

Conflict Resolution: Editorialization of Government- Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan Dialogue

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Abstract

Every newspaper publishes an editorial every day to state their official opinion on the most important of issues. Among public and official policymakers, editorials are taken seriously. This study undertook Pakistan's two leading newspapers' editorials – Dawn and The Nation - on the peace talks between the Pakistan government and the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The editorials published between January 2014 and July 2014 on the dialogues were studied. Using agenda-setting approach, this study found that Dawn published 67 and The Nation 61 editorials discussing stakeholders' stance on the dialogue, dialogues bodies, and disruption of dialogues to terrorism and TTP terms. The study measured the editorials to answer research questions.

Key Words: TTP, Peace Dialogues, Editorials

Background of Dialogues

Peace dialogues between the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) government the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) began on after a multi-party conference in September 2013 mandated the government to hold talks to draw a peace deal to end terrorism in Pakistan prevailing here after NATO forces attacked Afghanistan.

The war has left a toll on Pakistan. According to Cost of War (2015). Almost 57,000 Pakistanis – combatants and non-combatants – have been killed since 2001. Of these, about 21,500 are civilians. Nearly 40,000 civilians have been wounded. There are about 1.4 million refugees or internally displaced Pakistanis.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif surprised the nation by going for dialogues while addressing the National Assembly on January 28, 2014. A four-member committee from the government was announced for talks with the TTP with a mandate to enter into peace deals with the TTP. The committee consisted of Prime Minister's Adviser on National Affairs Irfan Siddiqui, journalist Rahimullah Yousufzai,

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former ambassador and expert on Afghanistan affairs Rustam Shah Mohmand and retired Major Amir Shah. Responding to government's move, the banned TTP nominated on January 31 a five-member committee which had Imran Khan (PTI), Maulana Samiul Haq (JUI-S chief), Abdul Aziz (cleric of *Lal Masjid*), Prof Mohammad Ibrahim (Jamaat-i-Islami), and Mufti Kifayatullah (JUI-F). Of them, Imran Khan, Abdul Aziz and Kafayutllah said they refuse to be part of the committee. The ensuing committee had Samiul Haq, Prof Ibrahim and Abdul Aziz. The committee met for the first time on February 4, 2014. On February 4, 2014 both the government and Taliban committees were to meet for the first time but the meeting was postponed as Sachtv.tv (2014) reported "the meeting was postponed due to non-inclusion of PTI and JUI-F in the Taliban's nominated committee".

Along the dialogue, terror activities were making headlines. On February 11, 13 people died in a blast at cinema in Peshawar. The attack was taken a sort of breach of confidence on the TTP and a violation of a ceasefire. Increasing incidence of terror perturbed the government's committee. Prior to this blast, a twin blast in the Picture House, a cinema in the heart of Peshawar city, claimed four lives and left over a dozen injured. On March 12, 2014 the government changed the committee members. The newly-formed committee consisted of Habibullah Khattak, secretary of the Ports and Shipping, FATA Secretary Arbab Arif, Prime Minister's Additional Secretary Fawad Hassan Fawad and former ambassador Rustam Shah Mohmand.

On March 13, 2014, STAP (2014) quoted Irfan Siddiqui as having said "the talks had entered a crucial stage and the two member Taliban talks committee would give a report about its talks with the Taliban leadership after its return from Miranshah in North Waziristan Agency of FATA within two days".

During the dialogue process, the dialogue witnessed stalemate many times. As talks were going nowhere Pakistani aircrafts started strikes in North Waziristan, and on June 26, the Operation Zarb-i-Azab was launched by the Pakistani army, which was heralded as the termination of talks, though a formal announcement in this regards was never announced.

Significance of Editorial

An editorial is a sort of opinion, published in newspapers at a dedicated place every day. According to A Singh (1906) and S Singh (1906), a quality editorial piece is about expressing an opinion in such a way that it does not look opinionated. It is about teaching without taking up pedagogical tools. Fourie (2001) in his book outlines the importance of different sections of a newspaper like front page, back page and inside pages. According to NC State Student Media (n.d.), if used properly, the editorial page can be a great way to bring about a change in a community.

According to Weintraut (n.d.), an editorial reflects a newspaper's opinion on an issue it is just like the arguments of a lawyer built on an argument to persuade readers to think the same way they do.

Peace Dialogues

Ramirez (2007) wrote in his policy paper that there is nothing better than using communication and personal contacts to achieve peace and dialogue leads to peace, and this method is suitable for solving interpersonal, national and international tensions. Viewing the importance of dialogue to forge peace and inability of army operations in the Tribal Areas, the Pakistani state announced dialogues with the TTP after an All-Party Conference held in Islamabad also mandated the government to hold dialogues with the militants.

Research Questions

Following are the questions to be answered in the study.

- How much the editorials of *Dawn* and *The Nation* covered from January 2014 to July 2014 the government-TTP dialogue?
- What were the slants in the coverage of the dialogue between the Pakistan government and the TTP in the editorials of the selected newspaper?

Literature Review

Numerous studies have been done on newspapers' editorials on issues like politics, health, education economy and social, and foreign policy issues. Editorials examine the exposition of important sections of public opinion towards issues and problems. Also, a good deal of literature is available on the newspapers' line on conflicts in other places. Hallock (2007) wrote that researchers had yet to give attention on the impact of editorials on public mind. He, however, cited a speech by Beldon Associate's John Harper who told the National Editorial Writers' Conference held in 1992 that according to a survey, 60 percent of the newspapers' subscribers read newspapers only for editorials. Because of the enormous readership of editorials, each and every word of an editorial is very important for the government, public and overall society. Rasool (2010) discussed the media role in influencing the government's policies in conflict resolution, saying it has generated a heated debate since early 60 and it the media is viewed as an important player. Also, Rasool mentions the objectivity of the media which helps assess the performance of media in societies which believe in liberal values. Newspapers, however, do not necessarily follow objectivity while discussing conflicts. They mostly follow the lines of their governments.

In the Review of Newspaper Studies, Kim (2000) found that The New York Times and The Washington Post blasted the Chinese government for repression of the Tianmen Movement. The newspapers, he found, were not so harsh while commenting on the Korean government's response to the Kwangju Movement.

Rasool (2010) quoting media experts said objectivity had yet to become a practice in journalism in certain circumstances.

Iqbal (2010) while discussing the rise of Talibanisation found glaring differences in the editorials of *Dawn* and *The News* and said *The News* was harsher towards Taliban from its counterpart, *Dawn*. The editorial treatment of the Pakistani government-TTP dialogues comes under the preview of agenda setting theory of research. Agenda-setting theory is the news media's power to change, impact or shape the focus of different issues on the public agenda (McCombs, M., Reynolds, A (2002). McCombs and Shaw (1972) quoting "The World outside and the Pictures in Our Heads, states that the mass media connect events between the world and public minds. Cohen (1963) observed that the press even though might not be successful in telling people what to think, but it could be successful in suggesting them about the issues worthy of thinking and that editors, writers and publishers could influence the perspective of the people regarding world through their papers.

Rogers and Dearing (1998) explain three types of agenda setting – public agenda setting, media agenda setting and policy. Of them, public's agenda is the traditional hypothesis, media's agenda as a dependent variable, while policy agenda is about political agenda setting.

According to Iyengar and Kinder (1987 and 1990) in the agenda setting theory, accessibility is very important. To them, accessibility implies if an issue gets covered more and more and with prominence, the issue will be part of audience's active memory.

Methodology

Content analysis is the methodology used for this study. The research techniques used in this research study are both the quantitative and the qualitative in these discrete stages.

The Universe

In this research study, the editorials of *Dawn* and *The Nation* published from January 2014 to July 2014 on the topics of dialogue between the Pakistan government and the TTP will be analyzed.

Sample

The editorials of *Dawn* and *The Nation* on the peace dialogue between the Pakistan

government and the TTP will be selected as the sample of the study.

Unit of Analysis

In this study the unit of analysis is the editorial of each newspaper.

Measurements

Each editorial containing the word peace talks, peace dialogues in any reference were used to determine the editorial on the issue. The coded topics were analysed and coded if the topics were positive, negative or neutral.

Code Sheet

A coding sheet was prepared to put in various categories assigned to the coders. The coders were acquainted with the stances of the two sides – Taliban militants and the government of Pakistan.

An editorial which supports the peace dialogue between the Pakistan government and the TTP would be positive (+), while an editorial which cast opposition would be negative (-), and an editorial with balancing meaning would be treated as neutral (0).

Results and Analysis

A total of 125 editorials were written on the issue of peace talks. Of them, Dawn carried 58 editorials (46.0), while The Nation came up with 67 editorials.

Table 1. Number of Editorials Covering Peace Talks between the TTP and the Government

Newspaper	No of editorials
<i>Dawn</i>	58 (46.0)
<i>The Nation</i>	67 (54.0)
Total	125

In Table 1 it is illustrated that a total 125 editorials were published by both papers from January-July, 2014. Of them, *Dawn* published 58 (46.0) editorials while *The Nation*'s score was 67 (54.0). The table highlights the month-wise break up.

Table 2. Number of Editorials Covering Peace Talks between the TTP and the Government

Month	<i>Dawn</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	Total
January	12 (53.6)	10 (45.4)	22
February	10 (34.4)	19 (65.6)	29
March	10 (45.4)	12 (53.6)	22
April	12 (60.0)	8 (40.0)	20
May	9 (45.0)	11 (55.0)	20
June	5 (41.6)	7 (58.4)	12
July	0	0	0
Total	58 (46.4)	67 (54.6)	125

Both *Dawn* and *The Nation* publish three editorials every day, and of them the most pressing issue is taken up in the first editorial, and less important in the following two editorials.

Table 2 shows the editorial issue placement in the two newspapers. The findings show that both *Dawn* and *The Nation* gave utmost importance to the dialogue process between the TTP and the government.

Table 3. Placement of editorials on peace talks in *Dawn* and *The Nation*

Editorial position No	<i>Dawn</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	Total
1	50 (46.2)	58 (53.7)	108
2	6 (66.6)	3 (33.4)	9
3	2 (25.0)	6 (75.0)	8
Total	58 (46.4)	67 (53.6)	125

Editorials published in *Dawn* and *The Nation* on peace dialogues had a range of topics in them. Of them, the topics given in Table 3 were dominant.

Table 4. Placement of editorials on peace talks in *Dawn* and *The Nation*

Topic	<i>Dawn</i>	<i>The Nation</i>	Total
Terrorism impacting peace dialogues	15 (48.3)	16 (51.7)	31
Dialogue committees	5 (50.0)	5 (50.0)	10
Term/proceedings of dialogue	14 (53.8)	12 (46.2)	26
Stakeholders' (government, TTP, army and political parties) stance on dialogue	21 (42.8)	28 (57.1)	49
Military operations during the talks	3 (33.0)	6 (66.0)	9
	58 (46.4)	67 (53.6)	125

The peace talks initiative with the militant groups' representative body – TTP – by the government did not attract any favorable coverage from the editorials of both selected newspapers from the pre-dialogue to during- and post-dialogue months since the editorials opposed to entering dialogues with such people who even did not acknowledge the state of Pakistan.

Table 5 shows the extent of unfavorable and favorable coverage.

Table 5. Overall slants in coverage

Newspaper	Unfavourable	Favourable	Neutral
<i>Dawn</i>	55 (45.8)	3 (60.0)	0
<i>The Nation</i>	65 (55.2)	2 (20.0)	0
Total	120 (96.0)	5 (4.0)	0

Analysis

Here is the analysis of *Dawn's* and *The Nation's* editorial treatment of the dialogue between the Pakistan government and the TTP from January 1, 2014 to December, 2014.

DAWN: *Dawn* in its editorial ('The wrong choice', 2014) was much skeptical about the government's policy of dialogues with the TTP. Criticising the "so-called strategy" to fight the militancy through talks with the militants, the editorial rapped the government's choice of principal interlocutors to hold talks between the TTP and the federal government. In another editorial (An intrepid policeman, 2014), *Dawn* linked the murder of policeman SP Aslam Khan in Karachi on January 10, 2014 with his hot pursuit of militants and criminals. It says the killing of the Karachi cop highlights militants' operational networking. It goes on, "The incident, yet again, makes us question the logic of talking to the militants." It also advised the government to revise its decision to hold talks with the government. On January 10, 2014 SP Aslam's murder was claimed by the TTP, and then on January 14, PML-N leader Amir Muqam survived an attempt on his life in Shangla and *Dawn* in its editorial (Ambivalent on militancy), castigated the state, politicians and the public for their confused stance on tackling militancy. In its editorial (Indecision yet again, 2014), *Dawn* commented on the session of Parliament convened to discuss its militancy policy. The editorial showed skepticism on the success of the talks as the prime minister did not attend the session. In its editorial (The new TTP, 2014), *Dawn* narrated the history of dialogues and accords between the army and the TTP which started from South Waziristan in 2004, and failed. The TTP announced its five-member dialogue body which consisted of the representatives of the PTI, the JI, the JUI-F, the Lal Masjid cleric, and the JUI-S. In its editorial (The TTP's choice), *Dawn* said the choice had

exposed the religious right's clear tilt towards the militant outfit, while the government also wanted to have PTI in its team.

For the first time, *Dawn* in its editorial (The right stance, 2014), praised the government for taking a tough, clear stance on the talks a TTP-owned bomb attack on policemen in Karachi. As the TTP's announced ceasefire ended, the militant group did not announce extending it. *Dawn's* editorial (Underhand tactics, 2014) saw it an act pressure the government perhaps for more concessions. *Dawn's* editorial (Still in the dark, 2014) criticised the kind of secretiveness by the government, military and the body holding dialogues with the TTP after the military pounded Taliban in North Waziristan. The army announced starting a military operation – Zarb-i-Azab – against the militants on June 15, 2014 and *Dawn's* editorial (North Waziristan operation, 2014) welcomed it.

The Nation: New year brings new resolutions, but according to *The Nation's* editorial (A self-destructive agenda, 2014), to the PML-N it is a business usual as he met with JUI-S Chief Samiul Haq empowering him to hold dialogues with the TTP. In a satirical tone, it called the initiative a “morale boost” for TTP. On January 6, 2014 the interior minister talked of the security policy, which *The Nation* in its editorial (A hint of a plan, 2014) appreciated, saying as TTP's response on talks was awaited, the security seemed a proactive approach to tackle militancy and it was the only option. The appreciation of the government was, however, short-lived. As on January 9, in a school bombing in Hangu, Aitzaz Hassan challenged the bomber, *The Nation's* editorial (One in a million, 2014) criticized those supporting the dialogues with the murderers. It said the TTP felt no fear in targeting people. In its editorial (Too insistent on ‘talks’, 2014) *The Nation* asked the minister be mindful of the factions showing even positive response to dialogue. The terror attacks killing SP Chaudhry Aslam and Aitzaz Hasan in Hangu had impacted government's dialogue offers. The TTP came up with more destruction as it claimed killing 25 paramilitary troops on January 20, 2014. The next day, *The Nation* in its editorial (No more talks, 2014) pulverized the TTP for its barbaric attack and also criticised those using the narratives like “...talks of ‘consensus’, threats of ‘blowback’, and cautions of ‘unwinnable war’” to delay the army action in North Waziristan. In another editorial (Stable status quo, 2014), *The Nation* criticised the rumors that the government would take action against those factions abhorrent of talks. In its editorial (Welcome to the circus, 2014) *The Nation* dubbed TTP's recent talks offer just to add to confusion while the government also neither took action, nor talked with the militants. In yet another editorial (Unnerved and undecided, 2014) *The Nation's* editorial again criticized the government's lackluster response to public demand for operation against militant. Of the operation or talks, take the step in any direction.

Research Questions and Testing Hypothesis

RQ 1: How much the issue of peace talks between the government and the TTP was covered in the editorials of *Dawn* and *The Nation* from January 2014 to July 2014?

The selected newspapers covered peace talks between the government and the TTP 125 times in the selected time period. Of the total 125 editorials, *Dawn* wrote 58 editorials while *The Nation* took up the issue in 67 editorials (see table 4).

RQ 3: What slant was adopted in the editorials of the selected newspapers?

The peace talks initiative with the militant groups' representative body – TTP – by the government did not attract any favorable coverage from the editorials of both selected newspapers from the pre-dialogue to during- and post-dialogue months since the editorials opposed to entering dialogues with such people who even did not acknowledge the state of Pakistan.

Conclusion

Going into dialogues with such a militant organization, which has claimed to killed people in acts of violence had never been an easy job for the government. The editorials of the selected newspapers were open with their agenda setting plans. The content analysis of the study found that editorials were written creating a sort of bad impression of the government dubbing it weak and always ready to surrender to the militants. Regardless of the fact that the dialogue had been started after a political summit's recommendations, the editorials of the selected newspapers never showed any sign of leniency toward the government for the fact that the other state simply did not recognize the state. They kept on urging the government to do something tough and now. It is safe to say that the government had no backing of the press during the dialogue side by side framing the TTP merciless and killers for its acts of terrorism.

The detailed study of editorials of *The Nation* and *Dawn* enables the researcher to suggest some recommendations as listed below:

□□ Showing too much pessimism in editorials and security related issues should be dealt with care in editorials and during the war-like situation, criticizing the state or army ruthlessly only gives psychological benefits to the anti-state factions, so state and army should not be criticised so often and so openly.

□□ Government's and army's policymakers should consult and brief the media people during critical situation, giving them optimum information, so that the flow of information keep the situation clearer and gag rumor mills.

□□ As Pakistan has suffered the most at the hands of terrorism, the editorial writers should take up this issue with a great care and come up measures to check the phenomena.

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