), leading to benefits such as increased tourism and investment.

A country has three "sub-brands": the political brand, the economic brand, and the cultural brand (Fan, 2008, p. 18) that need to work in synergy for the goal of nation branding to be optimized. This highlights the technical difference between a "nation brand" and "nation branding": whereas nation branding is a conscious process-based effort to influence the international opinion of a particular country, each country has an existing nation brand with or without any conscious efforts in nation branding that can be either strong and clear or weak and vague (Fan, 2008, p.18). Public diplomacy specifically focuses on building one of the aforementioned sub-brands of a nation: the political brand (Fan, 2008). As per the USC Center on Public Diplomacy (n.d.), public diplomacy may be defined as:

> [Public diplomacy] is a key mechanism through which nations foster mutual trust and productive relationships and has become crucial to building a secure global environment . . . it is a transparent means by which a sovereign country communicates with publics in other countries aimed at informing and influencing audiences overseas for the purpose of promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals. (para. 3)

Strategic aims surrounding public diplomacy mechanisms can range from "getting companies to invest, encouraging public support for your country's positions and convincing politicians to turn to it as an ally" (Holden, 2013, as cited in Flew, 2016, p. 285). These often work best when targeted to influence the "psychological and political environment in which attitudes and policies towards other countries are debated" (Melissen, 2005, p. 15) and not linked to the short-term objectives of democratic governments. Following that, as per O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2000), even though each nation has a current brand per se, hence the claim "any nation can be viewed as a brand" (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000, as cited in Kaneva, 2011, p. 123), there are certain qualifications that have to be considered. For Gilmore (2002), "a country that does not actively pursue in branding practices risks losing out to the positioning strategies of its competitors" (as cited in Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014, p. 92), nation branding can also occur in an organic manner "with or without a nation's awareness" (Kaneva, 2011, p. 123) as "most nations have had their brands made for them . . . deliberately or by default, formed from a myriad of different sources, such as word of mouth, education, mass media, travel, product purchases and dealings with its people," according to Loo and Davies (2006, as cited in Kaneva, 2011, p. 123). Even though there is a strong correlation between "countries that have produced strong brands and those that are strong brands themselves" (Fan, 2005, p. 9), a causal relationship cannot be evidenced. Thus, Anholt (2008) emphasized the importance of nation branding being taken up as a long-term project and recommended being "policy based" rather than "communication based," becoming "implicit in the way the country is run" (Anholt, 2008, p. 123) to see results.

The Pakistan Brand: In Search of a Collective Identity

In Pakistan's case, because nation-branding was not managed consciously and consistently, it ended up suffering significant damage, primarily linked to the U.S. war on terror (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014). Yousaf and Huaibin (2014) described the disconnect between the consequences of engagement for Pakistan and the media coverage of the country: Although U.S. media depicted Pakistan to be "minting money from the USA in the wake of war against terror without furthering the US motives in the region" (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014, p. 93), a July 2010 International Monetary Fund report stated that Pakistan incurred losses worth billions of dollars linked with the war on terror itself (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014). The report also asserted that Pakistan faced severe budget constraints as funds had to be allocated to confront anti-state elements leading to less development work (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014). Moreover, Pakistan witnessed the world's largest internally displaced people's movement in 2009 because of war and conflict, costing the country more than 10 billion USD in internally displaced people's rehabilitation efforts alone (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014). By 2013, Pakistan's participation in the international war on terror cost Pakistan more than an estimated 69 billion USD (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014). Pakistan's identity was predominantly considered to be negative, likely because of international media coverage of Pakistan backing radical Islamic militants, internal political problems, and economic challenges (Cohen, 2002), merely reflecting negative perceptions of Pakistan held by the United States and the world in general when it comes to terrorism (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014). By 2014, this perception was largely accepted by the international public, "though based on stereotypes, [and] not necessarily a reality" (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2015, p. 400).

To counter the negative media coverage, the then Pakistani government made a conscious effort in the form of an advertisement in *The Wall Street Journal* on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in 2011 (see Figure 1). While imploring readers to consider Pakistan's role and sacrifices for peace during the war on terror, asking, "Which country can do more for your peace?" (*The Hindu*, 2011, para. 1), the advertisement highlighted that 21,672 Pakistani civilians and 2,795 soldiers had been killed; 3,486 bomb blasts had taken place in the country, with 283 being major attacks and a loss of US$68 billion to the national exchequer. Although it can be considered an effort, it was not successful as the advertisement was "outdated, did not meet the advertising requirements of the American audience," and was only a one-off event and not a "coordinated branding campaign" (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014, p. 94). This move exposed a lack of expertise in nation branding or hired marketing and consultancy firms that are more profit-oriented than interested in national interests (Teslik, 2007, as cited in Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014).

***Figure 1. An advertisement placed in The Wall Street Journal by the Pakistani Government on
September 11, 2011 (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014, p. 93).***

As time passed, Pakistan was rated the second most-negatively perceived country in a 2012 BBC survey poll involving 22 countries, and by 2015, more surveys depicted "unfathomed backlash toward Pakistan from the world community" (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2015, p. 400), anchored in international media coverage of Pakistan backing radical Islamic militants. A 2017 study that looked at stereotypical views of Pakistan among students in China, notably a "friendly" country to Pakistan, uncovered three themes that

mainly constituted Pakistan's image in their view, namely that the country was a religious threat, mired in internal crises, and a threat to regional peace (Yousaf, 2017).

To better decipher why Pakistan struggles to move away from a one-dimensional international perception of the country, a brief historical, sociopolitical, and security overview of Pakistan's grapples with identity would be useful. Many of India's Muslims, having moved to Pakistan after the partition of British-ruled India in 1947, grappled with an identity crisis in cultural terms, as did the newly formed state of Pakistan, searching for a single unified identity. This quest was reflected in the choice of Urdu, associated with Muslims in British India, as the country's national language—a language spoken by only 7% of Pakistanis at the time (Jabeen, Chandio, & Qasim, 2010)—with early rulers attempting to "thrust administrative, political and linguistic uniformity over the country's local cultures" (Khan, 2015, para. 5). Islam appeared to be the only commonality cutting across ethnic and linguistic lines in a state that "inherited a diverse ethnic composition and an enduring enmity with India—a Hindu-majority state" (Khan, 2005, p. 4), primarily linked to the Kashmir conflict.[1] These two factors played a critical role in Pakistan's nascent security concerns, continuing for decades later.

With the need for political and social unification becoming a question of national survival after the separation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan and the consequent creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the Pakistani government led by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto appeared to further promote the official narrative of Pakistan having been founded on "the basis not of a common ethnicity or language, but religion" (Kermani, 2017, para. 6). Later in the same year, General Zia-ul-Haq legitimized and strengthened his new dictatorship by promoting a hard-line Islamic ideology and cracked down on liberal political groups and activists who demanded a return to democracy as, according to him, Pakistan was "an ideological country and there is no room for secularism or any 'ism' other than Islam" (Fouquet, 1983, para. 5). Emboldened by U.S. backing during the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s, General Zia "expected the West to turn a blind eye to grave human rights violations in Pakistan, as he believed he was doing a favor to the US by fighting its proxy war in Afghanistan" (Shams, 2016, para. 3).

His ideological grip on the country was further tightened by the backing of Saudi Arabia, which wanted to bolster Sunni Islam in Pakistan. The Soviet-Afghan war gave the Saudis a mechanism to do so via funding *madrassas* (religious schools) in Pakistan that teach *Wahhabism*, a particularly austere and rigid version of Islam (Nasr, 2001). Since then, these *Wahhabi* madrassas enjoyed state patronage even though *Wahhabism* was a minority sect in Pakistan and flourished at the expense of native regional groups, such as the Sufism[2]-oriented Barelvi movement of South Asia (Shams, 2012). A staunch *Wahhabi* Muslim nation was promoted as the primary identity of Pakistan, seemingly at the expense of the pluralistic Indigenous Indo-Pakistani culture (Shams, 2012). As per Pakistani historian Mubarak Ali, *Wahhabis* are "against any cultural plurality so they attack shrines, music festivals and other cultural centers that are not Islamic in their view," and "Arabization" (Shams, 2012, para. 4) seeped into the psyche of many Pakistanis. In

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[1] The Kashmir conflict, a territorial conflict over the Kashmir region primarily between India and Pakistan, has resulted in three wars between the two and several other armed skirmishes.

[2] Sufism is a form of Islamic mysticism that emphasizes introspection and closeness with God.

conclusion, since 1947, but particularly after the separation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan in 1971, successive Pakistani governments have promoted Islam as the only identity for the country, and that, too, is an exclusionary version of it. Besides the country's engagements with the West throughout regional conflicts, many of the stereotypes highlighted above have been fortified by Pakistani leadership's focus on Islam as a primary identity for the country.

On the other hand, Imran Khan, who entered politics in 1996, promoted native Sufi traditions from Pakistan such as the *qawwali* by sponsoring tours of the famous *qawali* Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan to the West during his years as a fundraiser for humanitarian projects. From 2011 onward, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leader used the term *Naya* Pakistan [New Pakistan] to describe his party's objective when he would be in power. In the 2013 general election, before having ever been in power, the PTI ad campaigns revolved around "change and revolution theme and social reforms theme" (Yousaf, 2016, p. 148) and targeted the youth. The same theme continued in the 2018 general election that the PTI won: This new Pakistan was meant to be "modern, liberal . . . yet also true to its roots, traditional and religious" (Khalid, 2018, para. 2). In October 2019, PM Khan equated teachings of the Sufi saints with "indigenous values'' that need to be promoted as national identity (*Express Tribune*, 2019, para. 1). For PM Khan, it was important for Pakistan to find its own "space, identity, culture and roots" (Taseer, 2019, para. 15), based on Indigenous, rather than imported, values.

Pakistan still stands accused of not doing enough in contributing to global peace and is, unfortunately, "not able to effectively communicate to the rest of the world its contribution, and sacrifices in the global war against terrorism, in spite of suffering from it the most" (Yousaf, 2017, p. 10). Consequently, Pakistan has been labeled by other countries "as per their convenience and [their] foreign policy interests" (Yousaf, 2017, p. 10). Such a state of affairs eventually influenced public opinion internationally, leading to penalization of citizens for "uncommitted crimes" such as, for example, travel and visa restrictions (Yousaf, 2017, p. 10), that tends to hit a nerve.

Increasing International Engagement via Public Diplomacy

Many of PM Khan's campaign speeches, as well as his first speech as elected PM, focused on how he would work to increase worldwide respect for the "green" (Pakistani) passport, promising supporters that "green passport will one day bring honor to you" (*Dawn*, 2019a, para. 1). PM Khan's government's efforts to improve Pakistan's image abroad has been primarily based on increasing Pakistan's engagement with the international community.

One of the ways this was done was through high-level visits to foreign countries, which are considered effective as "visiting leaders can increase public approval among foreign citizens" (Goldsmith, Horiuchi, & Matush, 2021, abstract). By April 2022, PM Khan made 29 foreign trips to 14 countries since becoming PM. Relevantly, while in the United States to meet with American President Donald Trump, PM Khan addressed a meeting at the U.S. Institute of Peace, where he had lunch with newspaper editors, met with the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate, and addressed the bipartisan Pakistani American Caucus (*Dawn*, 2019c). He also addressed a crowd of more than 30,000 Pakistani Americans in Washington, DC, signaling his popularity with the diaspora. The U.S. and international news outlets covered this trip.

Even though the trip's focus was to refresh bilateral ties between Pakistan and the United States, the United States declared Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA)[3] as a terrorist organization before the bilateral meeting between the two leaders. This move brought unexpected (yet welcome, for Pakistan) international attention to the long-simmering Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan. Another foreign trip of note was his participation in the United Nations General Assembly in 2019 in New York, where he met with heads of state on the sidelines as well as leaders of think tanks, human rights organizations, and industry. He also gave a 50-minute speech on the revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution and what that meant for Kashmir, which became the most-viewed speech by a leader on the UN's YouTube platform (*Dawn*, 2019d), and was covered by prominent international media outlets including *The New York Times*. As effects are larger when the leaders' public diplomacy efforts are reported in the news media and do not fade away immediately (Goldsmith et al., 2021), this was likely very effective for public diplomacy.

Second, PM Khan's government is focused on issues that matter to Pakistan as well as to other countries in the world, such as climate change. By focusing on a topic such as climate change, which poses a threat to all countries, and where Pakistan can contribute positively, PM Khan has created an opportunity for the international community to view the country through a new lens as a reliable partner, working to resolve internationally relevant issues. The country floated its first "Green Bond" (Gilespie & Ritchie, 2021, para. 1), amounting to $500 million, which was received well in global markets. *The Washington Post* reported on Pakistan banning the use of single-use plastic bags in the country (Constable, 2019). The Pakistani private sector also became involved: Nestlé Pakistan announced the usage of paper straws for all its products in May 2021, while Coca-Cola Pakistan planned to invest in building Pakistan's first "plastic roads" (*The Nation*, 2021b, para. 2) made of recycled plastic bottles. Though these would be considered "symbolic actions," they are "a component of the national story and the means of telling it" (Anholt, 2013, p. 3). Pakistan is extremely vulnerable to climate change, but given the seemingly "consistent, coordinated, and unbroken stream of useful, noticeable, world-class, and above all relevant ideas, products, and policies [to counter climate change]" (Anholt, 2013, p. 2), participating in the global fight against climate change could also serve to enhance Pakistan's reputation. Indeed, Pakistan was invited to U.S. President Joe Biden's climate summit for world leaders whose countries "that . . . show strong climate leadership, are 'especially vulnerable' to climate impacts or are 'charting innovative pathways to a net-zero economy'" (Kugelman, 2021, para. 2). Pakistan also hosted World Environment Day in 2021. The Pakistani government's first "billion tree tsunami" and later "10 billion tree tsunami" (Farand, 2021, para. 3) afforestation projects have gotten international attention. PM Johnson, at the UN General Assembly in New York in 2021, stated, "I invite everyone to follow the example of Imran Khan of Pakistan who has pledged to plant 10 billion trees in Pakistan alone, and he is doing so" (*The Nation*, 2021a, para. 3).

A government can also engage in successful public diplomacy by facilitating access (Donfried, n.d.) for other countries. According to Anholt (2013), most countries need to undertake educating foreigners about their country and celebrating rather than reducing their country's complexity is the most efficacious

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[3] BLA is a militant organization based in Afghanistan that has waged a violent armed struggle against Pakistan for what it claims as self-determination for the Baloch people and the separation of Balochistan (Bhadrakumar, 2019).

way to develop a national brand. This eventually leads to an increased exchange of knowledge, products, and capital. Anholt (2013) gave the example of young Iraqis having a much more favorable view of British soldiers in Baghdad if they had used the British Council Library in the city. Following the same technical-economic approach, Pakistan has become a "dominant actor" in terms of "mango diplomacy" (Ahmed & Jahanzaib, 2022, abstract), executing an extensive strategy such as mango exhibitions, not only to "increase its mango exports but also goodwill in target countries" (Ahmed & Jahanzaib, 2022, abstract).

Although public diplomacy should be aligned with a country's foreign policy and be in tune with medium-term objectives and long-term aims, it is not entirely suitable to leave it to official channels or even linked with the state (Melissen, 2005). Accordingly, PM Khan's government modernized visa facilities for foreigners by introducing e-visas and visas on arrival for both tourism and business for select countries. Citing past difficulties in obtaining a tourist visa to Pakistan, PM Khan said, "the first step [is] to open up the country" (*Dawn*, 2019b) to see the beauty of the country and "the potential for investment in Pakistan" (*Dawn*, 2019b, para. 10). Tourism projects such as the *Al-Biruni* radius were developed as, according to PM Khan, "cultural heritage needs to be preserved for future generations" (Geo News, 2021, para. 1). His focus on tourism led to *Forbes* listing Pakistan as one of its Top 10 "under the radar" (Shackle, 2020, para. 6) holiday destinations for 2020, while *Condé Nast Traveler* ranked it No. 1 overall. British Airways restarted its flights to the country in 2019 after a decade. The *Economist* reported Pakistan to be the third most important location in terms of growth in tourism (Tarar, 2021). Unfortunately, with the advent of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 and the ensuing worldwide restrictions on travel and movement, Pakistan was not able to fully benefit or even accurately measure the impact of its efforts to boost tourism.

Countering the Image of Extremism

However, before tourism can be realistically boosted in Pakistan, countering threats of terrorism and extremist ideologies for foreign publics is imperative by, first, improving security and engaging in peace facilitation globally. The PTI-led Pakistani government appeared to counter the above-mentioned threats of terrorism and extremist ideologies for foreign publics by focusing on narrative building. To evaluate whether they were successful in doing so, forming the purpose of this article, both inductive (Klauer & Phye, 2008) and deductive reasoning (Ratolo & Sator, 2018) were concurrently applied in the first phase of the study to qualitatively explore and select themes by "detecting generalizations, rules, or regularities'' (Klauer & Phye, 2008, p. 86) in Pakistani officials' publicly available interviews and hearings a month before and a month after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. The samples included are linked to both the Afghan Peace Process as well as multiple premises about Pakistan's relationship with the West believed to be true throughout the U.S. war in Afghanistan as confirmed by past engagement (Ratolo & Sator, 2018). Consequently, Pakistani officials mainly focused on the following themes while on the topic of Afghanistan: the importance of peace in Afghanistan for Pakistan considering that Islamabad cannot afford another refugee crisis on top of the approximately 3.5 million Afghan refugees it has hosted since the 1980s. Islamabad has "no favorites'' (Siddiqui, 2021, para. 8) and any protracted internal destabilization would have ripple effects on Afghanistan's neighborhood. Therefore, Pakistan would support an inclusive Afghan government especially given that Afghanistan needs international support. In the second phase, Western officials' publicly available interviews and hearings a month before and a month after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 were compared in terms of thematic concurrence to demonstrate whether

Pakistani officials were successful in influencing the narrative. The timing of both Pakistani and Western officials' publicly available interviews and hearings was also noted to decipher the potential direction of influence.

With that said, Pakistan supported and facilitated talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad acknowledged Pakistan's "special role for peace in Afghanistan" (*The News*, 2021, paras. 1–2). Unfortunately, the Afghan Peace Process did not result in the Taliban and Afghan government cooperating to form an inclusive government, with the Taliban taking over the Afghan capital Kabul on August 15, 2021. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, having left for the United Arab Emirates (UAE), continued to blame the Pakistani government and military for providing support to Taliban fighters that enabled them to succeed (Ellis-Peterson & Baloch, 2021). Vowing for Pakistan to only be a "partner in peace and not in conflict" (Latif, 2021, para. 2), PM Khan had previously responded to earlier claims by President Ghani at a high-level international conference:

> I can assure you that no country has tried harder to get the Taliban on the dialogue table than Pakistan. We have made every effort, short of taking a military action against the Taliban in Pakistan . . . to blame Pakistan for what is going on in Afghanistan is extremely unfair. (Sajid, 2021, para. 5)

Following the Taliban takeover, the Pakistani government diplomatically engaged with international stakeholders, including foreign governments and heads of multilateral organizations, resulting in joint press conferences and telephonic conversations with leaders of Germany, Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Turkey, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Canada, Austria, Slovenia, Iran, and Italy by early September 2021, assumedly to appear engaged with the international community in ensuring an inclusive government in Afghanistan. Highlighting the plight of everyday Afghans in an interview with *Sky News*, Pakistani Foreign Minister (FM) Shah Mahmood Qureshi said, there is no option of "abandonment of the Afghan people" (Rossi, 2021, 1:07).

These stances have been backed by actions: Pakistan signed a statement saying a Taliban emirate would be unacceptable to it as part of the extended "troika" (Afzal, 2021a, para. 3) on peaceful settlement in Afghanistan, including the United States, China, and Russia, as well as initiated talks with the Taliban to have an inclusive government (TRT World, 2021). Pakistan also played a significant role in ensuring evacuation of foreign nationals from Afghanistan and facilitating humanitarian efforts. This led to much appreciation from various heads of states and multilateral organizations that used "twiplomacy" (Burson, Cohn, & Wolfe, 2020, para. 11) to convey their appreciation, reaching millions of people in foreign countries.

Although there is a risk of providing more factual information not necessarily translating into foreign audiences being persuaded because "new facts provoke dissonance with longstanding opinions and feelings, [and] audiences may disregard them" (Entman, 2008, p. 89), such efforts by the Pakistani government to shift the narrative on Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan seem to have moved the needle, so to say, at least when it comes to Western elites. During an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), British Chief of the Defense Staff General Sir Nick Carter stated:

> Pakistan has lived with its challenges and hosts more than 3.5 million refugees on its soil
> . . . I am in no doubt that my opposite number in Pakistan, General Bajwa, is very genuine
> when he says that he wants a stable and moderate Afghanistan . . . Pakistan has now built
> a fence along the border and [is] keeping a strict eye on the cross-border movement.
> (*Dunya News*, 2021, paras. 1–6)

A similar shift in narrative can be detected among U.S. elites. In July 2021, the U.S. State Department acknowledged Pakistan as a "helpful and constructive partner" in Afghanistan and that the shared interests of both the countries go well beyond that (*Dawn*, 2021a, para. 1). The U.S. State Department also reportedly refrained from endorsing former Afghan president Ghani's claim during a call with U.S. President Biden, as noted above, that up to 15,000 Pakistanis had joined the Taliban offensive on Kabul as part of a "full-scale invasion" (Iqbal, 2021, paras. 6–10), while praising Pakistan for providing much-needed assistance to U.S. efforts to evacuate American troops and civilians from Afghanistan.

This shift in narrative among foreign, particularly Western, officials increasingly reflected the Pakistani government's views on managing the crisis in Afghanistan, indicating diplomatic success on behalf of the PM Khan–led Pakistan government. Penning an op-ed for *The Washington Post* in June 2021, PM Khan wrote:

> Our countries have the same interest in [Afghanistan]: a political settlement, stability,
> economic development and the denial of any haven for terrorists . . . there are more than
> 3 million Afghan refugees in our country—if there is further civil war, instead of a political
> settlement, there will be many more. (Khan, 2021, para. 3)

By July 2021, the President Biden–led U.S. administration stated, by White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, that they believed lasting peace in Afghanistan was possible only through a political solution, believing "a political solution is the only outcome to lasting peace in Afghanistan, but [they] will continue to provide support to the government in the form of humanitarian support, security support, training" (*The Hindu*, 2021, para. 3).

On July 27, 2021, PM Khan was interviewed by *PBS Hour*, where he declared:

> When there were 150,000 NATO troops in Afghanistan, that was the time to go for a
> political solution. But once they had reduced the troops to barely 10,000, and then, when
> they gave an exit date, the Taliban thought they had won. And so, therefore, it was very
> difficult for now to get them to compromise. (Woodruff & Till, 2021, para. 19)

Forward to September 2021, FM Qureshi, while hosting the first ministerial meeting of Afghanistan's neighbors since the Taliban took over, said that even though the situation in Afghanistan is "complex and fluid," its "new reality" required the world to discard "old lenses," and proceed with a "realistic approach" (First Post, 2021, para. 1). This point of view, focused on accepting ground realities and pragmatism, appears to be reflected in the discourse among American political elites. An example is the statement made

by Scott Anderson, a former State Department lawyer studying the United States recognizing the Taliban government in Afghanistan:

> No one is arguing that the state of Afghanistan has ceased to exist, and the rest of the world can't avoid interacting with it . . . at some point, people are going to have to acknowledge some entity as having the capacity to speak for Afghanistan in exercising its rights or obligations. (Toosi, 2021, para. 6)

The very next day, the White House stated that the Taliban were "cooperating in facilitating the departure of American citizens" and that they showed "flexibility," while being "businesslike and professional in our dealings with them in this effort," calling it a "positive first step" (France24, 2021, paras. 12–13). Furthermore, U.S. military officials stated they may cooperate with the Taliban to battle common enemies such as ISIS-Khorasan (Toosi, 2021). Even though it is not possible to contend that Pakistani officials' appeals for a pragmatic approach toward the Taliban may have been the only factor in the Americans' evaluation of the situation (and was probably not), it is likely that it may have been at least one of the recommendations considered by the American establishment moving forward. This is indicated in U.S. State Secretary Antony Blinken's response to the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee in September 2021 during which American lawmakers called for a reassessment (*Dawn*, 2021c) of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship:

> Pakistan has multiplicity of interests, [with] some that are in conflict with ours . . . it is one that is involved hedging its bets constantly about the future of Afghanistan, it's one that's involved harboring members of the Taliban . . . it is one that's also involved in different points [of] cooperation with us on counterterrorism. (*Dawn*, 2021c, paras. 2–3)

Responding to the allegations made against Pakistan for supporting the Taliban during the same hearing, Maryland Senator Van Hollen pressed:

> We [the United States] pick a date. We say to the Taliban you can attack Afghan forces and then we say, now let's negotiate the future of Afghanistan. Isn't the way it was set up when you walked in? . . . so, the Trump administration, with this negotiation, set it up perfectly for the Taliban . . . I think a number of those countries, at least Pakistan . . . have an interest in preventing chaos and civil war in Afghanistan. (*Dawn*, 2021d, paras. 10–11)

Analyzing the U.S. political elites' statements above in comparison with Pakistani officials' appeals, it can be said that PM Khan and his government's efforts had started to engender a change in the perception of Pakistan among Western elites. Even though PM Khan was ousted from government through a "controversial vote of no confidence" (Mohydin, 2022, p. 1) in April 2022, the narrative on Pakistan's role in the region and especially with respect to Afghanistan has continued by the current Pakistani government with the new FM Bhutto-Zardari calling for international support for Afghanistan in June 2022 and an arguably pragmatic approach toward the Taliban in Afghanistan (Lederer, 2021). The new Pakistani government appears to be more open to seeking better U.S.-Pakistan ties than the one led by PM Khan.

Discussion

The likelihood of the shift in narrative among foreign elites being translated to improved foreign publics' perception of Pakistan is high as elite messaging tends to be very influential when it comes to public opinion formation (Gabel & Scheve, 2007). In fact, "elite communication is the sole force that can move public opinion" (Zaller, 1992, as cited in Feldman, Huddy, & Marcus, 2012, p. 490), confining the public's role to either accept or reject elite messaging. Given their role as a passive audience, the autonomy of democratic citizens is questioned as they are "unable to scrutinize political information or evaluate ongoing political events independently of the pronouncements and actions of politicians and political elites" (Zaller, 1992, as cited in Feldman et al., 2012, p. 490). This is aligned with Robert Entman's (2004) *Projections of Power*, as according to his cascading activation model, agendas and story angles start at the top with the executive (in that study, the White House), then flow downward to the network of non-administration elites, then on to news organizations, before finally reaching the public. For Entman, U.S. elites enjoy enormous power in framing public debate, while the media disseminate the dominant discourse. This means that non-elites have little chance to contest the dominant frames.

Following the shift in Western elites' statements about Pakistan's role in Afghanistan, PM Khan penned an opinion in *The Washington Post* (Khan, 2021) as well as was featured on the cover of *Newsweek* in September 2021 (see Figure 2), both articles highlighting American errors in Afghanistan (including, in PM Khan's opinion, scapegoating Pakistan) and why the United States cannot ignore Afghanistan. It must be noted that both *The Washington Post* (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2021a) and *Newsweek* (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2021b) are considered left-leaning news organizations, as is the incumbent democratic government in Washington, DC, which serves to confirm Entman's (2004) cascading activation model.

Figure 2. Cover page of Newsweek Magazine in September 2021 (O'Connor, 2021).

However, the way the public reacts to those frames generates feedback from lower to higher levels, and this may sometimes lead to a frame adjustment (Entman, 2004). Zaller's model has been observed to have some boundary conditions that need to be considered, such as the increased relevance of any issue in citizens' daily lives, or meaningful exposure to relevant information via the news media that may enable citizens to reasonably determine their own position independently of political elites (Zaller, 1992, as cited in Bullock, 2011). Bahador (2011), however, showed that U.S. media was less likely to cover an issue that did not directly involve Westerners or their military forces, which may translate into less coverage of a post-U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Thus, the power of elite messaging would be even more potent then. With that said, however, the foreign publics may still not have a better view of a country even if they had more or better information (Entman, 2008). Entman (2008) gave an example of the image of America abroad:

> Foreign opposition and resistance to U.S. positions may be grounded in accurate information, not in ignorance or in failures of public diplomacy. Where American policies threaten the widely perceived national interests of another country . . . its publics and elites may well reject even the most sophisticated U.S. public diplomacy initiatives. (Entman, 2008, p. 88)

Whether a change in perception continues or translates into any meaningful benefit for the country remains to be seen. Considering "critics of Pakistan have accused it of hedging its bets over Afghanistan and the Taliban" (Landale, 2021, para. 2) and helping the Taliban that have been a security threat to the United States, while the U.S. withdrawal has been called "botched" and a "disaster" at home and abroad (Collinson, 2021, para. 11). President Biden never established a relationship with PM Khan and did not call him throughout the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan despite Pakistan's significant involvement in the Afghan Peace Process. Perhaps in response to President Biden's "cold shoulder" (Afzal, 2021b, para. 4), PM Khan did not attend the U.S. Summit for Democracy in December 2021 either (Afzal, 2021b). Pakistan's "long-standing support for the group" (Afzal, 2021b, para. 4) led to the Biden administration narrowing the scope of the relationship to limited engagement only. Thus, widespread news coverage of Pakistani officials' statements is not expected. The same news coverage may not even be as palatable for the U.S. public as Pakistan would like, even though 69% of the U.S. public believes the United States did not achieve its objectives in Afghanistan with only 26% believing the Biden administration managed the U.S. troop withdrawal well (Green & Doherty, 2021). However, that the new government is likely to be less critical of the U.S. withdrawal than PM Khan and may be more open to the U.S. demand for the use of Pakistani air bases for monitoring security in Afghanistan, which PM Khan appeared to adamantly oppose (Dagia, 2021), may result in a softer tone in Western elite messaging and coverage of Pakistan's security-oriented role in Afghanistan. While this may lead to a positive change in perception among Western publics about the country, it may also continue to play into terrorism and conflict-related stereotypes already associated with the country as the United States continues to pursue a one-dimensional security-oriented relationship with Pakistan despite the new Pakistani government wanting a "broader relationship" (Nichols, 2022, para. 3).

Most importantly, perhaps, for any country to succeed in enhancing its international reputation, it must focus on developing the "product" (i.e., the country itself). This is especially important given that "there are no shortcuts. Only a consistent, coordinated, and unbroken stream of useful, noticeable, world-class, and above all relevant ideas, products, and policies can, gradually, enhance the reputation of the country that produces them" (Anholt, 2013, p. 7). That means that any Pakistani government, whether led by PM Khan or PM Sharif, should not expect guaranteed or quick returns on public diplomacy efforts unless they are able to sustain them and actually improve security, governance, and international engagement. All such symbolic actions must be "done for a real purpose in the real world, or else it runs the risk of being insincere, ineffective, and perceived as propaganda" (Anholt, 2013, p. 3). Effective public diplomacy efforts are to "ensure information is received in the way that it was intended" (Melissen, 2005, p. 16). The PM Khan-led government's decision to engage and encourage only Western travel bloggers by including them in tourism conferences while excluding local travel bloggers, with the Minister of Tourism stating that "foreign social media personalities better placed to promote Pakistan internationally" (Malik, 2019, para. 1), was criticized because attempts to replace inherited stereotypes with fabricated ones were being made (Anholt, 2013).

In the context of Afghanistan, concerted efforts to contribute to peace and humanitarian efforts in the region must continue and evolve as needed. PM Khan's commitment to humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan led to high praise from American radio and television host Glenn Beck, owner of the charity that arranged the planes. He tweeted:

> [PM Khan's] leadership of placing humanity before politics is a great example of interfaith cooperation . . . Pakistan has once again proven to be a valued partner in all seasons for the United States, despite recent criticisms from some sections of US media. (*Dawn*, 2021e, para. 7)

In another instance, among others, the World Food Programme (WFP) Director David Beasley tweeted to acknowledge Pakistan's support to counter hunger resulting from conflict (*Dawn*, 2021b). These tweets are likely to be effective: according to Pew Research, in 2020, one in four Americans used Twitter, out of almost 60% used the site to regularly access news, while more than two of three Americans used Facebook, out of which more than half used it to regularly access news (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). This is in sharp contrast to a 2012 Pew State of the Media study, which suggested that social networks were mostly an additional way to get the news, rather than a replacement of traditional sources. Public opinion formation has been evidenced to be strongly influenced by this shift (Gabore & Xiujun, 2018). The power of this revolution in communication has introduced new nonstate actors into the diplomatic process, requiring a different approach from the hierarchical club diplomacy model of the past to focus on the flatter network diplomacy model of today (Heine & Turcotte, 2016), which incorporates as well as caters to many stakeholders internationally. It must be fully harnessed and continued by successive Pakistani governments if the country is to truly shed not just its past image but also to recreate a new collective identity.

Conclusion

To gain greater access to scarce resources, including influence, countries must manage their branding by either actively repositioning themselves or by having a consistent and all-embracing national brand strategy. The Pakistani government under PM Khan appeared to understand the importance of developing a positive nation brand for the country when it comes to safeguarding current and future prospects. This seemed to contrast with the past when Pakistan's nation brand was not managed consciously and consistently, especially when it suffered significant damage linked with the U.S. war on terror.

With that said, though the Pakistani government under PM Khan undertook innovative and concerted efforts to develop a positive reputation and global image for the country, more time and consistency across governments is needed to fully benefit from or even accurately measure impact. The Pakistani government should not expect quick, or even guaranteed, returns on public diplomacy efforts, as they must be sustained for a long period of time against a background of improved security and governance along with peace facilitation and international engagement.

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