

SHAPING PERCEPTIONS: ANALYSING THE DISCOURSE
OF LEADING AMERICAN THINK TANKS ON PAKISTAN
SINCE 2011

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the discourse generated by two leading American think tanks—the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the US Institute of Peace (USIP)—on Pakistan since 2011. The paper does so, by employing the discourse analysis method. It studies in detail the narratives peddled by these institutions particularly in three key thematic areas i.e. terrorism, political stability, and economy. The paper employs the epistemic community approach to assess how these narratives influence US foreign policy decisions toward Pakistan. Through an extensive review of think tank publications, policy briefs, and expert interviews, the study finds that the discourse generated by the respective think tanks on Pakistan has been predominantly negative. It portrays Pakistan as a security risk and an unreliable partner. Furthermore, this discourse has also been reflected in US foreign policy decisions towards Pakistan in negative manner since 2011. The findings underscore the importance of think tanks in shaping international relations and highlight the need for Pakistan to actively engage with these institutions to provide a counter narrative.

Keywords: Think Tank, Discourse Analysis, Pakistan, Wilson Center, US Institute of Peace

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1. INTRODUCTION

A think tank, according to the International Encyclopedia of Social & Behavioral Sciences, refers to “a policy research institute that is apparently independent of corporate, state, and other interests, although variations exist globally in terms of affiliations, political controls, and ideological motivations.”¹ In the context of international relations, think tanks play a crucial role in shaping the foreign policy of countries mainly by generating discourses that influence policymakers, the media, and public opinion at large. This is particularly true about the US, where there are more than 1500 think tanks. These think tanks serve as knowledge hubs where experts analyse global issues and provide policy inputs to the government. Given their proximity to government institutions and decision-making circles, these organisations influence the foreign policy of the country.²

Since 2011, two leading American think tanks; the Wilson Center and the USIP have consistently portrayed Pakistan in a predominantly negative light through its discourse by focusing on themes of terrorism, political instability, and economic fragility in the country. The discourse has played a crucial role in shaping how Pakistan is perceived in Washington. Not only has it shaped the discourse on the country but has also negatively influenced the US foreign policy vis-a-vis Pakistan during the concerned period. This paper examines the discourse generated by these institutions concerning

¹ N. J. Smelser and P. B. Baltes, eds., *International Encyclopedia of Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 1st edition (Amsterdam New York: Pergamon, 2001).

² James G. McGann, ed., *Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the US* (Abingdon England ; New York: Routledge, 2007).

Pakistan in detail and, sheds light on the extent to which this discourse influences and translates into the foreign policy of the US since 2011. In doing so it pursues several key research questions in the process. These research questions are:

1. What discourse have US think tanks generated on Pakistan since 2011?
2. To what extent is the discourse generated by US think tanks on Pakistan objective, or whether it is influenced by the personal biases of the experts involved or by other external factors such as political or strategic interests?
3. Does the discourse of these think tanks matter?
4. Has the discourse of the US think tanks been reflected in US foreign policy toward Pakistan in the concerned period?

To pursue these research questions, the paper has primarily adopted a qualitative and exploratory research methodology for which data from both primary and secondary sources have been consulted. The primary data mainly includes an expert interview that have been conducted with the former Pakistani ambassador to the US. On the other hand, the secondary data consists of a comprehensive review of policy briefs, opinion articles, research reports, and podcasts produced by the selected think tanks. The data gathered from these sources has subsequently been subjected to discourse analysis as the primary analytical technique.

1.1. Literature Review

In recent years, the subject of discourse analysis of think tanks has garnered significant scholarly attention from scholars across various contexts. Consequently, this interest has resulted in a considerable body of scholarly work on the subject. For instance, Ferran Lalueza and Ramon Girona's research article, *"The Impact of Think*

Tanks on mass media discourse regarding the Economic Crisis in Spain," provides an important insight into how Spanish think tanks shaped the discourse on Spain's economic crisis during 2013 and 2014.³ Similarly, in the context of the US, Eduardo Munhoz Svartman and José O. Pérez's work, *"Brazil, Think Tanks, and the International System: A Discourse Analysis*," offers an interesting analysis of how American think tanks have framed Brazil's growing role in international politics through their discourse in recent years.⁴

The role of think tanks in influencing the foreign policy of countries has also been a subject of significant scholarly inquiry. For example, H. Xin's article, *"The Influence of Chinese Foreign Policy Think Tanks on China's EU Policy: A Comparative Analysis of CIIS and SIIS*," provides a comparative case study of the influence of two prominent Chinese think tanks—the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) and the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS)—on China's foreign policy toward the European Union between 2014 and 2019.⁵

While these studies are important contributions to the existing corpus of literature, there still exists a notable scholarly gap in the said literature especially in the context of the discourse analysis of US think tanks on Pakistan. This gap is particularly important, especially in the context of Pakistan, owing to the fact that the US remains one of Pakistan's crucial partners, especially in counterterrorism efforts. Moreover, US is also

³ Ferran Lalueza and Ramon Girona, "The Impact of Think Tanks on Mass Media Discourse Regarding the Economic Crisis in Spain," *Public Relations Review* 42, no. 2 (June 1, 2016): 271–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.09.006>.

⁴ Pérez José O. and Eduardo Munhoz Svartman, "Brazil, Think Tanks, and the International System: A Discourse Analysis," *Journal of Global Studies* 21, no. 47 (December 9, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.20889/M47e21017>.

⁵ Hua Xin, "The Influence of Chinese Foreign Policy Think Tanks on China's EU Policy: A Comparative Analysis of CIIS and SIIS," *Asia Europe Journal* 21, no. 2 (June 1, 2023): 173–208, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-023-00666-w>.

Pakistan's prime export market. Besides, the gap is also significant because US think tank discourse on Pakistan is unique owing to its all-encompassing nature which covers a wide range of areas, unlike the focus unlike the more focused analyses that have been conducted on countries like Brazil, as noted above. This paper seeks to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive discourse analysis of leading American think tanks.

1.2. Hypothesis

The hypothesis underlines this paper is that, the discourse produced by leading US think tanks on Pakistan has been predominantly negative since 2011 and it has negatively influenced US foreign policy towards Pakistan in the concerned timeframe.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

The epistemic community approach has been adopted as the theoretical framework for this paper. The framework, which has been borrowed from foreign policy analysis, focuses on how networks of experts—particularly those within think tanks, collectively referred to as an epistemic community—influence foreign policy decision-making. Epistemic communities consist of professionals with expertise in specific policy areas. They shape state behavior by influencing the perception of an issue or country, providing policymakers with frameworks to interpret complex issues, and offering policy recommendations.⁶

In the context of this research, the epistemic community approach is employed to understand how US think tanks, in this case, Wilson Center and the USIP, influence US

⁶ Peter M. Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination', *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992): 1–35.

foreign policy toward Pakistan. This influence is mainly exerted through the production and dissemination of discourse generated by the epistemic communities of these think tanks, which include figures such as Michael Kugelman, Asfandiyar Mir, Stephen Tankel, and Tamanna Salikuddin. By examining the contributions of these experts, this study seeks to understand why they narrate what they narrate and how or whether their narratives are reflected in the formulation and evolution of US foreign policy towards Pakistan. Though the entire paper is guided by this theoretical framework, it will be operationalised more explicitly in the critical analysis section.

1.4. Scope of the Paper

Regarding the scope of the paper, it mainly analyses the discourse of two American think tanks, i.e the Wilson Center and USIP, on Pakistan since 2011 to present. The year 2011 has been taken as a starting point mainly due to the fact that the year 2011 represents one of the critical junctures in US-Pakistan relations, especially in the wake of the May 2011 Abbottabad raid, which resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden.

Likewise, the paper is confined to two think tanks as mentioned above, the Wilson Center and USIP. It is mainly due to two reasons. Firstly, because both think tanks have dedicated programs on Pakistan, which have produced enormous knowledge on a wide range of topics. Secondly, these think tanks are very close to the US government owing to the fact that both the think tanks were established through congressional acts. Consequently, it positions them as influential actors in shaping US foreign policy and thus worthy of scholarly attention.

Lastly, in terms of thematic focus, the paper concentrates on three recurring themes within the discourse which include: terrorism, political stability, and the economy. These themes have been chosen because they have consistently represented core areas of interest for the US in its engagement with Pakistan since 2011, which is evident from the extensive volume of publications produced by the Wilson Center and USIP that revolve around these specific issues. The preference for these themes is not coincidental but rather reflects the broader strategic and geopolitical priorities of the US government. This connection between think tank discourse and US foreign policy interests has been corroborated to this researcher by former Ambassador of Pakistan to the US, Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, during an interview, where the former confirmed that the emphasis on the concerned themes on the part of the think tanks, reflects the US government priorities vis-à-vis Pakistan.

1.5. Limitations of the Study

As far as limitation of the paper is concerned, the study is mainly limited by word constraints, which has allowed a focused analysis of maximum two think tanks. As a result, the paper does not include the works of other major think tanks, such as the Atlantic Council and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which has also done substantial and an important work on Pakistan. While these institutions are important, their exclusion does not diminish the relevance of the selected think tanks for this paper given the reasons cited above. Future research could expand on this study by incorporating the think tanks that have not been covered to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the discourse on Pakistan in US policy circles.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF ANALYSING THE DISCOURSE OF THINK TANKS

Before exploring the discourse generated by the think tanks vis-à-vis Pakistan, one might question whether it is truly worthwhile to examine and analyse it in the first place. The answer to the question is unequivocally yes. There are several compelling reasons for this.

First, these think tanks, which form part of what is known as an epistemic community play a crucial role in influencing the foreign policy of a country. Epistemic community loosely refers to a network of professionals, mainly found in think tanks, with recognised expertise in policy-relevant knowledge within a particular domain. The influence of the epistemic community on foreign policy making is such that there is a whole approach with the name “epistemic community approach” in foreign policy analysis, which mainly looks at how these expert groups shape state behavior by providing decision-makers with frameworks to interpret complex issues, offering policy solutions, and legitimising certain courses of action over others.⁷

In the context of the US, this influence is even more pronounced, as noted by Nana de Graaff and Bastian. According to them, one of the defining characteristics of the American policymaking landscape is the policy planning network which is a dense conglomeration of think tanks, and research institutes, that collectively set political agendas, propagate key ideas, shape public and elite opinion, and ultimately influence policymaking both in the domestic and foreign context.⁸ This observation was further

⁷ Haas, ‘Epistemic Community and International Policy Coordination.

⁸ Nana De Graaff and Bastiaan Van Apeldoorn, “The Transnationalist US Foreign-Policy Elite in Exile? A Comparative Network Analysis of the Trump Administration,” *Global Networks* 21, no. 2 (2021): 238–64, <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12265>.

reinforced by the former ambassador of Pakistan to the US, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry during an interview conducted for this paper. Responding to a query regarding the role of American think tanks in influencing US foreign policy, Ambassador Chaudhry argued that American think tanks, in general, play a significant role in shaping US foreign policy by “creating and promoting narratives that align with and advance US interests.”⁹

Also, in the context of the US, these think tanks enjoy close institutional ties with the government, as has already been discussed elsewhere in this paper. This proximity to policymakers allows them to play a direct role in shaping the foreign policy agenda as also been pointed out by Emanuel Adler and Peter M. Hass in their research paper, that the extent of an epistemic community’s influence on foreign policy decisions depends on several factors, most prominently by its access to power corridors. The broader the reach of an epistemic community into policymaking circles, the greater the influence it can exert. Since most of the think tanks, mainly the ones that are selected for this study, enjoy close relationships with the US government they are in a position to influence the US foreign policy.¹⁰

Interestingly, there are instances from US foreign policy decisions toward Pakistan that substantiate this argument of think tanks' influence on US foreign policy. For example, one of the dominant themes that emerged from the discourse of selected think tanks in the context of terrorism is that Pakistan is playing a double game with the

⁹ Interview with former Ambassador of Pakistan to the US, Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry, by Azhar Zeeshan, Online, 6 March 2025.

¹⁰ Emanuel Adler and Peter M. Haas, “Epistemic Communities, World Order, and the Creation of a Reflective Research Program,” *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992): 367–90.

US and that the financial aid to Pakistan should be made transactional—provided only if latter demonstrates tangible progress in counterterrorism efforts.

Now this recommendation and line of argument has been reflected in US foreign policy decisions on many occasions since 2011. For instance, in July 2011, following the Abbottabad raid that resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden, the Obama administration suspended \$800 million in military aid to Pakistan, citing concerns over the sincerity of Pakistan's commitment to combating terrorism.¹¹ Relations between the two countries became increasingly strained and many US officials publicly questioned Pakistan's sincerity in the fight against militancy.

Similarly, in 2016 and again in 2018, the respective US administration cut additional aid to Pakistan, amounting to \$450 million and \$300 million respectively, citing Pakistan's failure to take decisive action against militant groups allegedly operating from its soil. Also, during this period, statements from US officials echoed exactly the same narratives put forth by think tanks. For example, in 2018, then-President Donald Trump famously tweeted, "They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more! The US has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies & deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools."¹² This statement closely mirrors the discourse generated by these think tanks, which have consistently portrayed Pakistan as duplicitous in its counterterrorism efforts.

¹¹ "US Suspends \$800m in Pakistan Military Aid," Al Jazeera, July 10, 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2011/7/10/us-suspends-800m-in-pakistan-military-aid>.

¹² Mark Landler and Gardiner Harris, 'Trump, Citing Pakistan as a "Safe Haven" for Terrorists, Freezes Aid', *The New York Times*, 4 January 2018, sec. US, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/04/us/politics/trump-pakistan-aid.html>.

The bottom line is that analysing the discourse of think tanks matters significantly, both in general and in the specific context of Pakistan as well, owing to their profound influence on the formulation of foreign policy, as evident from the case of the US. Think tanks, as part of the epistemic community, provide the intellectual frameworks, narratives, and policy recommendations that shape how decision-makers perceive and respond to complex geopolitical issues. By following their discourse, one can gain valuable insights into the foreign policy decisions of a country. Moreover, it also provides a lens through which one can anticipate future trends and shifts in the foreign policy of a country and enables policymakers to prepare for possible foreign policy changes.

3. DISCOURSE GENERATED BY SELECTED THINK TANKS ON PAKISTAN

3.1. The Woodrow Wilson International Center

The Wilson Center, officially known as the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, is one of the leading US think tanks. It was established in 1968 by an act of Congress. It operates as a quasi-governmental institution, which receives funding from the US government. Moreover, its board of trustees is also appointed by the President of the US and confirmed by the Senate.¹³

Moreover, many of its members have held key positions in the government. For instance, its current President and CEO Ambassador Mark A. Green was the chief

¹³ 'Leadership, Wilson Center', Wilson Center, accessed 28 February 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/leadership>.

administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) from 2017 to 2020.¹⁴

Regarding the center's work on Pakistan, it has a dedicated sub-program under its broader Asia Program which frequently covers Pakistan-related issues. The program produces analysis on topics including but not limited to political, economic, and security aspects of Pakistan. The analyses are mainly in the form of opinion articles, reports, symposiums, and podcasts which will be subjected to discourse analysis in the subsequent sections.

3.2. The Discourse of Wilson Center on Pakistan Since 2011

To get a glimpse of the discourse of the Wilson Center on Pakistan, one can consider a statement from one of the opinion articles written by Michael Kugelman in 2014, which has essentially summed up the discourse of the think tank on Pakistan since 2011. To put it in his own words, "With alarming frequency, children are blown up in bomb blasts, polio prevention workers gunned down, and religious minorities massacred. Reportedly, capital flight is rampant and elites are sending their kids out of the country."¹⁵

Since 2011, the Wilson Center has produced nearly 48 analysis pieces on Pakistan, which includes opinion articles, reports, and podcasts. Out of the total, 30 pieces exclusively focus on terrorism, 10 on political stability, and 8 on the economy.¹⁶

¹⁴ "Leadership, Wilson Center."

¹⁵ Michael Kugelman, "Pakistan's Militancy Response: Too Little, Too Late," Wilson Center, February 4, 2014, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/pakistans-militancy-response-too-little-too-late>.

¹⁶ The data has been extracted manually by the researcher from Wilson Center's website

Wilson Center Coverage of Pakistan Theme-Wise Since 2011

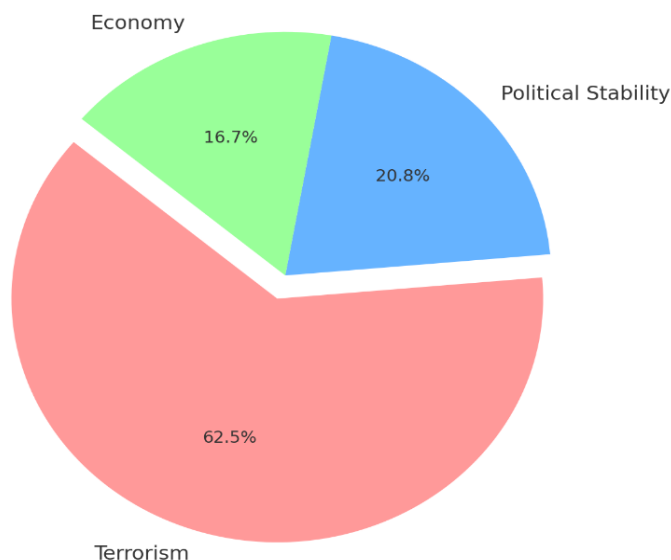


Figure 1: Breakdown of areas covered by Wilson Center regarding Pakistan since 2011¹⁷

The overarching discourse on Pakistan in these analyses has been predominantly negative. It essentially portrays Pakistan as a crisis-ridden country, which is grappling with severe and almost insurmountable security, political, and economic challenges.

3.2.1. Discourse related to Terrorism

While referring to the role of Pakistan in dealing with terrorism, Christine Fair, an American political scientist, once famously wrote, “Pakistan fights some terrorists while sheltering others—it wants to be seen as both firefighter and arsonist at the same

¹⁷ The pie chart has been compiled by the Researcher from the data extracted from Wilson Center's website

time.”¹⁸ Her statement is a reflection of the dominant discourse, which emerged in the aftermath of 9/11, regarding terrorism and Pakistan. The discourse under discussion often framed Pakistan through the lens of complicity and duplicity by portraying Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism¹⁹ and as a state which, in the words of US President Trump, has given nothing to the US, in the context of counter terrorism, except lies and deceit.²⁰

Since 2011, the Wilson Center has frequently reinforced these themes in its analyses regarding Pakistan and terrorism. To break down the data from the Center, the most prominent theme, peddled by the Center, regarding Pakistan in the context of terrorism is that is the portrayal of Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism. This theme appeared in 17 out of the 30 analytical pieces, published by the Center regarding Pakistan. These publications frequently accuse Pakistan of providing sanctuary to militant groups, such as the Haqqani Network, and of supporting terrorist activities in Afghanistan and in the region. The said narrative is particularly evident in analytical pieces published by the Center most prominently in “*Pakistan’s Hidden Threat from Within*” authored by Michael Kugleman.²¹

The second recurring theme, which appeared in nearly 8 analytical pieces out of 30, roughly 26.7%, focuses on Pakistan’s double game with the US in the counterterrorism efforts. The narrative characterises Pakistan as playing a double

¹⁸ C. Christine Fair, “Pakistan Is an Arsonist That Wants You to Think It’s a Firefighter,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), March 20, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/10/pakistan-us-relations-taliban-afghanistan-arsonist/>.

¹⁹ Daniel.L Bayman, “The Changing Nature of State Sponsorship of Terrorism,” Brookings Institute, May 28, 2008, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-changing-nature-of-state-sponsorship-of-terrorism/>.

²⁰ ‘Pakistan Has given Us Nothing but Lies and Deceit: US President Donald Trump’, DAWN, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1380148>.

²¹ Michael Kugleman, “Pakistan’s Hidden Threat from Within,” Wilson Center, August 7, 2012, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/pakistans-hidden-threat-within>.

game, by taking action against some militants while spearing the others (primarily those targeting the US and Western forces in Afghanistan).

Lastly, a third theme in the context of terrorism and Pakistan which appeared in the work of the Center is related to the concerns about the potential of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal falling in the hands of terrorists. This narrative has been raised in 5 articles out of the total. According to the theme, owing to the so-called militant infiltration within Pakistan's security apparatus, extremist groups can potentially gain access to the nuclear arsenal of the country, which can pose a significant risk to the global security. Together, all these narratives reflect a predominantly negative discourse on Pakistan's in the context of terrorism.

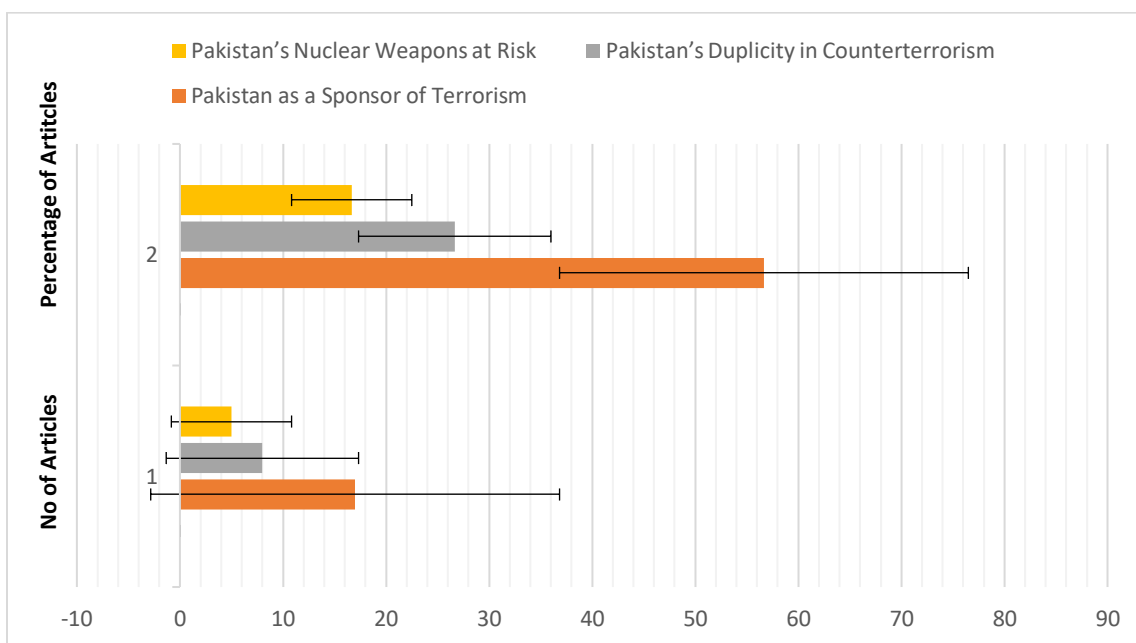


Figure 2: An Overview of the number and percentage of analytical pieces published by the Wilson Center on different themes in the context of Pakistan and Terrorism²²

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The bar chart has been compiled by the author by using data from Wilson Center's website

3.2.2. Discourse of Wilson Center Related to Political Stability in Pakistan

Following the discourse on terrorism, the center's coverage and analysis of Pakistan's political stability is equally negative. Although the center has not produced as many analytical pieces on this subject, in comparison to the subject of terrorism, the limited body of work that has been done on the subject still paints a bleak picture of Pakistan by portraying it as a country that is deeply entrenched in chronic political instability which is primarily driven by the military's interference in politics.

The theme of military interference as the primary driver of political instability in Pakistan, is the single dominant theme that emerged out of the discourse of the center on Pakistan's political stability. It is evident from the fact that all the 10 articles, reports, and briefs published by the Center regarding Pakistan's political stability, took up the mentioned theme directly. It portrays the military as the most influential political actor and at the same time most destabilising force that undermines democratic processes and political stability in Pakistan through direct and indirect interference in politics, and by weakening the civilian institution.

Take the example of an opinion article published by the center in May 2023, titled "Pakistan at a Dangerous Crossroads". The article was written by Baqir Sajjad, a Wilson Center Fellow from Pakistan. The author, while commenting on Pakistan's history of political instability and the military's role in it, asserted that the country's chronic political instability mainly stems from the army's persistent interference in politics, which has taken various forms, including direct coups, and exerting indirect control over weak

governments.²³ The same theme appeared in the rest of the articles as well published by the Center as appeared in the following chart.

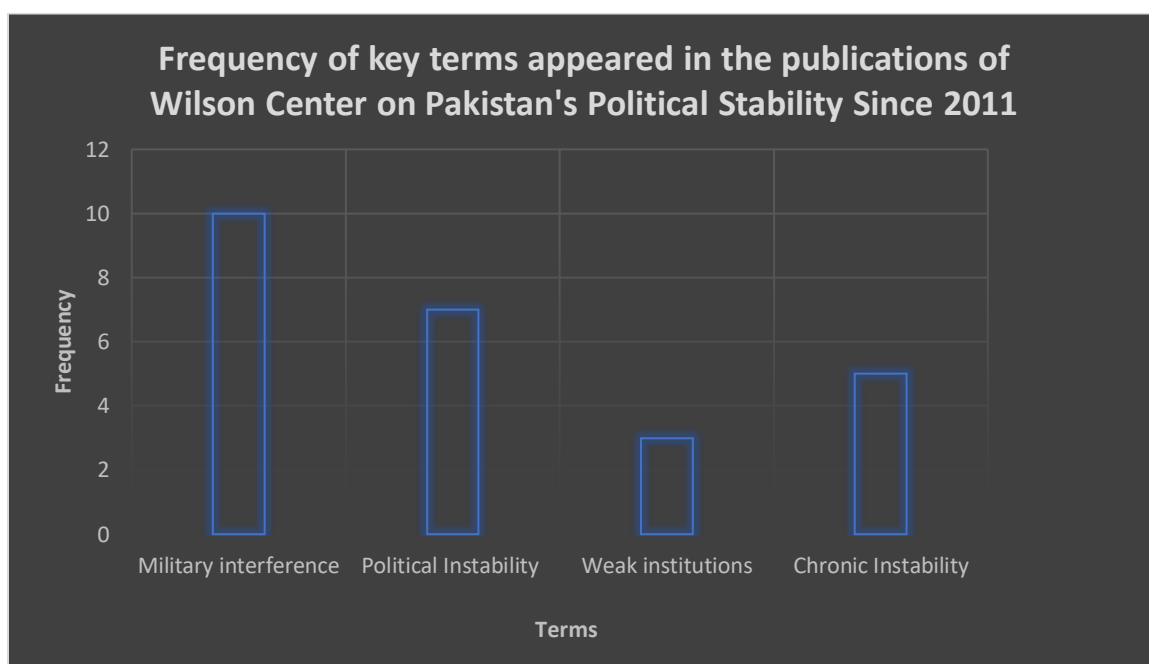


Figure 3: Frequency of key terms appeared in the discourse of Wilson Center on Pakistan's Political Stability²⁴

3.2.3. Discourse of Wilson Center related to Economic Situation of Pakistan

The Wilson Center's discourse on Pakistan's economic situation follows a similar pattern to its discourse on terrorism and political stability. It portrays a negative and often one-dimensional picture of the country's economic situation. According to the Center's analyses, Pakistan's economy is in a perpetual state of crisis, exacerbated by terrorism and chronic political instability. The discourse of the center can be divided into three main themes.

²³ Baqir Sajjad, "Pakistan At a Dangerous Crossroads," Wilson Center, May 16, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/pakistan-dangerous-crossroads>.

²⁴ The chart has been compiled by the author by using data from Wilson Center's website

The most dominant theme in the Center's discourse on Pakistan's economy, is the portrayal of Pakistan's economy as being in a state of perpetual crisis. The said theme appeared in nearly all 8 analytical pieces of the center which frequently employ words such as "alarming statistics," "dire predictions," and "not a pretty picture" to describe the country's economic health. This pessimistic portrayal of the country's economy situation was evident in one of the Center's podcasts, "Pakistan in Peril,?" where the speakers describe Pakistan's economy in starkly negative terms. For instance, in the podcast one speaker remarked, "When you open the hood on Pakistan's economy, it's not a pretty picture. A lot of the numbers related to its economy are just really, really awful."²⁵

A second recurring theme which appear in the center's discourse is related to the linkage between Pakistan's economic challenges and its internal instability, including terrorism and political volatility. The said theme appeared in nearly 7 out of the total 8 articles produced by the center. It focuses mainly on how terrorism and political instability exacerbate capital flight and deter international businesses from engaging with Pakistan. This theme is intertwined with the broader narrative of Pakistan as a crisis-ridden state, where economic challenges are both a cause and consequence of instability which leaves little room for optimism.

Lastly, the third theme, which appeared in 2 out of the 8 analyses of the center on Pakistan's economy, is the country's perceived dependency on external actors, particularly China, and the economic risks that are associated with it. It argues that

²⁵ John Milewski and Michael Kugelman, "Pakistan in Peril? The State of the Nation's Democracy, Economy, and Relationship with the US," accessed March 19, 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/audio/pakistan-peril-state-nations-democracy-economy-and-relationship-us>.

Pakistan's reliance on Chinese-built power plants, which were initially sought to address the country's crippling energy shortages, has instead exacerbated its economic woes. They posit that the heavy debt burden and skyrocketing energy prices that are associated with these projects have further strained Pakistan's already fragile economy.²⁶

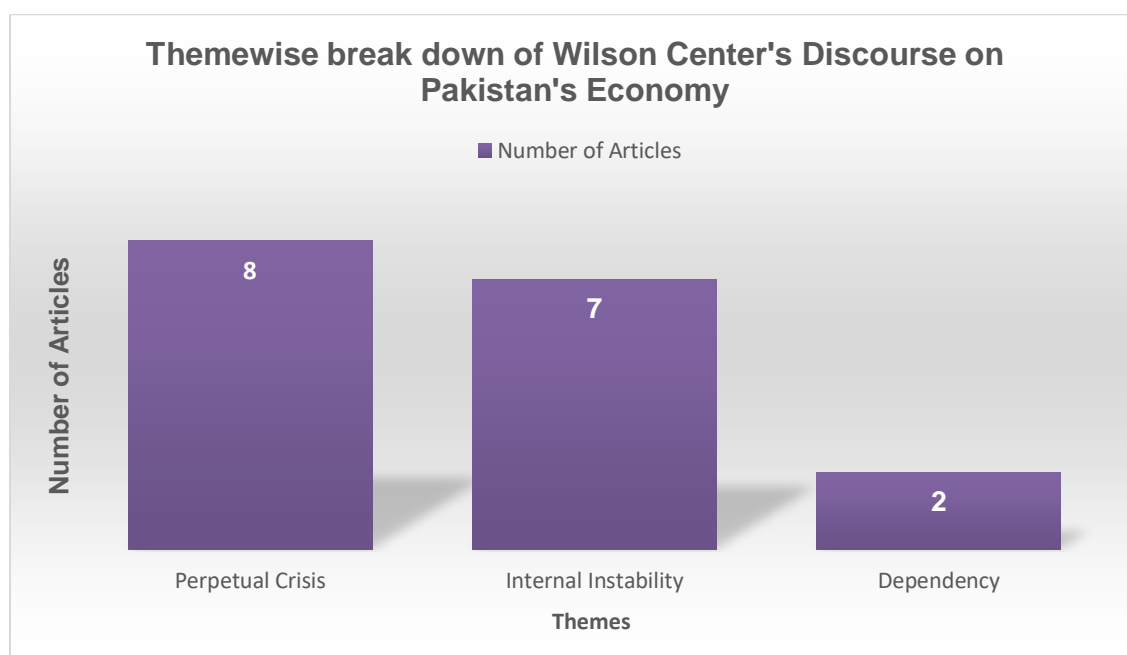


Figure 4: Theme wise breakdown of Wilson Center's Discourse on Pakistan's Economy²⁷

3.3. The US Institute of Peace (USIP)

The USIP is another major think tank in the US. Like the Wilson Center, it was also established by the US Congress in 1984 with the mission to prevent and mitigate violent conflicts worldwide. It has strong connections with the US government and works closely with policymakers and diplomats in the US foreign policy establishment. It

²⁶ Milewski and Kugelman.

²⁷ The chart has been drawn by the author by using data from Wilson Center's website

receives direct funding from the US government. Moreover, its board of directors is also appointed by the President of the US and subsequently confirmed by the Senate.

Regarding its work on Pakistan, USIP has maintained a longstanding focus on the country as part of its broader program to promote stability in the South Asian region. The institute's overarching focus on Pakistan has remained terrorism and militant extremism. This is evident from the fact that from 2011 to the present, USIP has produced approximately 30 analytical pieces related to terrorism, making it the most extensively covered subject in its discourse on Pakistan.²⁸

Another area of interest for USIP is political stability and the status of democracy in Pakistan, wherein the institute frequently analysed the civil-military relations, electoral processes, and other governance issues. However, compared to its coverage of terrorism-related issues, USIP's work on political stability is relatively limited, with around 15 analytical pieces published on the subject during the concerned period.²⁹

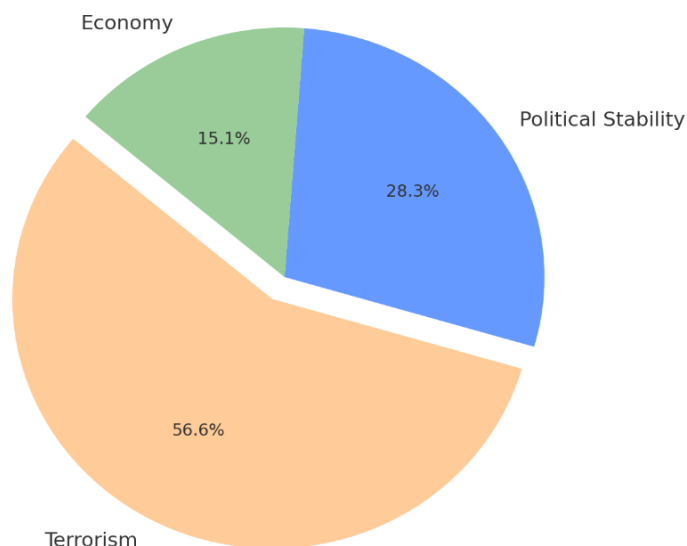
While USIP's primary emphasis remains on security and political issues, it has also addressed Pakistan's economic landscape. However, this engagement of the institute with Pakistan's economy has been comparatively sparse, with only 8 analytical pieces produced over the years.³⁰ The institute frequently publishes reports, research and opinion articles, and policy briefs on Pakistan in the mentioned focus areas, which shall be analysed in the subsequent section for discourse analysis of the institute on Pakistan.

²⁸ The data has been extracted by the Author manually from the Institute's website

²⁹ Data extracted by the Author

³⁰ Data extracted by the Author

USIP Coverage of Pakistan Theme-Wise Since 2011

**Figure 5: Breakdown of themes covered by USIP regarding Pakistan since 2011³¹**

3.4. Analysing the Discourse of USIP on Pakistan since 2011

Echoing the discourse of the Wilson Center on Pakistan, the USIP has also, through its discourse, portrayed Pakistan as a country grappling with extremism, political instability, and economic fragility. Since 2011, USIP's discourse on Pakistan has consistently emphasised the state's inability to curb terrorism, its alleged ties with militant outfits, the persistent challenges to democracy and political stability from the country's military, and chronic economic crisis. This is particularly evident from the introduction of Pakistan on the institute's website. The website introduces Pakistan as a state suffering from "increased violence and extremism" due to limited state capacity to

³¹ The pie chart has been drawn by the author by using data extracted from USIP's website

prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts.³² In the following sections, a detailed discourse analysis of USIP's work on Pakistan since 2011 will be carried out by focusing on three key areas i.e. terrorism, political stability, and the economy.

3.4.1. Discourse of USIP related to Terrorism

The discourse generated by the USIP on Pakistan in the context of terrorism since 2011 is much like the same as that of the Wilson Center. The institute's discourse on Pakistan in the context of terrorism can be broken down into three main themes i.e. Pakistan's alleged use of militant groups as proxies for geopolitical objectives, the state's inability or reluctance to fully dismantle militant networks, and lastly, a rare appreciation for Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts especially in the context of deradicalization program.

The first theme, which is also the predominant theme in the discourse of the institute, portrays Pakistan as a state that uses militant groups as proxies to achieve its geopolitical objectives, particularly in relation to India and Afghanistan. This theme appears in 18 out of 30 USIP's analytical pieces on Pakistan and terrorism. The most striking example of the said theme can be found in Stephen Tankel's 2013 report for the USIP, "Domestic Barriers to Dismantling the Militant Infrastructure in Pakistan". In the report, Stephen argues that Pakistan's "preoccupation with maintaining jihadist proxies for geopolitical objectives, primarily to counter Indian influence in the region, remains a significant barrier to eradicating militancy."³³

³² 'Pakistan', US Institute of Peace, accessed 02 March 2025, <https://www.usip.org/regions/asia/pakistan>.

³³ Stephen Tankel, "Domestic Barriers to Dismantling the Militant Infrastructure in Pakistan" (US Institute of Peace, September 9, 2013), <https://www.usip.org/publications/2013/09/domestic-barriers-dismantling-militant-infrastructure-pakistan>.

The second major theme in the USIP's discourse is Pakistan's alleged reluctance to fully dismantle militant networks operating within its borders. This theme appears in 10 out of 30 of the institute's publications on Pakistan and terrorism. Arif Rafiq's policy brief for the USIP, "Pakistan's Resurgent Sectarian War", can be taken as an example in this regard wherein the author argues that Pakistan's ruling junta has long been hesitant to take action against the Sunni Deobandi sectarian militant groups, which are often perceived as unconventional assets.³⁴

While USIP's discourse on Pakistan is predominantly negative, as noted above, the institute has, on rare occasions, also acknowledged Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts. This theme appears in only 1 article entitled, "The Challenges of Countering Radicalization in Pakistan", which highlights the *Sabaoon* School's initiative in the Swat Valley as a successful example of de-radicalisation program. The author, while commending the school's efforts to rehabilitate teenage boys recruited by the TTP previously, described it as "incredible work" that needs to be expanded.³⁵

³⁴ Arif Rafiq, "Pakistan's Resurgent Sectarian War," US Institute of Peace, November 5, 2014, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2014/11/pakistans-resurgent-sectarian-war>.

³⁵ "The Challenges of Countering Radicalization in Pakistan," US Institute of Peace, May 9, 2012, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2012/05/challenges-countering-radicalization-pakistan>.

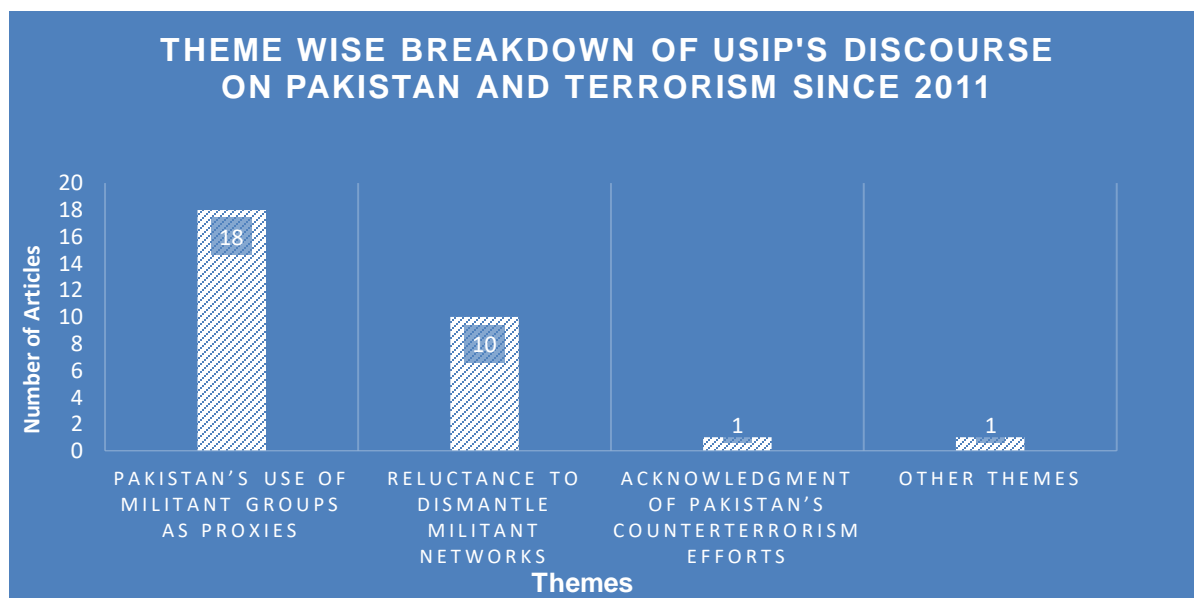


Figure 6: Theme wise breakdown of USIP's discourse on Pakistan and Terrorism since 2011³⁶

3.4.2. Discourse of USIP Related to the Economic Situation of Pakistan

The discourse of the USIP on Pakistan's economic situation largely aligns with that of the Wilson Center. It portrays Pakistan's economy as chronically in crisis, which is often characterised by stagnation, policy paralysis, and an overreliance on external financial assistance. In this regard, the discourse of the USIP can be broken down into three recurring themes i.e. the country's economic decline due to political and security instability, the country's inability to enact meaningful economic reforms, and lastly, the implications of external financial assistance and foreign investments, particularly Chinese investments under the CPEC.

The first theme as noted above put Pakistan's economy in negative spotlight by portraying it in continuous state of decline owing to the political upheaval and security

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The bar chart has been drawn by the researcher by using data from USIP's website

challenges the country faces. The said theme frequently appeared in the discourse of the institute as evident from the fact that out of the total 8 analytical pieces published by the institute on Pakistan's economy nearly 50% has taken up the theme directly. A notable example of this can be found in an opinion article published by the institute, "Pakistan Faces a Long Road to Sustainable Growth". In the article, Uzair Younus highlights that at the turn of the century, Pakistan had a higher GDP per capita than India, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. However, due to political upheaval, and the failure of successive governments to implement structural reforms, Pakistan's economic trajectory deteriorated significantly over the last two decades. He further underscores that given the current trajectory of the country's economy; sustainable economic growth is still a distant dream for Pakistan.³⁷

The second recurring theme in USIP's discourse is Pakistan's inability to enact meaningful economic reforms, which has perpetuated its economic stagnation. This theme appears in 3 out of 8 of the institute's publications on Pakistan's economy. To provide an example, consider the 2024 report "Will the IMF's \$7 Billion Bailout Stabilize Pakistan's Economy?" published by the USIP. The report summed up Pakistan's economic situation over the past two decades, "as an economy which has been lurching from one financial crisis to another without addressing fundamental structural deficiencies with proper well thought structural reforms".³⁸

³⁷ Uzair Younus, "Pakistan Faces a Long Road to Sustainable Growth," US Institute of Peace, October 7, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/10/pakistan-faces-long-road-sustainable-growth>.

³⁸ Shehbaz Rana, Asfandiyar Mir, and Sanjay Kathuria, "Will the IMF's \$7 Billion Bailout Stabilize Pakistan's Economy?," US Institute of Peace, September 25, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/09/will-imfs-7-billion-bailout-stabilize-pakistans-economy>.

The implications of external financial assistance and foreign investments, particularly Chinese investments under CPEC is the third theme that emerged from the discourse of USIP. This theme appears in 2 out of 8 of the institute's publications. It is important to note here that unlike Wilson Center, USIP's discourse on this theme is a bit nuanced and balance as some of its reports highlighting the potential benefits of CPEC while others raise concerns about its impact on Pakistan's governance and economic reforms. For instance, in one of the reports entitled "*The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Barriers and Impact Report*", Arif Rafiq argues that CPEC could be a game-changer for Pakistan's economy, provided that the political rights of local populations are safeguarded.³⁹ However, there are other reports, such as "China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia", which raise concerns about the lack of transparency and accountability in Chinese-funded projects, and argues that it can exacerbate governance weaknesses and can contribute to Pakistan's unsustainable debt load.⁴⁰

³⁹ Arif Rafiq, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Barriers and Impact," US Institute of Peace, October 25, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/10/china-pakistan-economic-corridor>.

⁴⁰ "China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia," US Institute of Peace, December 16, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/12/chinas-influence-conflict-dynamics-south-asia>.

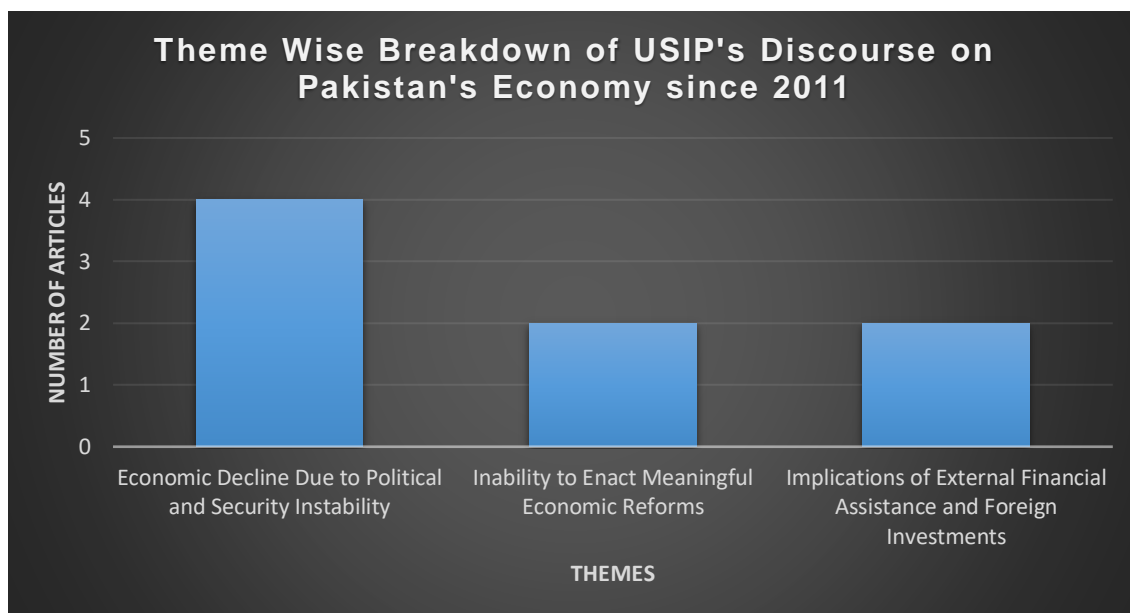


Figure 7: Theme wise break down of USIP discourse on Pakistan's Economy since 2011⁴¹

3.4.3. Discourse of USIP Related to Political Stability in Pakistan

The USIP portrayal of Pakistan's political landscape is also negative as evident from its discourse which is dominated by two interrelated themes i.e. military interference in the politics, and skepticism about the potential of democratic processes in resolving Pakistan's political crises.

The first theme, which remains the central theme in USIP's discourse focuses on Pakistan's military as the most influential actor in the country's political landscape which often overshadow the civilian institutions and lead to political instability in the country. This theme appears in nearly 13 out of the total 15 of USIP's analytical pieces on the subject. To provide an example, consider an opinion article published by the institute entitled, "Five Key Issues Facing Pakistan's New Army Chief". In the article, the authors, Asfandiyar Mir and Tamanna Salikuddin argues that Pakistan's army chief is the most

⁴¹ The bar chart has been drawn by the author by using data from USIP's website

influential figure in Pakistan's politics which often holds veto power both domestic and foreign policies of the country.⁴²

The second theme in USIP's discourse, which is closely linked to the first, revolves mainly around the skepticism regarding the effectiveness of democratic processes, such as elections, in addressing Pakistan's entrenched political crises. This skepticism mainly stems from the alleged interference of the military in the country's political affairs, which is seen as undermining functionality of democratic institutions. This theme appears only in 2 out of 15 of the institute's publications. This skepticism is particularly evident in an analysis piece of the USIP, "Understanding Pakistan's Election Results (2024)" authored by Asfandiyar Mir and Tamanna Salikuddin. In their commentary on the aftermath of elections, the authors expressed significant doubts on the ability of elections to resolve Pakistan's deep-seated political crisis. They argued that "rather than providing stability, the 2024 general elections is likely to exacerbated Pakistan's political instability."⁴³

⁴² Asfandiyar Mir and Tamanna Salikuddin, "Five Key Issues Facing Pakistan's New Army Chief," US Institute of Peace, November 30, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/five-key-issues-facing-pakistans-new-army-chief>.

⁴³ Asfandiyar Mir and Tamanna Salikuddin, "Understanding Pakistan's Election Results," United States Institute of Peace, February 13, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/02/understanding-pakistans-election-results>.

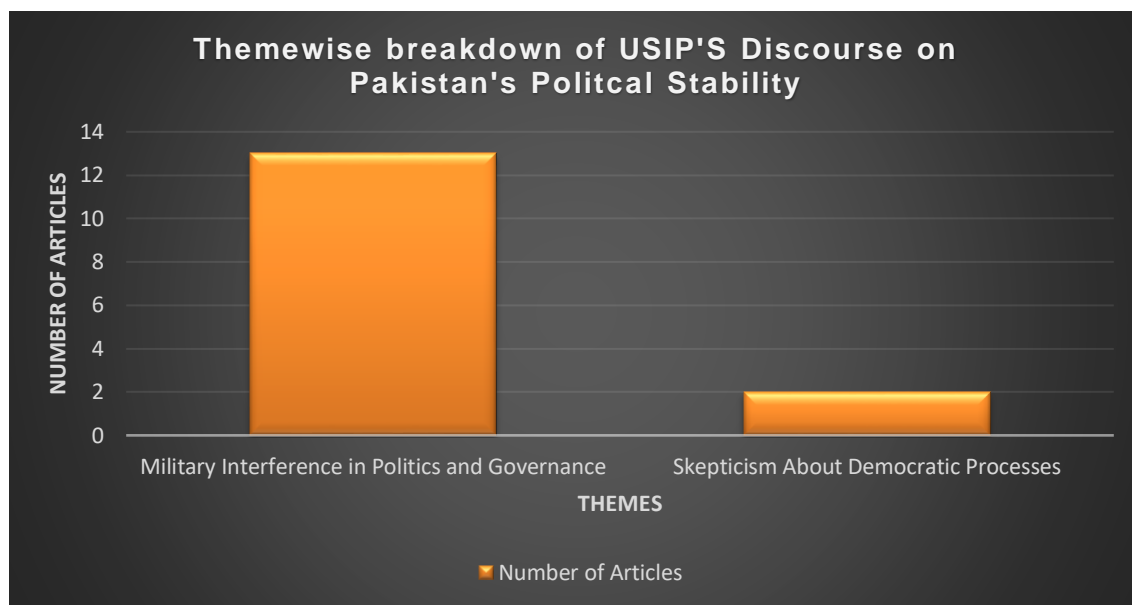


Figure 8: Theme wise breakdown of USIP'S discourse on Pakistan's Political Stability⁴⁴

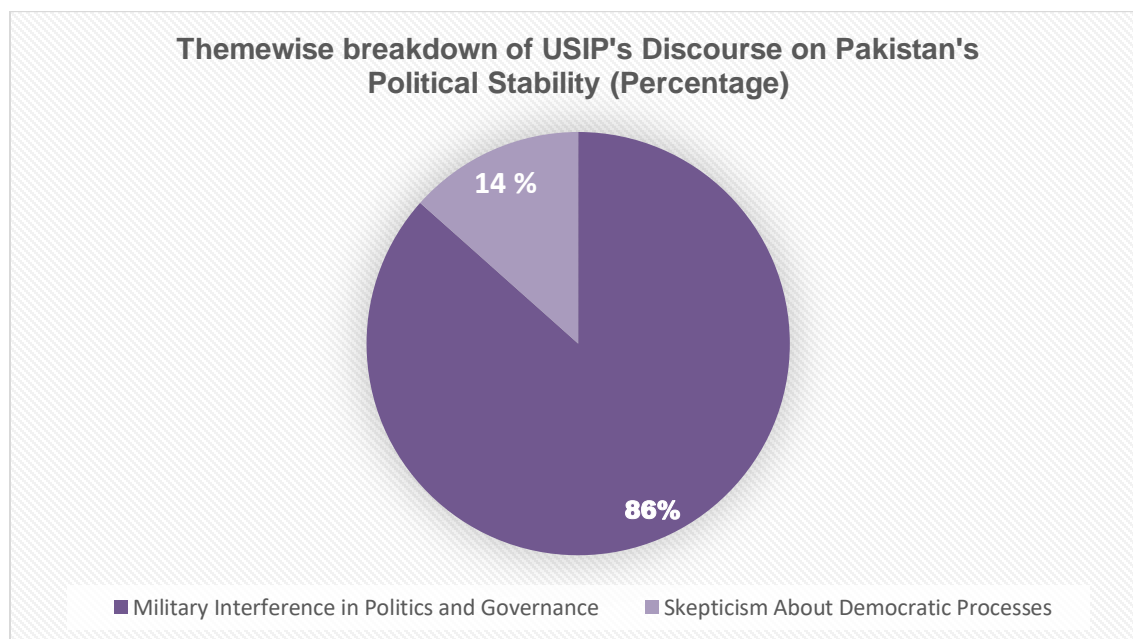


Figure 9: Theme wise breakdown of USIP discourse on Pakistan's Political Stability (Percentage)

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The bar chart has been drawn by the author by using data from USIP's website

4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DISCOURSE OF WILSON CENTER AND USIP

The preceding sections mapped the discourse generated by the epistemic community of the Wilson Center and USIP on Pakistan since 2011 and found that it is predominantly negative, focusing on themes of terrorism, political instability, and economic fragility. However, it is equally important to investigate why the epistemic community associated with these institutions produced the discourse they produced on Pakistan, and determine whether it is an objective depiction of Pakistan or otherwise.

A deeper analysis of the discourse of concerned think tanks revealed that it is driven by many factors. One of the key factors that helps explain this pattern of discourse is the role of individual expert biases within these institutions. Michael Kugelman, the Wilson Center's leading voice on South Asia, offers a prime example in this regard. Kugelman's consistent framing of Pakistan as a fragile and unstable state is featured not only in his work for the Wilson Center, as has been explored in detail in the above sections, but also across multiple platforms, including his X (formerly Twitter) account. Through his posts, he regularly reinforces a certain image of Pakistan, which is mainly negative. A cursory look at the X profile of Kugelman's social media reveals this pattern and his bias towards Pakistan.

For instance, in April 2025, while commenting on Pakistan's foreign relations with the neighbouring countries, Kugelman took to X and posted that, "the regional dynamics of Pakistan's growing security crisis are critical. Its ties with India, Iran, and Afghanistan vary from fragile to hostile. Borders are tense. And security risks have strained ties with

China, its closest ally.”⁴⁵ Now consider his other post, this time on India. It reads, “Today’s Yunus-Modi meeting attests to an important fact that’s often forgotten amid all the toxic narratives and noise around India-Bangladesh ties post-Hasina: It’s not a hostile relationship, despite major tensions and mistrust.”⁴⁶ Couple this with the previous post, and his personal bias becomes self-evident. The growing anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh and the strained relations between the two countries in the post-Hasina phase are the talk of the town; however, Kugelman still somehow managed to frame the ties as friendly and not hostile.

Besides this duality and bias, there are other factors that further raise questions about the credibility of Kugelman's work on Pakistan. The foremost among them is the nature of the sources he relies upon for his analysis. In one of his podcasts, when asked explicitly about the sources of his information and insights on Pakistan, he responded in an ambiguous manner, saying only, “I have some credible sources”. Such vagueness, particularly on sensitive issues, undermines the transparency and reliability of his analysis.⁴⁷

There is another important factor that also needs to be taken into consideration while making sense of the discourse generated by the concerned think tanks: the relationship between the US government and the concerned think tanks. Besides, experts’ biases, the negative portrayal of Pakistan can be partially attributed to US interests which these

⁴⁵ Michael Kugelman, “The Regional Dynamics of Pakistan’s Growing Security Crisis Are Critical. It Accuses Its Neighbors of Sponsoring the Attacks. But Ties w/India, Iran & Afghanistan Vary from Fragile to Hostile. Borders Are Tense. And Security Risks Have Strained Ties w/China, Its Closest Ally.” Post, X (Formerly Twitter), March 16, 2025, <https://x.com/MichaelKugelman/status/1901327431065104554>.

⁴⁶ Michael Kugelman, “Today’s Yunus-Modi Meeting Attests to an Important Fact That’s Often Forgotten amid All the Toxic Narratives and Noise around India-Bangladesh Ties Post-Hasina: It’s Not a Hostile Relationship, despite Major Tensions and Mistrust. Both Sides Have Still Been Willing to Engage.” Post, X (Formerly Twitter), April 4, 2025, <https://x.com/MichaelKugelman/status/1908155760829448325>.

⁴⁷ Milewski and Kugelman, “Pakistan in Peril?”

think tanks actively pursued as noted elsewhere in the paper. Both the Wilson Center and the USIP receive funding from the US government and maintain close ties with Washington's policymaking apparatus. These institutional alignments often result in analyses that mirror prevailing US foreign policy priorities. A significant shift in these priorities occurred around 2011, when the rise of China captured the attention of the US administration. This newly found obsession with rising China was also evident from the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" policy. The policy repositioned the US's strategic focus from the Middle East and South Asia to the Asia-Pacific region.

Within this new framework, India emerged as a key strategic partner for the US, which it viewed as a counterweight to China's rising influence in the region. Consequently, Pakistan, once enjoying the status of a non-NATO ally of the US during the Cold War and subsequently in the War on Terror, was increasingly relegated to a peripheral position in their strategic calculations. The said diminishing strategic utility of Pakistan in Washington's calculus has, in turn, influenced the tone and focus of policy research emanating from US-based think tanks, which, as has been explored in the paper, often framed Pakistan through a negative lens.

Thus, reflecting on the above points, it can be argued that the discourse generated by these think tanks is manipulated by the biases of their experts and the geopolitical interests of the US, which these think tanks pursue. This is not to imply that they project outright falsehoods about Pakistan. Certainly, there is an element of truth in their claims. However, it is a partial truth—and partial truths are more dangerous than complete falsehoods. It is precisely through these partial truths that effective propaganda is crafted. Propaganda gains its strength not from outright lies but from presenting

fragments of truth in a distorted and selective manner, emphasizing certain realities while omitting others. The very same dynamic is at play here in the context of Pakistan.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Monitoring the Discourse of US Think Tanks on Pakistan

Since it has been established that the discourse of US think tanks provides key insights into the US foreign policy and also influences its foreign policy direction, monitoring of this discourse is crucial for Pakistan. In this regard, the think tanks operating in Pakistan can be tasked, to monitor the discourse of leading US think tanks on Pakistan. It could include analysing publications, reports, and policy recommendations produced by these think tanks at regular intervals to identify recurring narratives and themes. Consequently, it will provide valuable insights into how Pakistan is perceived in US policy circles and anticipate potential shifts if there is any, in US foreign policy vis a-vis Pakistan. This proactive approach would enable Pakistan to better understand and respond to the narratives shaping its international image, while also providing a foundation for crafting informed and effective counter-narratives.

5.2. Institutionalised Engagement with US Think Tanks

Secondly, there is a need on the part of Pakistani diplomats to establish formal links with the US think tanks. Currently, there is no institutionalised framework for sustained and systematic engagement, as revealed to this author by former Ambassador of Pakistan to the US, Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry. To address this gap, Pakistani diplomats stationed in the US should establish and maintain relationships with key think tanks. This

engagement could include among other things, attending their events, contributing op-eds, and participating in panel discussions to present Pakistan's viewpoint and provide firsthand insights into its policies, challenges, and achievements. It is worth noting that during this study, with the sole exception of former Ambassador Maleeha Lodhi, no other Pakistani diplomat's op-ed or written contribution could be found on the websites of the selected think tanks. This highlights the need for a more structured and proactive approach to ensure that Pakistan's perspective is consistently represented in these influential platforms.

In addition to this institutional engagement, there is also a need to build relationships with leading voices within these think tanks who significantly shape the discourse on Pakistan. For instance, in the case of Wilson Center, Michael Kugelman is a prominent figure whose work greatly influences the Center's perspectives on Pakistan. The individual regularly visits Pakistan. Pakistan's policymakers, by and large, can actively engage with him and similar experts to provide alternative perspectives on Pakistan. Such an engagement could potentially help counterbalance negative narratives and present a more nuanced understanding of Pakistan's policies and predicaments.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research paper has explored the discourse generated by two leading US think tanks, the Wilson Center and the USIP on Pakistan since 2011. Through a detailed analysis of their opinion articles, reports, policy briefs, and podcasts, the study has found a predominantly negative discourse about Pakistan from the selected think tanks. It is evident from the recurrent themes of terrorism, chronic political instability, and economic fragility that regularly appeared in their discourse. The paper

has further concluded that the discourse produced by these think tanks—largely influenced by the personal biases of their epistemic communities, has not only negatively shaped perceptions of Pakistan in US policy circles but has also influenced US foreign policy decisions in negative manner vis-a-vis Pakistan in the selected timeframe.

Given this impact of the discourse of US think tanks on US foreign, this study suggests that Pakistan needs to monitor, and analyse the discourse of these think tanks which can be helpful for Pakistan's policymakers to anticipate foreign policy shifts. Additionally, it also emphasis on the need to engage with these think tanks actively. In the end, the research paper underscores the broader role of think tanks in shaping international relations and suggests that future studies can explore their influence not only on the foreign policy of the US but also on other countries' foreign policies as well.

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