

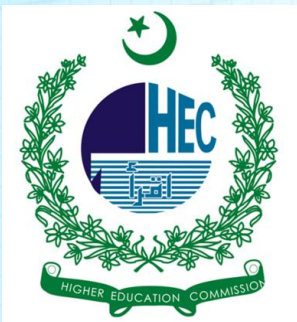
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Between Strategic Neutrality and Regional Solidarity: A Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis of the US-Iran Conflict Narratives in Pakistani Print Media



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Abstract

This research analyzes discursive manoeuvres and media framing of the United States – Iran conflict in Pakistan's high-brow English language newspapers (Daily Dawn and The News International) in an era of intense regional conflicts and sensitive negotiations. A special corpus was created and analysed using a mixed methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) with Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) as its underlying theory, which comprised 283 editorials and op-ed articles (245,618 words). The statistical Keyness, collocation networks and KWIC (Keyword-in-Context) concordances that focused on the principal actors were subjected to a computational analysis. The study is theoretically a combination of Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Teun van Dijk's sociocognitive approach. The empirical results show a very polarized editorial environment: Daily Dawn was cautious and legalistic, spoke of international legal standards, institutional de-escalation and regional solidarity to safeguard the internal equilibrium of Pakistan and protection of its porous borders. In contrast, The News International followed a realist approach and used the metaphor of the "bridge" of diplomacy as opposed to the "pillar" of economy to condemn the mediation by the state as an uncompensated strategic service with no entry for the fragile Pakistani economy on the balance sheet. The outcomes show how domestic media representation of global conflicts is negotiated within the context of the national security agendas of the elites, and how these media representations continue to struggle with the enormous macroeconomic and structural dependence.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies, US-Iran Conflict, Media Framing, Pakistani Press, Strategic Neutrality.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

On February 28, 2026, a coordinated and intense kinetic course of action by a joint U.S.-Israeli military force against the Islamic Republic of Iran (IR Iran) nuclear and military infrastructure completely changed the geopolitical map of Western Asia (Global Foreign Policies Review, 2026). Central to this military operation were three nuclear facilities, where Iran is known to be trying to build nuclear weapons, which are deeply buried: Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan, and the first hours of the attack saw the assassination of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In response to this existential threat, the Iranian state's alternative command structure deployed its asymmetrical forces, including swarms of cruise missiles and fast-attack drones, targeting U.S. military assets in Western Asia, Israel, and critical shipping lanes in the Gulf.

The conflict quickly turned to the Strait of Hormuz as the main choke point, where Iran's Persian Gulf Strait Authority declared an area of "management and supervision" that required tolls and required all ships to get permission before going through the strait, a development that would have a significant impact on regional security (Dawn, 2026). The blockage of this major waterway used by about 20% of the world's crude oil and liquefied

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natural gas (LNG) shipments has created an instant global economic crisis. The unpredictability of global energy markets caused crude oil prices to rise significantly, and the UN cut its global growth prediction for 2026 to 2.5%, pointing to the substantial food and energy price shocks that hit poor nations the hardest. To circumvent the Iranian blockade, the United States dispatched "Project Freedom," that is, a naval carrier strike group (including the USS George H.W. Bush) to provide merchant shipping with free passage through the Strait, bringing it to the brink of a "catastrophic, unrestricted" war.

In this historic scenario, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan played an indispensable role as a mediator in the backchannel negotiations leading to a delicate bilateral ceasefire agreement on 8th April 2026 and hosting the historic "Islamabad Peace Talks" on 11th-12th April 2026 (Al Jazeera, 2026). In contrast to the previous years of relative international isolation, Pakistan's unexpected role as a diplomatic "middleman" is similar to the one it played during Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China in 1971 (Kurlantzick, 2026). This was due to Pakistan's special diplomatic position, as it did not have any U.S. military base, did not have to face Iran's retaliatory attacks, and had been the diplomatic home of Iran's Interests Section in Washington since the U.S. diplomatic ties with Iran were cut off in 1979.

In addition, the civil-military leadership of Pakistan, headed by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Chief of Defence Forces Field Marshal Asim Munir, has strong security and transactional ties with the U.S. and the Gulf Arab states, and historical and cultural ties with Tehran (Rana, 2026). This access to both sides enabled Islamabad to fill the void as a little-known interlocutor acceptable to both sides in the face of a total lack of trust globally.

1.2 Study Purpose

This study aims at identifying and problematizing the core research issues that are the matter of concern of this research. In this context, it is the deep discursive dilemma of a structurally dependent, economically fragile middle power like Pakistan in high-stakes military conflict between its contiguous neighbour, Iran and its principal security-economic patron, America. The Pakistani state machine had tried to appear as a mediator of the region, and during the crisis of 2026, it was seen maintaining "calibrated neutrality" as a way to project its image as a diplomat in order to foster its image as a regional mediator. The Pakistani state machine had been trying to appear as a mediator of the region, and during the crisis of 2026 it was seen maintaining "calibrated neutrality" as a way to project its image as a diplomat in order to foster its image as a regional mediator. The elite English-language print outlets, in particular *The Dawn* and *The News International*, had to work discursively to fit Pakistan's extensive and structural weaknesses, such as its critical balance of payments crisis, the electricity crisis and the volatile sectarian dynamics with its geopolitical realities of transactional security ties. This paper examines in detail the process of this ideological (re)negotiation, and investigates how media representations were used to justify the state's risk-containment diplomacy and/or to critically expose the strategic and financial constraints of being a "bridge" but not a "pillar".

1.3 Research Objectives

This study seeks to achieve three primary academic objectives:

1. To quantitatively analyze the statistical distribution of keywords, semantic

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domains, and lexical collocations associated with the primary actors (the United States, Iran, and Pakistan) within the compiled media corpus during the 2026 conflict.

2. To qualitatively investigate how the metaphors of the diplomatic "bridge" and the economic "pillar" were discursively deployed in *The Dawn* and *The News International* to frame the utility, financial viability, and strategic limitations of Pakistan's foreign policy.
3. To deconstruct the micro-linguistic choices, modality, and thematic structures within the editorials to reveal the underlying ideological tensions between international legalism, cautious de-escalation, and transactional realism.

1.4 Research Questions

This study has three primary research questions to directly respond to the research objectives:

1. What are the statistically significant keywords and collocations of the search nodes "Iran", "US/United States", and "mediation" in *The Dawn* and *The News International* sub-corpora during the 2026 military crisis?
2. How do the publications discursively negotiate the tension between Pakistan's structural vulnerabilities (economic, energy, and sectarian) and its diplomatic agency as a mediator?
3. In what ways do the micro-linguistic patterns (such as transitivity, nominalization, and modal verbs) in the editorials of both newspapers reflect broader ideological divisions regarding Pakistan's strategic alignment in a multipolar world?

1.5 Rationale of the Study

This research significantly contributes to both computational linguistics and international relations by demonstrating the use of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) in providing an empirical, reproducible, and falsifiable foundation for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Qualitative political discourse analysis within media and communication studies has faced criticism for its text selection and the subjective practice of 'cherry-picking' texts in a manner that aligns with ideological preferences. This study is able to avoid researcher bias, as it uses large-scale computer-assisted profiling, with human qualitative investigation, to anchor the qualitative close readings in statistically representative language patterns.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the knowledge on middle-power diplomacy in extreme systemic pressures. This challenges the notion of media as a mere messenger of state agenda, and examines the ways in which the domestic media negotiate the regional security threats, economic vulnerabilities and cultural connection in the face of global confrontation. In the end, this study offers a discourse-based, thorough analysis of a crucial episode in Pakistan's foreign policy and demonstrates the use of language in creating national agency and dealing with strategic risk in a global crisis.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on the foreign policy of Pakistan has always identified Pakistan's paradoxical stance in the global geopolitical scene (Chaudhry & Ashraf, 2012; Siraj, 2007). Many analysts of South Asian security characterize Pakistan's diplomatic history as a quest for strategic balance in the face of high levels of pressure from outside and vulnerability on the inside (Rana, 2026). It constitutes a delicate equilibrium, particularly within the triangular relationship including the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Global Foreign Policies Review, 2026). Initially, Pakistan's relationship with the United States has consistently been transactional, characterised by security alliances, military assistance, and

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institutional connections, including the Pentagon and Pakistan's military headquarters in Rawalpindi (Ali & Qadir, 2012).

In contrast, Iran is a neighbour that is contiguous and culturally and historically linked. As Qazi and Shah (2018) noted, that Iran was very enthusiastic about establishing friendly relations with Pakistan at the time of its formation, and it provided Pakistan with all kinds of support during the wars of 1965 and 1971. Iran, as the neighbouring country, supported the establishment of Pakistan and wanted to establish friendly relations with Pakistan from the beginning. But Pakistan's close proximity to Saudi Arabia, leading to an increased level of strategic dependence, including the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement signed on 17th September 2025, has always been a structural limitation on its relations with Tehran, which has kept it in a constant state of diplomatic tension (Kurlantzick, 2026).

Global Foreign Policies Review (2026) brought an unprecedented set of challenges in this delicate triangular dynamic with the introduction of the 2026 US-Iran war. The magnitude of "Operation Epic Fury", in which Pakistan saw the Iranian leadership decapitated and its nuclear and military facilities demolished, compelled it to move from a passive balancing to a proactive risk containment approach (Al Jazeera, 2026; Rana, 2026). Conflict resolution theories argue that middle power mediation takes place most effectively when the mediator has unique access, historical credibility and a vested interest in averting regional collapse, but doesn't have the coercive power to set terms for combatants (Al Jazeera, 2026). In the year of the crisis, 2026, Pakistan fit all the criteria perfectly.

It also did not have any American military bases and served as the custodian of Iran's Interests Section in Washington since 1979, thus being spared from retaliatory Iranian attacks. Furthermore, India has had a relative thaw in ties with Islamabad in the mid-2020s, with high-level talks between Field Marshal Asim Munir and the Trump administration providing Pakistan with an unusual opportunity for bilateral access. However, critical scholars of international relations believe that Pakistan's mediation activities were from the start structurally unneutral, as it was simultaneously committed to Saudi Arabia and China, and to the Gulf economy (Australian Outlook, 2026).

Media framing theory is important in the analysis of the way these complexities of foreign policy are digested in the domestic public sphere (Entman, 1993). Media does not just disseminate information but rather; by selecting, highlighting and ignoring events, editors and columnists create different "interpretive frames" which determine the understanding of the international crises among the public and the policy makers (Waqas et al., 2021). In Pakistan, the elite English-language media has a disproportionate control over the foreign policy decision-making process, and the process of discursive negotiation of national interests can be seen primarily there (Ali & Qadir, 2012).

Many consider The Dawn to have been the paper of record for the diplomatic corps, bureaucracy and military elite (Siraj, 2007), started by the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Comparative studies of how Pakistani media frames regional conflicts have shown that The Dawn always takes a "peace journalism" approach to such conflicts, highlighting diplomatic etiquette, international law, the authority of the UN Security Council and the long-term institutional benefits of de-escalation (Qazi & Shah, 2018). The News International, on the other hand, a part of the well-known Jang Group,

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targets a large yet socio-economically diverse but politically aware readership (Abbas & Tabassum, 2026). However, it also helps to maintain regional stability and is often reported as pragmatic realism, with a significant focus on economic security, transactional costs, and the material impacts of geopolitical change (Saleem, 2026).

This opposition of the two editorial stances was discursively revealed in the 2026 war when the question of Pakistan's strategic value was discussed in the pages of Dawn (2026) and Saleem (2026). The News International published a very critical realist analysis (Saleem 2026) while The Dawn portrayed the "Islamabad Opening" and subsequent peace talks as a symbol of the "diplomatic credibility" and "moral authority" of Pakistan as a neutral facilitator (Al Jazeera 2026). In particular, the political analyst Farrukh Saleem used the metaphor of the 'Pillar versus Bridge' in The News.

Acknowledging that Pakistan was being utilized as a 'bridge' by regional and global powers to serve their strategic interests, Saleem (2026) pointed out that the country was a 'repeat use' mediator as it was not being paid any substantial amount of economic compensation. This vision holds that in a transactional reality, becoming a "bridge" is fraught with security risk and of little balance-sheet value, while a "pillar" has systemic value and security and financial or energy dividends for its geopolitical position. The argument between the legalistic and regional-stabilisation perspective of The Dawn and transactionally realistic and balance-sheet oriented perspective of The News International is the central point of scholarly discussion, which this study dissects with the help of the empirical, corpus linguistic lenses.

3.METHODOLOGY

Based on the methodological framework of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), this study is designed with a computational research method of the hybrid approach between quantitative and qualitative. This methodology is a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and the statistical capacity of corpus linguistics (Baker, 2006, 2023; Marchi & Taylor, 2018). English-language editorial and opinion articles published in Pakistan's two primary daily newspapers from the commencement of Operation Epic Fury (February 28, 2026) to the conclusion of the critical post-cessation period (May 22, 2026) of the 2026 US-Iran conflict are the target population (Dawn, 2026; Global Foreign Policies Review, 2026). To compile the US-Iran Conflict Pakistani Media Corpus (UIC-PMC 2026) purposive sampling was used (Partington, 2004). The articles were gathered with web automated Python-based scrapers with the search terms of 'Iran', 'US', 'United States' and 'Pakistan' in the editorial and opinion pages of both newspapers (Baker, 2006). The final representative Corpus was 283 texts of 245618 words. This was split into two sub-corpora to be compared, the Dawn Sub-Corpus (DSC), with 152 texts and 132,450 words, and The News Sub-Corpus (TNSC), with 131 texts and 113,168 words.

The data were processed and analysed using the AntConc, version 4.1.1, a software tool for advanced Corpus Linguistics (Baker, 2006; Gillings et al., 2023). The analysis was carried out in three steps of the CADS process: Keyword analysis, Collocation analysis and Keyword-in-Context (KWIC) concordance profiling (Baker, 2023; Marchi & Taylor, 2018). The first step was to carry out a keyword analysis to discover those words that occurred with a statistically higher frequency in UIC-PMC 2026 than in some reference corpus (Baker, 2006). The reference corpus was a 10 million word general Pakistani English web texts known as Pakistani English Web Corpus (PEWC-2025). The

Log-Likelihood statistic (denoted as *LL*) was used to calculate keyness.

Second, in order to map the semantic networks around the major actors "Iran" and "US" or "United States" were used as search nodes and collocation analysis was performed (Baker, 2006). The association strength between each node and its neighbouring terms within a 5 word span (both to the left and right of the node, shown as *L5 – R5*) was calculated using the Mutual Information metric *MI*.

$$MI = \log_2\left(\frac{O_{xy} \times N}{O_x \times O_y}\right)$$

Here, O_{xy} is the co-occurrence frequency of the node and collocate, N is the total corpus size, O_x is the frequency of the node and O_y is the frequency of the collocate (Baker, 2006). Collocations that co-occurred at least $O_{xy} \geq 5$ times, with $MI \geq 3.0$ were kept for analysis. Thirdly, KWIC concordances were taken out for the key metaphors "bridge" and "pillar," and qualitatively analyzed using critical discourse tools to comprehend the functioning of the key metaphors in their total texts (Saleem, 2026).

The text that was scraped was considered to be proprietary IP and used for academic research purposes only to ensure academic integrity and copyright fair use. These were only reproduced in the shape of short concordance bits or in statistics. By combining computational and discursive approaches, this ensures methodological triangulation, limits researchers' subjectivity and bias, and minimizes selective interpretation by providing statistically sound evidence from the corpus-based qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (Gillings et al., 2023; Marchi & Taylor, 2018).

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This research integrates the conceptual frameworks of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) and Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective with Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which perceives language as a social practice that both reflects and perpetuates power dynamics (Fairclough, 1989, 1995; van Dijk, 1988, 1998). According to Fairclough's model, any discursive event can be seen as a text, as a discursive practice, and as a social practice (micro-level, meso-level and macro-level) (Fairclough, 1989; Nia & Navarro-Martínez, 2016). At the micro level of *Textual Description*, it is interested in the formal linguistic aspects of the text, including vocabulary, the structure of sentences, metaphors and modality (Fairclough, 1989). The operationalization in this paper is through the extraction of keywords, collocates and concordance lines as done by Baker (2006), which shows how the media physically constructs the actors and actions in the war of 2026.

At the meso-level of Discursive Practice Interpretation, the model will take into consideration the processes of text production, distribution and consumption, as well as the discursive gatekeeping functions of the editorial desks where the international wire reports and military press releases are digested and turned into public-facing policy guidance (Fairclough, 1995; Siraj, 2007).

On macro-level analysis of the discourse in Sociocultural Practice Explanation, the discourse is related to the social, political and historical context of society (Fairclough, 1995). In this context, the study provides an explanation for the limits and contours of media narratives as they are tied up with the macro geopolitics of the Pakistani state in 2026, such as the balance of payments crisis and IMF Program, bilateral security agreements with Saudi Arabia, CPEC investments, and the precarious management of

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domestic sectarian stability (Al Jazeera, 2026; Kurlantzick, 2026).

This framework is an improvement over the qualitative CDA traditional problem of "cherry-picking" ideologically convenient texts that may also be the result of the researcher's bias (Gillings et al., 2023) by incorporating CADS. The corpus tools serve as a starting point for an empirical analysis, in order to focus the analysis of the qualitative "thick description" on patterns which are statistically dominant and representative of the whole media landscape (Baker, 2006; Marchi & Taylor, 2018).

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative analysis of the Pakistani media corpus "*US-Iran Conflict Pakistani Media Corpus (UIC-PMC 2026)*" highlighted different trends of framing of crisis by the two news organizations, namely The Dawn and The News International (Dawn, 2026; Saleem, 2026). As seen in Table 1, the structural metadata for the entire corpus and its respective sub-corpora show that the war received a significant editorial attention in both publications, but *The Dawn* had a bit more editorial density, that is, published a greater number of individual editorial and op-ed texts in the specified time period (Qazi & Shah, 2018).

Table 1: *The Structural Metadata for the Corpus*

Corpus Parameter	Dawn Sub-Corpus (DSC)	The News Sub-Corpus (TNSC)	Total UIC-PMC (2026)
Total Word Count	132,450	113,168	245,618
Total Number of Texts	152	131	283
Average Word Count per Text	871.3	863.8	867.9
Standard Deviation of Text Length	104.2	115.6	109.9
Type-Token Ratio (TTR)	11.2%	12.8%	10.4%
Standardized TTR (STTR - 1,000 words)	44.1%	46.3%	45.2%

A keyword analysis was done to determine the key thematic areas of the media coverage. Table 2 shows the 15 most statistically significant keywords, according to Log-Likelihood value (Baker, 2006), in the UIC-PMC with respect to *PEWC-2025* reference corpus.

Table 2: *The 15 Most Significant Keywords*

Rank	Keyword	Raw Frequency in UIC-PMC	Normalized Freq (per 10k words)	Log-Likelihood (LL)	Associated Semantic Domain
1	<i>mediation</i>	1,482	60.33	+1,452.3	Diplomatic Agency / Process
2	<i>ceasefire</i>	1,204	49.02	+1,201.2	Conflict Resolution
3	<i>Hormuz</i>	985	40.10	+987.5	Maritime

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					Security / Energy
4	<i>Tehran</i>	951	38.71	+954.1	Geopolitical Actor
5	<i>neutrality</i>	842	34.28	+845.2	Strategic Positioning
6	<i>stabilization</i>	711	28.94	+712.4	Conflict Management
7	<i>negotiations</i>	652	26.54	+654.1	Diplomatic Process
8	<i>shuttle</i>	588	23.93	+589.6	Diplomatic Method
9	<i>solidarity</i>	511	20.80	+512.4	Regional Affinity
10	<i>vulnerability</i>	495	20.15	+498.2	Economic / Domestic Risk
11	<i>bridge</i>	411	16.73	+412.3	Pragmatic Metaphor
12	<i>pillar</i>	396	16.12	+398.1	Pragmatic Metaphor
13	<i>monetization</i>	341	13.88	+342.5	Financial Realism
14	<i>sectarian</i>	311	12.66	+312.1	Domestic Social Risk
15	<i>blockade</i>	295	12.01	+298.5	Economic Warfare

There is a noticeable dichotomy in the keywords used in the analysis, with process terms such as 'mediation' and 'ceasefire' on the one hand, and domestic risk terms such as 'vulnerability' and 'monetization' and realist terms like 'sectarian' on the other (Al Jazeera, 2026; Saleem, 2026). A collocation analysis was conducted on the words "Iran" and "US" / "United States" in both sub-corpora (Baker, 2006) to see how the two main geopolitical opponents were discursively constructed. Table 3 shows the most common collocates of "Iran" and Table 4 the most common collocates of "US" / "United States".

Table 3: The Most Common Collocates Of Iran

Rank	Collocate of "Iran"	Co-occurrence Freq	Mutual Information (MI)	Log-Likelihood (LL)	Predominant Source Sub-Corpus
1	<i>nuclear</i>	345	5.82	+312.4	Balanced (DSC & TNSC)
2	<i>Tehran</i>	288	7.12	+295.1	Balanced (DSC)

					& TNSC)
3	<i>strikes</i>	211	4.95	+188.4	TNSC (Realist Framing)
4	<i>ceasefire</i>	185	5.21	+174.2	DSC (Legalist Framing)
5	<i>border</i>	164	4.88	+152.1	TNSC (Security Framing)
6	<i>retaliation</i>	142	5.41	+139.5	TNSC (Realist Framing)
7	<i>shuttle</i>	128	6.02	+112.4	DSC (Diplomatic Framing)
8	<i>solidarity</i>	111	4.31	+98.2	DSC (Affiliation Framing)

The collocation patterns of the node 'Iran' in Table 3 indicate a distinction between the legalistic and the material aspects of crisis resolution. Associations between "Iran" and such terms as "ceasefire" (MI = 5.21) and "shuttle" (MI = 6.02) indicate an institutionalised discourse with a focus on diplomacy, mediation and non-violent de-escalation in line with a peace journalism approach in the sub-corpus The Dawn. In contrast, The News International sub-corpus has a realist perspective and the MI with Iran is highest for strikes (MI = 4.95), border (MI = 4.88) and retaliation (MI = 5.41). This binary image of Iran implies that Iran is an autonomous regional power involved in legitimate regional security competition, whereas a sense of material and kinetic risks of border destabilization and spillover is foregrounded in The News International, in line with Pakistan's immediate security vulnerabilities.

Table 4: The Most Common Collocates Of USA

Rank	Collocate of "US" / "US"	Co-occurrence Freq	Mutual Information (MI)	Log-Likelihood (LL)	Predominant Source Sub-Corpus
1	<i>administration</i>	412	5.11	+398.2	Balanced (DSC & TNSC)
2	<i>Trump</i>	385	6.45	+382.4	Balanced (DSC & TNSC)
3	<i>demands</i>	241	4.88	+212.1	TNSC (Critical Framing)
4	<i>unilateral</i>	195	5.23	+184.5	DSC (Legalist Framing)
5	<i>pressure</i>	184	4.65	+162.4	Balanced

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					(DSC & TNSC)
6	<i>alliance</i>	142	4.31	+112.1	DSC (Security Framing)
7	<i>negotiations</i>	128	3.95	+98.5	DSC (Diplomatic Framing)
8	<i>Strait</i>	112	4.12	+88.4	Balanced (DSC & TNSC)

By analyzing the collocation data, it is revealed that Iran" is collocatively associated with the following: *border*, *solidarity*, and *ceasefire* while the "US" is collocatively associated with the following: *unilateral*, *pressure*, *Trump*, and *demands* (Dawn, 2026; Saleem, 2026). This represents a definite tendency within the discourse, as it presents Iran in the perspective of being a power near the region and capable of mitigating conflict, and the United States as an outside power that resorts to unilaterality (Global Foreign Policies Review, 2026). Concordance (KWIC) analysis was conducted on the key metaphorical and structural segments (Baker, 2006) in order to explore the semantic application of these framings. Table 5 shows selected concordances for both sub-corpora, which are used to illustrate the different kinds of semantic contexts of the two metaphors, "bridge" and "pillar."

Table 5: Selected Concordances for Both Sub-Corpora

Concordance Line (KWIC)	Source Sub-Corpus	Analytical Category
"...Pakistan is actively navigating an increasingly difficult landscape trying to prevent talks from..."	DSC	Legalist / Risk Containment
"...the ceasefire may merely be a tactical pause before fresh strikes are ordered by Donald Trump..."	DSC	Deep Trust Deficit
"...is Islamabad merely acting as a repeat-use mediator with zero balance-sheet value while..."	TNSC	Realist / Transactional critique
"...in geopolitics, a bridge gets used while a pillar gets paid and Pakistan continues to play the..."	TNSC	Realist / Transactional critique
"...the country remains balance-sheet dependent and possesses no pricing mechanism for its strategic..."	TNSC	Realist / Structural critique

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"...the civil-military leadership has successfully initiated the Islamabad Opening to showcase middle..."	DSC	Institutionalist / Prestige
"...Riyadh and Washington remain key anchors but regional solidarity dictates a non-hostile stance..."	DSC	Balanced Neutrality

Table 5 shows the representative Concordance Lines from the two sub-corpora.

As for the second and third research objectives, the linguistic realisations of the two competing metaphors of the 'bridge' and 'pillar' are presented in the examples in the concordance line in the two sub-corpora. In the The Dawn Sub-Corpus (DSC), the significance of the "bridge" is linked to prestige of the institution and the management of crisis, and the "Islamabad Opening" is highlighted as a successful diplomacy which renders Pakistan as an important "net regional stabilizer". In contrast, The News Sub-Corpus (TNSC) uses these metaphors very critically, in a realist manner, and is keen to point out that there are serious domestic, sectarian and security implications of being a "repeat-use mediator" or a "bridge", and that it is of "zero balance-sheet value". In contrast a "pillar" is discursively constructed as an actor who is able to "set terms" and "get paid" and that Pakistan has not been able to do so unlike the past geopolitical incidents such as the Soviet Afghan war and the post 9/11 Era.

4.1 Discussion

Comparative critical discourse analysis of The Dawn and The News International in the 2026 US-Iran conflict reveals the deep ideological polarization of the Pakistani public sphere due to the macro-geopolitical constraints Pakistan faces (Fairclough, 1995 and Siraj, 2007). This is evident in each of the three aspects of Norman Fairclough's model – textual description, discursive practice and sociocultural practice. At the textual level, the editorial prose in The Dawn' reveals a high level of commitment modality (must, should, crucial, etc.) in the case of de-escalation in the region and a low level of commitment modality (seems, appears, could, etc.) in the case of attributing direct blame to the global adversaries. In fact, in its May 22nd, 2026, editorial "Hardening lines", the newspaper presents the controversy over Iran's highly enriched uranium stockpile in a very legalistic, neutral language, saying:

The talks on the US-Israel war on Iran "reflect the extent to which Washington and Tehran remain far apart from each other. The Dawn's nominalization of the central conflict as a "disagreement" and "confusion" and the use of the verb "seem" in its sentences keep the state from taking a stance on the controversy, thus maintaining its linguistic neutrality as mediator. The News International, on the other hand, refuses to subscribe to this rhetorical diplomacy, treating its mediation narrative with the state as a "sales proposition", using a hyper-transactional vocabulary (monetization, pricing, balance-sheet dependent) to actively unravel the state's self-congratulatory mediation narrative (Saleem, 2026). This is most apparent in Farrukh Saleem's use of the metaphor "bridge vs. pillar", in which the noun "bridge" collocates with negative verbs, such as "used", "crossed" and "uncompensated" and the noun "pillar" collocates with verbs "paid", "value" and "terms":

Is Pakistan a "pillar" or a "bridge"? There is no monetization structure in Pakistan because "A bridge connects others, a pillar anchors value... Yes, Pakistan has become a

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repeat-use mediator... But Pakistan remains balance-sheet dependent." (Saleem, 2026)
This micro-linguistic move is ideologically and directly critical of the military-led diplomatic discourse and its substitution of structural exploitation and financial naivety. Discursive practise indicates that the two newspapers interpreted and refashioned global news from wire services and civil and military news locally (Fairclough, 1995). A key intertextual element in the 2026 war was the transposition of military discourses to the public sphere, where they were translated from state-centric to public discourses. The action of the military-led diplomacy, for instance, was presented in both newspapers as the action of the institution, as Field Marshal Asim Munir, the Chief of Defence Forces, was on the verge of a high-level visit to Tehran, indicating that "the mediation effort is now being handled at the highest levels of Pakistan's civil-military leadership" (Dawn, 2026).

In this context, the nominalized "civil-military leadership" will only give an impression of a unified, disciplined and strategic state apparatus, which would in turn bolster confidence of the United States and Iran in the mediation of Pakistan. The realist critique, on the contrary, was used to present this high-level military engagement in *The News*, which stated that Pakistan has "secured seats at select negotiation tables", but this is nothing more than a "theatre" if it is not translated into tangible monetary gains (Saleem, 2026).

These gatekeepers are also seen in the integration of international reports in the publications. In May 2026, when the ceasefire talks were on, leaks from the US and Iran's two agencies were published by Reuters and Axios suggesting that the US and Iran were reaching a 'one-page memorandum of understanding' to halt hostilities and *The News* immediately jumped on the information, highlighting outcomes of the material markets, through which it was indicated that oil prices declined below 100 and share prices surged globally, thereby presenting the ceasefire in the context of global economic stabilization, which is in Pakistan's energy self-interest.

In the meantime, *The Dawn's* editorial "Hardening lines" was using the same leak, but emphasizing the "trust issues at stake which are deep-rooted", with the warning that "negotiations could go on while both sides quietly gear up for future war". This gatekeeping is a sign of the caution and long-term strategic framing of *The Dawn*; in a sense, it is more a reflection of the fragile structure of the international system than of the day-to-day market fluctuations.

The discursive options of both newspapers at the macro level of sociocultural practice are limited in view of the Pakistani state's actual material vulnerabilities in 2026. The "trilemma of Pakistani foreign policy" of maintaining regional solidarity with a contiguous volatile neighbor (Iran), transactional defense and economic relations with a global superpower (US) and strategic defense commitments with a key financial patron (Saudi Arabia) has been discussed discursively by both publications in view of Pakistan's geographical and sectarian realities (Qazi & Shah, 2018).

The Dawn understood that "regional solidarity" and its condemnation of the US-Israeli strikes as "violations of international law" would appease the local sectarian tensions, avert the risk of a full-scale destabilisation of Iran and shield CPEC infrastructure (Gwadar) from cross-border spillover effects, which the Pakistani state could not risk in the face of ongoing insurgency in Baluchistan. Thus, *The Dawn's* preaching rationalized "risk containment" and suggested mediation was not an option but an imperative for

geopolitical internal security.

However, the portrayal of "balance-sheet dependency" by The News is a direct throwback to Pakistan's structural dependency on rent-seeking and desperate financial bailouts during the Soviet Afghanistan war (1979-1989) and post 9/11 War on Terror (2001-2011), respectively, where Pakistan managed to secure 85 billion and 45 billion (inflation-adjusted) international financial inflows. In contrast, in 2026, Pakistan was offering an essential service to the world, saving it from an oil shock, and keeping the vital strait of Hormuz open, while being "balance-sheet dependent" and appealing to Riyadh and Doha for 5-billion lifelines.

The News' macro-critique reflects a deep ideological disaffirmation of the state of statecraft in Pakistan today: that the state can no longer effectively use its geography as a means to financial survival and therefore, that the state's diplomacy has become empty.

4.3 Recommendations for Policy and Media Practice

In view of the facts and findings of this research, it is recommended to change the structure of the media based on the following reasons:

4.3.1 For Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and National Security Division

The first is the need for a geopolitical valuation framework to be institutionalized, so that Pakistani foreign policy can shift from ad hoc mediation of crises to a long-term institutionalized one that can transform geopolitical access into long term economic asset.

1. **Establishment of an Institutionalized Geopolitical Valuation Framework:** The state machinery of Pakistan needs to have a pricing and contractual arrangement regarding the facilitation activities on the regional level as emphasized in the "bridge vs. pillar" debate. This entails negotiating specific transit trade deals, energy pipeline agreements and regional infrastructure investments, as conditions for hosting peace negotiations.
2. **Operationalisation of the Balochistan-Sistan Transit Trade Corridor:** In order to minimise structural vulnerabilities on the western border, MoFA should build on the momentum of the 2026 ceasefire and fully operationalize the new bilateral trade transit agreement with Iran. Trade corridors which link the two countries through 900 km of the border, if made safe and economically viable, could transform security threats into economic ties and decrease room for cross-border militancy and stability in Balochistan.

4.3.2 For Media Institutions and Regulatory Bodies

1. **Adoption of Standardized "Peace Journalism" Protocols:** The study shows that, especially in acute geopolitical crises, social media and mainstream media are very receptive to unverifiable and sensationalist information which could compromise national security, such as the false viral report about the statements of the Turkish President Erdogan on Israel. There is a need for elite print publications and broadcast media to have one uniform fact checking procedure and follow "peace journalism" frames, with more emphasis on factual, de-escalatory reporting than on clickbait narratives.
2. **Socio-Economic Impact Metrics in Geopolitical Reporting:** Editors and foreign policy correspondents ought to be taught to look at international conflict from a multidisciplinary point of view. Incorporation of quantitative socio-economic measures (such as effect of maritime blockades on fertilizer prices, remittance flows, domestic inflation etc.) should be done in a systematic manner as part of mainstream reporting on foreign policy to enable a comprehensive and pragmatic public discourse on national interest.

5. CONCLUSION

This study used Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse Pakistani print media conflict narratives about the US and Iran in English, comparing the linguistic and ideological biases of two mediums (Dawn, 2026; Saleem, 2026). The use of the empirical tools of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) scaled up in Norman Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model has exposed the intricate discursive tightrope ridden by a middle-power media in a global security crisis (Fairclough, 1995; Marchi & Taylor, 2018). The quantitative results showed that the differences for lexical salience and collocation network (Baker, 2006) were statistically significant.

The News International offered a "pragmatic realism" and "transactional" frame to its discourse, which harshly criticized the institutional de-escalation, maritime security and regional stabilization efforts of the state as a "cautious legalism" and "balance-sheet dependent" exercise (Dawn, 2026; Saleem, 2026).

This split was evident in the different metaphors of the 'bridge' and 'pillar' from the diplomatic and economic realms, respectively, as The Dawn discursively legitimized the civil-military leadership's 'calibrated neutrality' as a strategic 'shield' for Pakistan's fragile economy and its western border and the volatile sectarian balance in the homeland in case of a catastrophic regional spillover (Al Jazeera, 2026; Dawn, 2026). The News International refuted the prestige-driven narrative and characterised the state's shuttle diplomacy as "geopolitical theatre" lacking a monetisation pipeline, indicating that Pakistan will be utilised as a recurring bridge by global powers while relying on debt bailouts from them (Saleem, 2026).

Finally, this critical discourse analysis shows that media discourse on the making of middle powers is not simply a reflection of state-centric foreign policies, but instead is a dynamic, strongly contested public space that negotiates the state's structural vulnerabilities, geographical realities and historical dependencies (Chaudhry & Ashraf, 2012; Siraj, 2007). The Pakistani media during the US-Iran war in 2026 served as a rationalizer of Pakistan's national security limitations while simultaneously being a fierce critic of the failure of the Pakistani government to use its strategic location to its benefit in terms of economic survival (Al Jazeera, 2026; Saleem, 2026). Given the ongoing and tumultuous shift from a unipolar to a multipolar world, the results of this analysis in the field of language and critical social theory reveal the necessity of combining these two approaches to gain a complete understanding of the interaction between language, power and national interest in the context of global systemic crisis (Baker, 2006; Fairclough, 1995).

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