

Incidental and Divergent Media Attention on Afghanistan: A Comparative Analysis of US, Pakistani, and Indian Newspapers

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Overview

The US-withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Fall of Kabul (to the Taliban) were extensively covered across global media. Countries such as the US, India and Pakistan had greater stakes in the fallout of two-decade long Afghan war and as a result have led to media discourses with a certain focus on Afghanistan. We conducted a study to analyze the coverage of Afghanistan-related news published between August and September within each of these countries to (a) compare the frequency of media coverage across all three countries, (b) examine any variations in the several ways the issue was covered, and (c) assess any specific slant in the coverage which could reflect the policy of the respective countries on this issue.

Methodology

In the pursuit of the above-mentioned goals, we chose three top-tier newspapers from each country (see, Table 1). To obtain the data, we relied on the LexisNexis database and applied a keyword-based search to obtain the relevant data. The search query parameters were two keywords, i.e., “US-Withdrawal” and “Taliban” published between 1st August to 15th September. The final dataset comprised of 3684 articles published in nine newspapers over the span of six weeks.

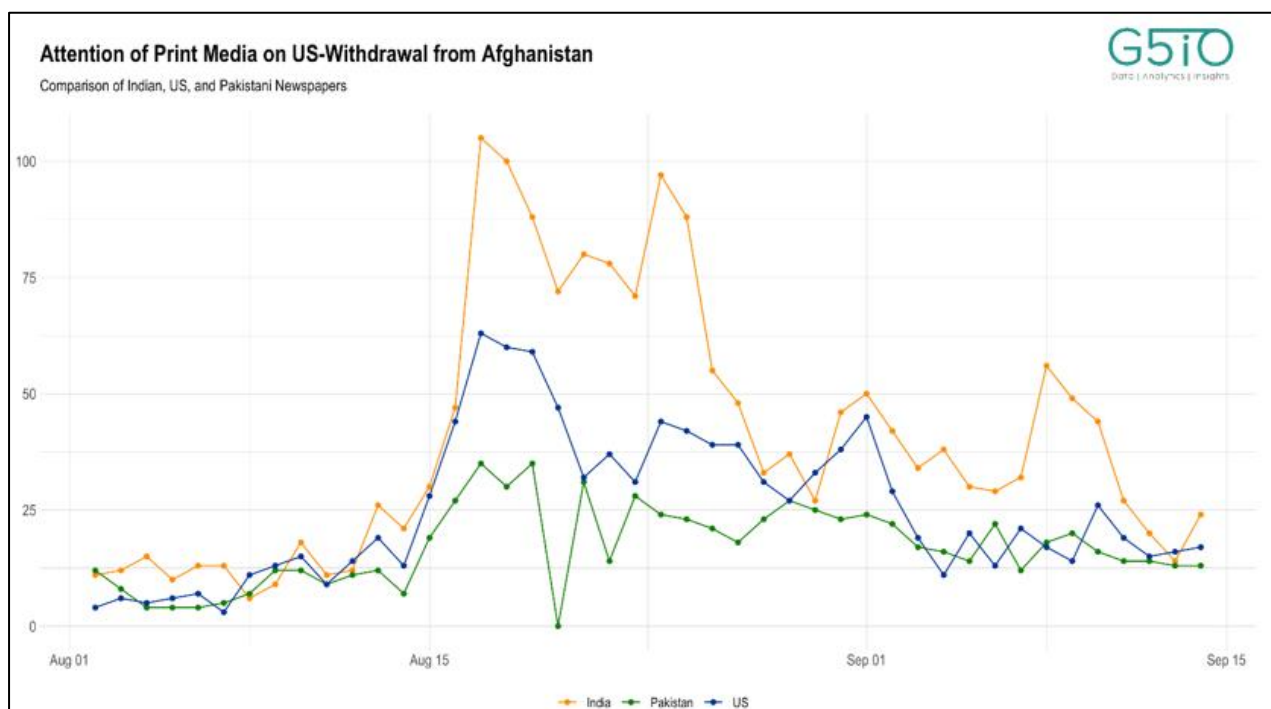
Table 1: Distribution of Newspaper Articles

Country	Newspaper	Number of Articles
United States	USA Today	58
	Los Angeles Times	162
	New York Times	898
Pakistan	Dawn	296
	The News	303
	Express Tribune	166
India	The Times of India	501
	Hindustan Times	1042
	The Hindu	258
Total		3684

Insight 1:

An analysis of the frequency of the articles published in different media outlets show that the attention given by the media to the Afghanistan issue spiked particularly when Kabul fell to the Taliban.

However, when comparing across all three countries it was rather Indian newspapers that seemed to have been extensively covering this issue. Additionally, the media coverage of the issue was rather incidental which significantly reduced after the completion of the US military drawdown.

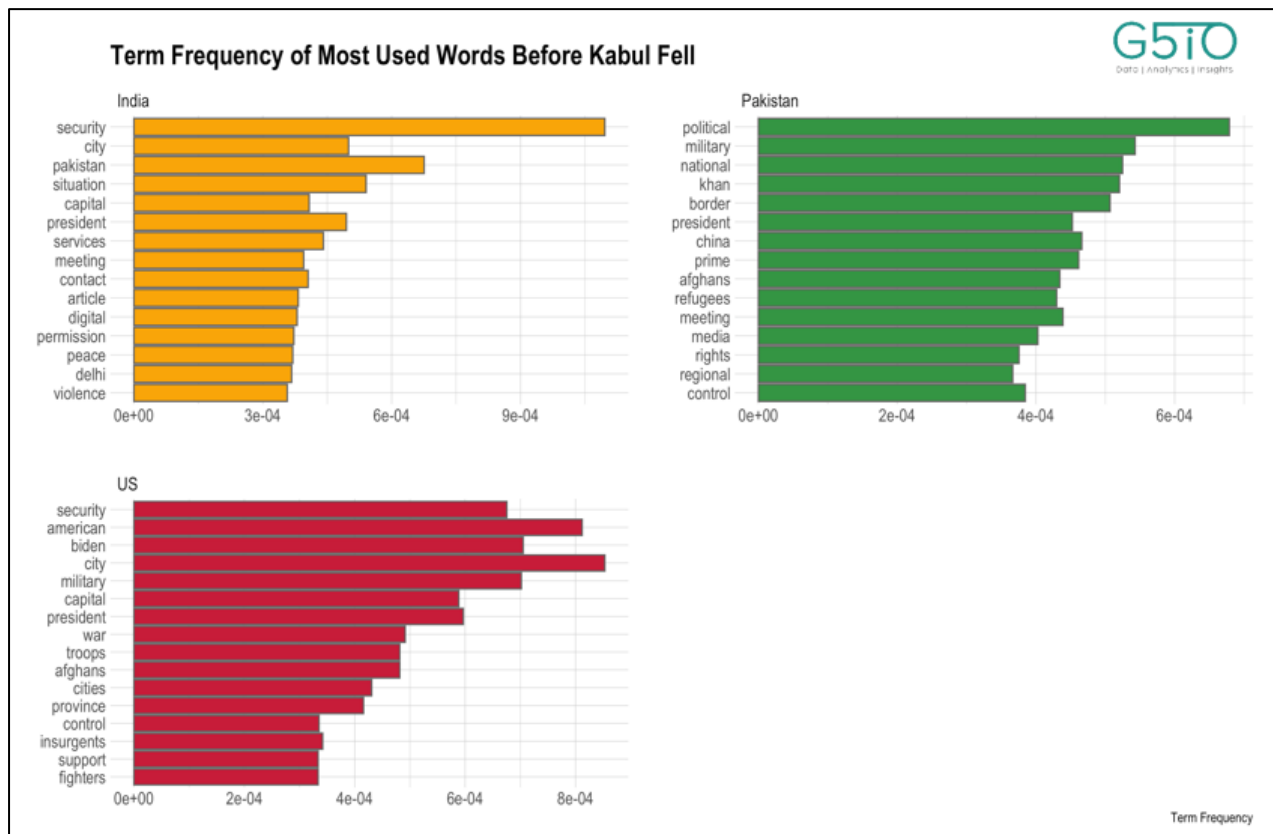


Insight 2:

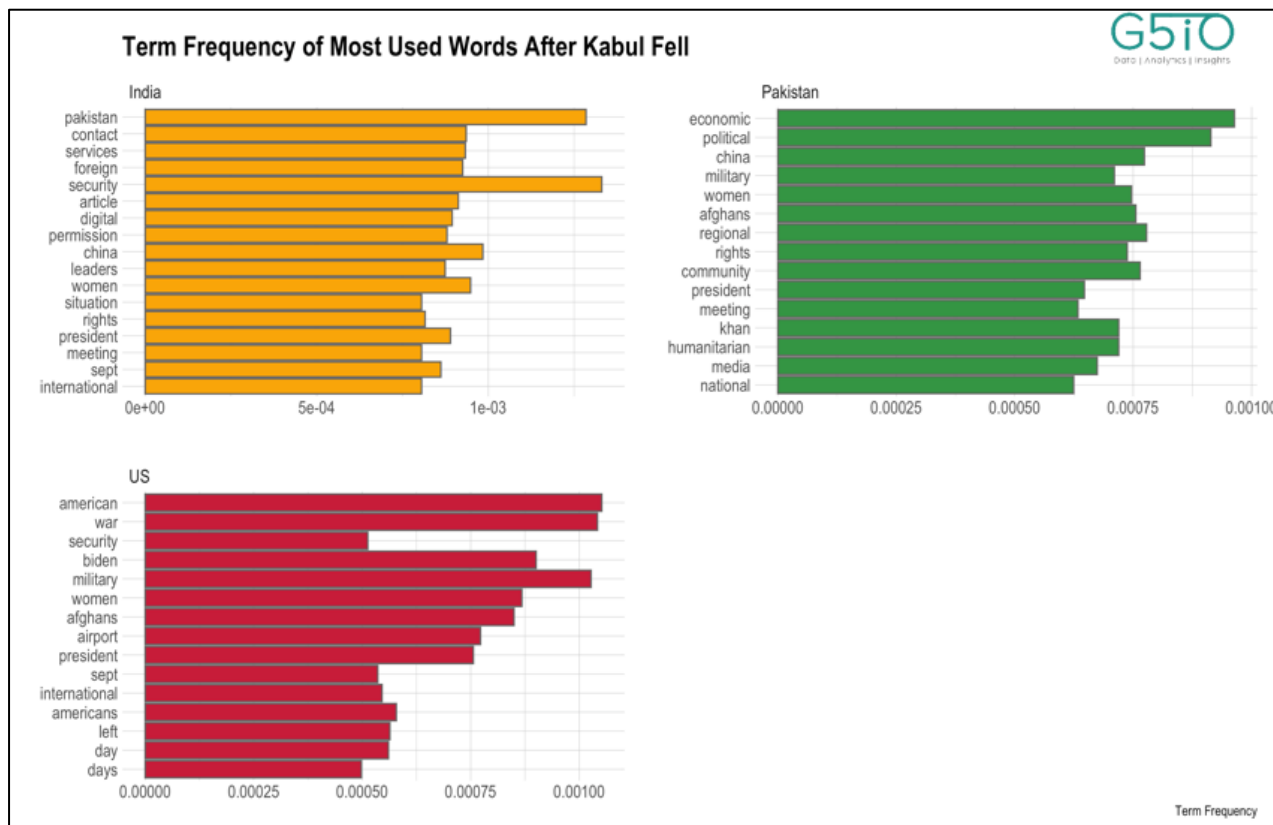
Next, we wanted to explore the nature and characteristics of the coverage across all three countries. However, to add further nuance and examine the variations, we divided the data between coverage before 15th Aug, (the day Kabul fell to the Taliban) and articles published between 16th August and 15th September.

The first plot shows significant variance in the coverage of the issue across all three countries. For example, Indian newspapers focused on discussing the 'security' situation of Kabul and much of the debate remained on the Afghan "President" before the city fell. Moreover, Indian papers substantially discussed Afghan issue in conjunction with Pakistan; hence explaining why 'Pakistan' was the third most used word in Indian coverage of the Afghanistan issue.

In contrast, media coverage in Pakistan remained focused on the “political”, “border”, and “refugee” issues. While coverage in the US was mostly aimed at getting their “troops” out of the “war” zone and making sure the “security” situation does not deteriorate.



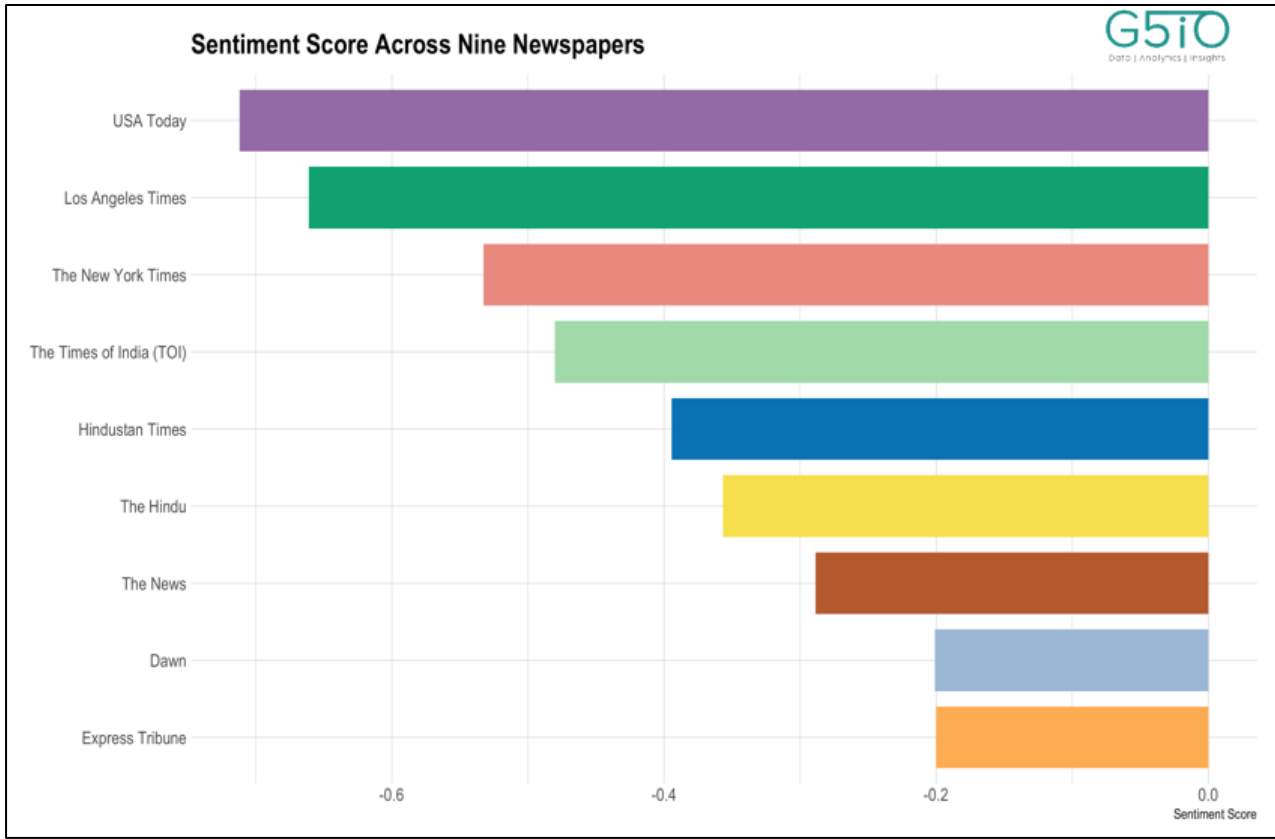
When the city fell to the Taliban however, there was a marked change in coverage across all three countries. For instance, in Indian media’s coverage, the most important subject became “pakistan” and the increasing influence of “china”. In Pakistani newspapers, coverage moved on from discussing ‘internal challenges’ to covering the issue in light of the myriad “economic”, “political”, and “military” implications of the taliban takeover. As for the US, media coverage primarily remained the same while continuing to discuss the safe return of “american”, “military”, troops and “security”. Certain topics such as “women” “rights” remained common among all three countries.



Insight 3:

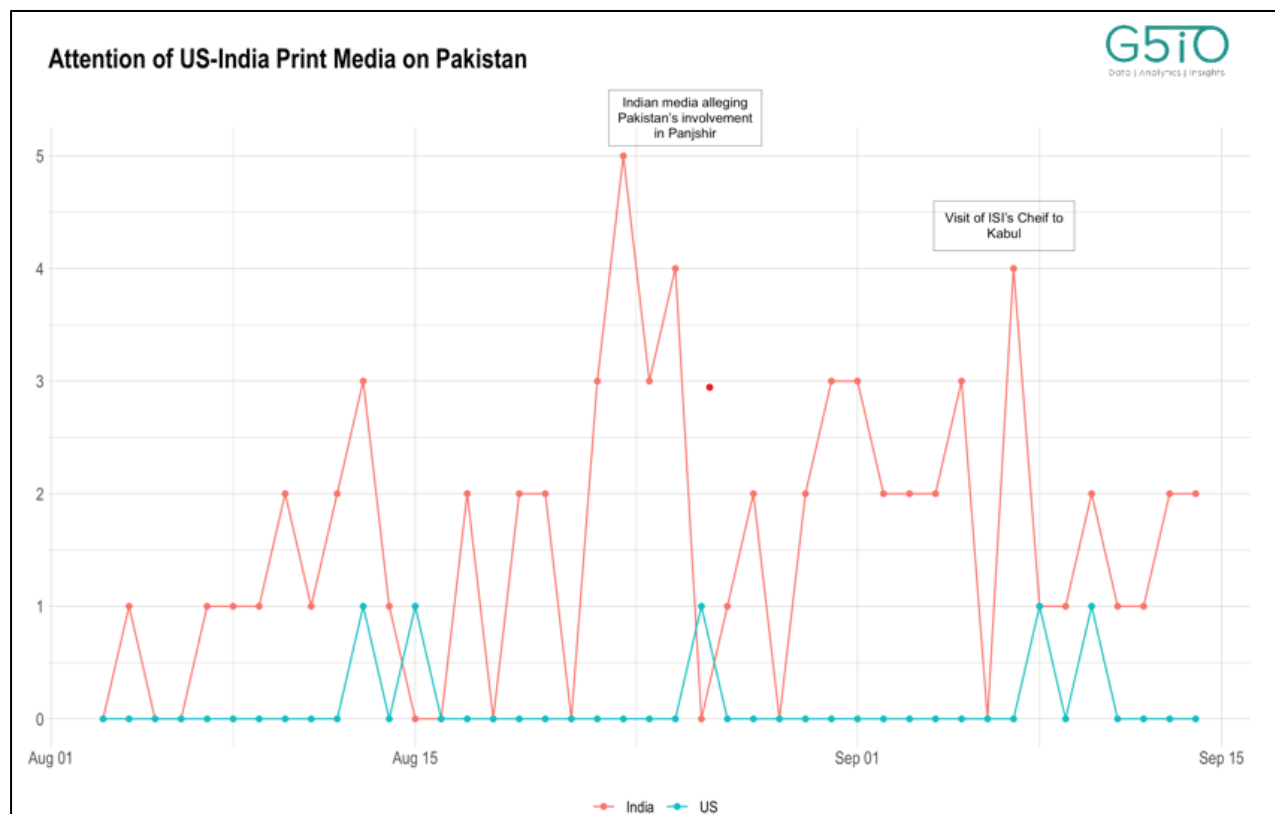
In order to gain more insight, we looked at each country’s coverage of the most frequent words that were more often used in relation with one another. The following graph thus shows the most frequent words written in Indian newspapers on the issue of Afghanistan. The placement of the words in the center of the network highlights the importance of certain word whereas, a thicker line indicates the higher frequency of such words. The Indian coverage offers some interesting insights.

For example, the word “Pakistan” placed right near the center of the network indicates its considerable importance within Indian media’s coverage and framing of the Afghanistan issue. Moreover, the structure of the network indicates that the coverage remained more focused on issues related to the Taliban gaining “control” and “support”.

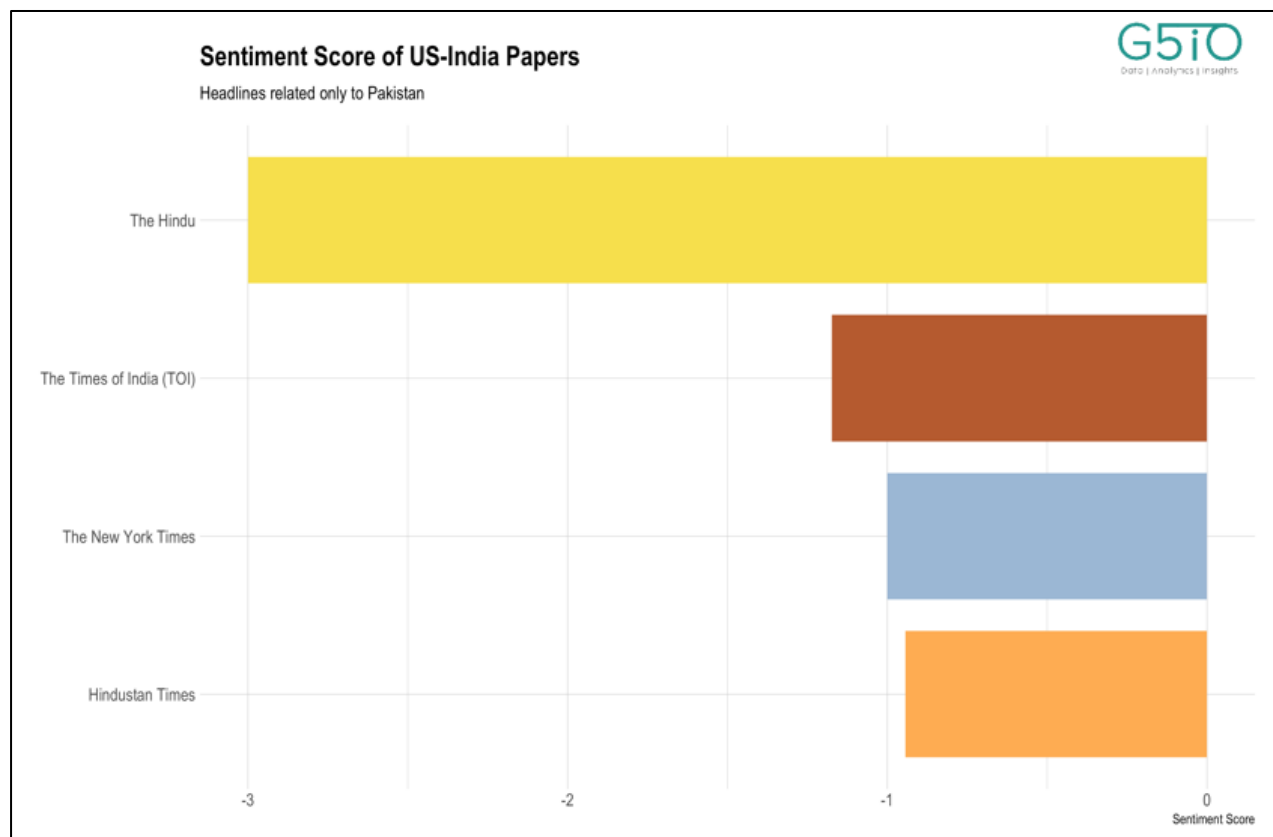


Insight 5:

It is also worth mentioning that while doing the analysis, it was observed that Pakistan was excessively mentioned alongside the Afghanistan situation especially within Indian news media. Accordingly, we first wanted to see which papers covered Pakistan the most and since a news article can have the word Pakistan in any context we took a different approach and looked only at the headlines that had “Pakistan” featured prominently. Interestingly, the frequency graph showed that India abundantly covered Pakistan, while US media published only 5 articles that had the word “Pakistan” in their headlines. Indian newspapers had published as many as 73 articles headlining ‘Pakistan’ over the period of six weeks.



In addition to the frequency, we also looked at the sentiment expressed in those Pakistan-related headlines. Unsurprisingly, Indian media excessively published on Pakistan with a negative tone, with 'The Hindu' leading this effort. Interestingly, all three newspapers from India covered Pakistan negatively whereas from the US only The New York Times covered Pakistan and that too not as negatively as compared to Indian newspapers.



Conclusion:

From this study, we can draw the following conclusions:

- 1- The uptick in the coverage of Afghanistan was incidental and followed the principles of news value, i.e., as the issue lost its value it gradually disappeared from the media
- 2- The amount of media attention paid to the US-withdrawal was linked to the proximity and national interests of each country.
- 3- Discussion in the coverage primarily revolved around themes related to international security in the glaring absence of a more human angle.