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# Students' Perception of Terrorism and liberal Narrative about Afghanistan in Pakistan

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Ruqia Rehman  
Fida Muhammad Bazai  
Ghulam Murtaza

## Introduction

No country is free of prejudices; certain groups of its own citizens are discriminated against. Still, at the very least this is normally deprecated officially and, as in some countries, one sees genuine attempts to create an equalitarian society(Hoodbhoy, 2018).

The key objective of this article is to determine the relationship between liberal narrative in Pakistan about Afghanistan and university students' perceptions towards terrorism. There are three narratives in Pakistan regarding Afghanistan; liberal, conservative, and religious. Some scholars on Pak-Afghan relationship; Khadim Hussain, Pervaiz Hoodbhoy, and Amir Rana argue that there is a strong negative relationship between narratives about Afghanistan in Pakistan and its efforts against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. They claim that it would not possible to defeat terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan before changing narratives in both countries. According to Khadim Hussain,

In Zia era the educational curriculum was particularly instrumental in forging a mindset that perpetuated the stereotyping of the 'other' and engendered a culture of intolerance. The climate provided a fertile ground for the militant discourse that, along with other factors, laid the foundation of Talibanisation in Pakistan. Sectarianism, which is eating into the very vitals of Pakistani state and society, is one of the by-products of this process(Hussain, 2014).

This study will illustrate whether there is any relationship between the war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and the narratives about Afghanistan in Pakistan or not. If there is any relationship what is the nature of the relationship between the two phenomena. This study is exclusively focused on the university students in Pakistan four provinces in order to know if other factors than narratives are also playing their role in students' perceptions towards terrorism. It is important to mention one point that the differences between the three narratives; liberal, conservative and religious are more established in the cases of the United States

and India than Afghanistan, because of their high importance in Pakistan's domestic politics.

### Literature Review

There are different opinions among scholars over the relationship between madrasas, universities and terrorism in Pakistan. Educational institutions in Pakistan, especially madrasas, have been at the target of the United States since 9/11. According to Dr. Rehman, the *madrassas*, which were associated with conservatism, ossification and stagnation of Islam earlier are now seen as hotbeds of militancy in the name of Islam. After 9/11, a number of authors, both western (Singer 2001) and Pakistani (Haqqani 2002), have connected the *madrassas* with militancy. At least three reports of the International Crises Group (ICG) – published 29 July 2002, 20 March 2003 and 16 January 2004 – have taken the nexus between militancy and the *madrassas* as a given (Rahman, 2013).

There is a bulk of literature on the Madaris students support for terrorism. Many published reports and scholarly articles Gelfand, LaFree, Fahey, and Feinberg (2013), Tellis (2208) and Fair (2009) have claimed that the large number of students in Pakistani Madris are important sources of terrorism and suggested various strategies to streamline their curriculum. They claim in their reports and findings that the extremist curriculum taught in Pakistani Madrasah develop the same mind set as that of various terrorist organizations (Mufti, 2011). They further claim that radicalisation and extremism is not only present in Madaris, but also in Pakistan's higher education institutions (Afzal, 2018). According to Hussain,

Unfortunately, in Pakistan, instead of making learning a positive experience that brings out the best in students, successive governments have tried to harness the academic aspect of curriculum development for the purpose of indoctrination. At no other time has this approach been embraced with more fervour than during Gen ZiaulHaq's era (Hussain, 2014).

He further says that,

That period saw languages, Islamic studies, social studies and even the natural sciences infused with content geared towards developing an isolationist mindset. Moreover ...four main concepts were incorporated into the curricula; the glorification of war, the denigration of other religions, nations, countries and races, the representation of women as lesser humans unable to participate in social, political or even academic fields, the distortion of indigenous history and neglect of indigenous civilisations and personalities known for their intellectual, political and social achievements (Hussain, 2014).

Some of them (Gelfand et al., 2013) even assert that the Madris in Pakistan are providing foot-soldiers to terrorist organizations. However, there are very few authentic studies that study the relationship between universities students and terrorism. The large number of terrorist incidents by universities students inside

and outside Pakistan necessitates a comprehensive research to find out the attitude of University students towards terrorism.

There are several renowned scholars like Christine Fair, Seth Jones, Hussain Haqqani, Ashley Tellis, Bruce Riedel, Ahmed Rashid and Frederic Grare, who regularly publish on political and strategic developments in Pakistan in reputable journals. There is a disturbing consensus among these recognised scholars that state sponsored narrative in Pakistan about Afghanistan, India and US negatively affect the war against terrorism and extremism. According to Rana,

A general argument can be made that Pakistan's power elites have been patronising religious, ethnic, cultural and racial disagreements to further their regime, instead of looking at the diversity of religious, cultural and societal opinion in Pakistan as a sign of inclusiveness and plurality. That has significantly damaged the country's social fabric, mainly its humanistic values such as empathy and compassion, which safeguard individuals and societies from hate and aggression (Rana, 2019).

He further says that,

Pakistan's far-right religious groups have been known for mobilising their street power whenever the country has faced a crisis in its ties with its neighbours or Washington. The Pakistan Defence Council is the most recent example of such an alliance of religious groups. Among other things, it has been used to whip up public sentiment against the US for conducting drone strikes inside Pakistan, the Salala check-post attack in 2011, and the Raymond Davis affair that saw an American spy kill Pakistani civilians in Lahore (Rana, Establishing a new order, 2019).

According to some scholars like Christine Fair, Khadim Hussain, Hussain Haqqani and Frederic Grare the state does not only use these organisations to promote specific kinds of narratives against India, US and Afghanistan, but also counter nationalist and secular narratives at home through religious groups. According to Rana,

The institutions of religious education may have not completely eroded the nationalist ethos of the Baloch but they have at least provided them a sense of connectivity with the broader religious communities in Pakistan. The Tableeghi Jamaat is one of the instrumental organisations connecting the Baloch with the wider national, religious and social discourses in the country. Banned terrorist groups such as the Jamaatud Daawa and Al-Rehmat Trust were also encouraged to expand their networks in the province, especially in the insurgency-infested areas (Rana, RELIGION, NATIONALISM AND INSURGENCY IN BALOCHISTAN, 2019).

This article analyses how liberal narrative about Afghanistan affects students' perceptions towards terrorism in Pakistan.

### **Narratives in Pakistan about Afghanistan**

There are three narratives in Pakistan regarding Afghanistan; liberal, conservative and religious. The dominant narrative is that of the security forces, which comes in the domain of conservative one. The conservative narrative in Pakistan doesn't support the current government in Kabul, because they believe it is disproportionally dominated by non-Pashtun and is under the influence of New-Delhi (Lodi, 2005). The security establishment doesn't have good relationship with liberal forces in Afghanistan and also doesn't enjoy cordial relationship with other minorities except Pashtuns. In Pashtuns, the security establishment was closely associated with religious elements. Currently the religious forces don't have any important role in the Afghan government. Secondly, the security establishment and the conservative forces suspect that India interferes in Pakistan through Afghanistan, because they share long porous borders (Shoib, 2013).

The religious forces have radical narrative on Afghanistan. They are strongly against the presence of International forces, especially of the United States, in Afghanistan. They consider the US presence in Afghanistan as occupation by crusade powers and the elimination of pure Islamic government of the Taliban that according to them installed absolute peace and stability in Afghanistan. They consider the political government in Kabul not true representative of the people, but agents and puppet of the United States to prolong their stay for strategic objectives against China, Pakistan and Iran. They have always been in alliance with the military establishment. According to Rana,

Though Muslim societies have their own unique backgrounds, the Pakistani clergy has been boosted by two major factors. First, the clergy has been a strategic partner of the establishment in its nationalism project and has extended its help to the state's political and geopolitical ventures. Secondly, the state, on the whole, has left society to the mercy of a clergy disposed towards religion-oriented sociocultural engineering (Rana, Establishing a new order, 2019).

The Conservative forces allege that India support internal unrest by supporting Baloch rebel and the Pakistani Taliban through its proxies in Afghanistan. The conservative forces also do not support long term stay of the United States in Afghanistan for two reasons. Firstly, they believe that as long as foreign forces are present in Afghanistan, it will be difficult to defeat narratives of terrorist organisations. Secondly, the conservative forces suspect that the United States' strategic objectives in the region are more aligned with India against Pakistan and China. These all developments make Pakistan security forces or the conservative forces less supportive of the current dispensation in Afghanistan (Yusuf, 2014). Therefore, Pakistan security forces are not showing any willingness to break a deal between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

The conservative forces believe that Afghanistan has unique geo-strategic location, which is becoming extremely important with the shift of politics from Europe to Asia. They claim that the United States' objective in Afghanistan is not to defeat the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, but rather to have an eye on the Pakistan' nuclear

weapons and balance China and Russia emergence as global power with the help of India (Rehman, 2015). They totally support the Taliban struggle against foreign and Afghan forces and urge Pakistani state to provide military, political and diplomatic support to the Taliban to ensure their victory against the United States to ensure peace in the region. They call the Afghan Taliban as true Afghan nationalist and representatives of their people (Khan, 2012). This narrative is one of the key reasons behind Pakistan's reluctance to initiate military action against the Afghan Taliban in Quetta and Waziristan. According to Rana,

From Karachi to Torkham, Islamabad to Gilgit and Peshawar to Kotri, the spread of religious institutions is a visible indication of the religious ethos in the country. But the architectural symmetry of madressahs, mosques and religious centres also points to the presence of religious forces that are at work to create a kind of national cohesion (Rana, RELIGION, NATIONALISM AND INSURGENCY IN BALOCHISTAN, 2019).

### **Liberal narrative about Afghanistan in Pakistan:**

The liberal forces consist of Pakistan Muslim League (N), Pakistan People Party (PPP) and other regional and ethnic parties. They prefer the current political set up over the Taliban government. They are also not against the presence of the foreign forces in Afghanistan. The liberal don't particularly like the alliance of Kabul and New-Delhi against the Islamabad, but they believe that Pakistan have many leverages on Afghanistan, the latter could be easily moved away from the Indian block (Bilawal, 2018). They strongly support political, economic, business, trade and people to people contacts with Afghanistan.

The liberal forces argue that Pakistan and Afghanistan should set together and resolve the bilateral differences over the terrorism, Durand line and Afghan refugees in Pakistan. They want to expand China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project to Afghanistan and central Asian countries. They support the Afghan army war against the Afghan Taliban and stresses upon political resolution of the insurgency. They don't subscribe to the two front threat doctrine that Afghanistan and India present two-front war challenge to Pakistan and argue that the former had never supported India in the bilateral conflict with Pakistan (Achezkai, 2017). They urge Islamabad to establish cordial strategic relationship with Kabul to defeat the menace of terrorism.

The liberal forces in Pakistan have clear position on three aspects of Islamabad's policy towards Afghanistan. They don't support to view Afghanistan in zero-sum security perspective vis-à-vis India and urge Pakistan's security establishment to establish normal bilateral relationship with Kabul. The liberals in Pakistan also support the current government in Afghanistan and stresses international community generally and the United States particularly to focus on condition based withdrawal rather imposing any arbitrary deadline without taking ground

realities into account. They are also the vocal opponent of extremism and terrorism in every form and shape. They oppose the Taliban's government in Afghanistan. Pakistan and India are locked in security dilemma and zero-sum game in South Asia. There is a long history of bilateral aggressions, wars, and support of terrorism in both countries since 1947 (Fair, 2010). They both have developed identities on the basis of rivalries against each other and totally paralysed economic and trade activities in region. The hostility between India and Pakistan ostensibly started with Kashmir, but now extended to every dimensions of bilateral relationship including sports especially cricket, which is one of the most popular game in both countries (Haqqani, 2013). They stop playing cricket against each other except in an International Cricket Council (ICC) event. In Indian Premier League (IPL), which is the biggest event in cricketing world after the ICC World Cup, players from all over the world are coming and playing, but Pakistani players are not allowed by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), which shows the level of hostility among the two nations that share same culture, language and colour.

The liberal forces in Pakistan, who work for civilian supremacy within the country, emphasize upon a liberal identity of Pakistan. They are of the view that Pakistan should establish amicable relationship with all neighbouring states including India and work for resolution of disputes including the issue of Kashmir through negotiation and dialogue (Iqbal, 2015). They are against the use of any kind of force in the bilateral relationship and stress upon people to people contact. The liberal forces in Pakistan, especially, urge the security establishment and powerful circles to establish relationship with Afghanistan from geo-economic perspective rather than geo-strategic (Rana, 2018). They believe that Pakistan should not look at Afghanistan as zero-sum game with India, rather promote an environment which is beneficial for the economy of both countries. They urge that Pakistan should increase volume of trade with Afghanistan and invest in resources and infrastructure to get access to Central Asian States, which are resources rich countries. They are strongly in favour of CPEC extension to Afghanistan to connect the region and promote trade activities (Khatak, 2018).

The liberal parties in Pakistan do not support the premature withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan. They support the current democratic dispensation in Kabul and making efforts to strengthen the bilateral relationship. Unlike the conservative and religious parties, the liberal recognise the current regime as legitimate *de Jure* representative of the Afghan people. They are cognizant of the fact that the regime in Kabul is weak and fragile, but believe that it will stabilise with the passage of time. They stress upon the United States to condition withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan with improvement of security situation on ground rather than imposing deadline due to domestic politics as during the Obama administration (Rashid, 2018). They do not object over the long term stay of the US forces in Afghanistan and encourage support the US war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

They do not share concerns of the security establishment and religious forces about the US objectives in the region against Iran, Pakistan, China and Russia.

The biggest difference between the liberals and religious forces in Pakistan over the issue of Afghanistan is terrorism and extremism. The liberal parties like PPP, ANP and MQM are the worst victim of terrorism in Pakistan. They lost hundreds of works and many prominent leaders to terrorism. They are very vocal against terrorism and do not support the Afghan Taliban. They believe that if the Afghan Taliban succeeds in Afghanistan, it will encourage extremist forces in Pakistan again to start insurgency. Therefore, they support the US forces stay in Afghanistan consider the current Afghan government as legitimate representatives of the Afghan people.

They believe the Taliban in Afghanistan are the same as in Pakistan, they have the same world view and are stringent opponent of liberal values, norms and ideas. According to the liberal parties, if the US withdraws from Afghanistan without restoring stability, it will again unleash the forces of extremism in the region and destroy movements for civilian supremacy, gender equality, freedom of speech, and protection of minorities. According to Rana,

However, the establishment usually eyes the moderates with suspicion because they cannot provide outright support for ventures entailing a democratic cost. The moderate forces are surviving on the civilizational, spiritual and cultural ethos of the country (Rana, Establishing a new order, 2019).

### **Methodology**

This paper implies quantitative research method to determine the influence of liberal narrative about Afghanistan on students' perception toward Taliban and Al-Qaeda. It is a discreet study and data is collected from 4 universities through survey. Convenient sampling technique was used at the beginning. 588 students were selected in 4 universities. The following was the distribution of sample students; 152 from University of Balochistan (UOB), 221 from University of the Punjab (UOP), 112 from University of Peshawar; and 103 students from University of Karachi (UOK). Students were selected from BA/BSc and MA/MSc programs. The survey questions contain two sections; the first section was about demographic variables and second part about the perception of terrorism. Student responses were acquired on five degree Likert scale. Reliability and validity were confirmed through pilot surveys. The value of Cronbach's Alpha was 0.861, which was statistically significant and acceptable.

The author personally visited universities to collect the data from respondents. The data was analysed by using SPSS. The descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to analyse the data. The frequencies, mean, and standard deviation are acquired in descriptive and Chi-square test was applied as inferential statistics.

### Discussion:

The following section discusses the results of comprehensive survey conducted among students of various backgrounds on the issue of terrorism and the liberal narrative about Afghanistan. It determines how liberal narrative in Pakistan affects students' perception on Afghanistan and terrorism, whether it is positive or no relationship between liberal narrative on Afghanistan and support for terrorism among Pakistani students.

**Table 1: Support for democratic government in Afghanistan**

ETHNICITY	PUNJABI	PASHTUN	BALUCH	SINDHI	MUHAJIR
OPP/ST OPP	49(20.9)	20(10.9)	8(13.1)	5(18.5)	16(19.5)
NO PERP	70(29.9)	19(10.3)	7(11.5)	5(18.5)	19(23.2)
AGREE/ ST.AGREE	115(49.1)	145(78.80)	46(75.4)	17(63)	47(57.3)
TOTAL	234(100)	184(100)	61(100)	27(100)	82(100)
CHI-Sq	45.811(.000)				
Cramer's c	.197				

The perception of Pakistan university students from all provinces were assessed and tested for the "support democratic government in Afghanistan". The response on this particular query had significantly different opinion from different ethnic groups of students (chi-sq. =45.81; p-value < 0.01). The observable difference was seen in the perception of Punjabi students where (49.1%) supported democratic government in Afghanistan, compared to Pashtuns (78.80), Pashtuns (75.4) and Sindhis (63).

**Table 2: Afghanistan as security threat to Pakistan**

ETHNICITY	PUNJABI	PASHTUN	BALUCH	SINDI	MAJAR
OPP/ST OPP	70(29.9)	58(31.50)	21(34.4)	6(22.2)	25(30.5)
NO PERP	75(32.1)	49(26.6)	12(19.7)	10(37)	18(22)
AGREE/ ST.AGREE	89(38)	77(41.8)	28(45.9)	11(40.7)	39(47.6)
TOTAL	234(100)	184(100)	61(100)	27(100)	82(100)
CHI-Sq	7.577				
Cramer's c	.114				

On inquiring about the perception of students on whether they think that Afghanistan poses a security threat to Pakistan, the majority agreed with the above proposition (chi-sq =7.5;p-value >0.10).



Table 3: Afghanistan’s relationship with India

ETHNICITY	PUNJABI	PASHTUN	BALUCH	SINDI	MAJAR
OPP/ST OPP	116(49.6)	83(45.10)	38(62.3)	12(44.4)	45(54.9)
NO PERP	59(25.2)	47(25.5)	9(14.8)	7(25.9)	21(25.6)
AGREE/ ST.AGREE	59(25.2)	54(29.3)	14(23)	8(29.6)	16(19.5)
TOTAL	234(100)	184(100)	61(100)	27(100)	82(100)
CHI-Sq	8.400 (.395 )				
Cramer’c	.085				

The results on Afghanistan’s relationship with India revealed (chi-sq. =8.40 p-value=0.01) higher majority of all ethnic groups strongly support Afghanistan relationship with India.

Table 4: Support for insurgency in Afghanistan

ETHNICITY	PUNJABI	PASHTUN	BALUCH	SINDI	MAJAR
OPP/ST OPP	125(53.4)	99(54.10)	44(72.1)	19(70.4)	40(48.8)
NO PERP	57(24.4)	33(18)	10(16.4)	4(14.8)	23(28)
AGREE/ ST.AGREE	52(22.2)	51(27.9)	7(11.5)	4(14.8)	19(23.2)
TOTAL	234(100)	184(100)	61(100)	27(100)	82(100)
CHI-Sq	16.143(.040)				
Cramer’c	.117				

it was again assessed to see whether we can witness any difference between ethnicities (as mentioned in table above)and their perception on Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, the hypothesis of independence was rejected (chi-sq. =16.14 ;p-value =0.05).

**Table 5: Students' perception of terrorism in FATA**

QUESTI ON	OPERATIONS					PEACE.DEAL				
ETHNIC ITY	PUN JAB I	PAS HTU N	BA LO CH	SIN DI	MA JAR	PUN JAB I	PAS HTU N	BA LO CH	SIN DI	MA JAR
OPP/ST OPP	22(9 .40)	34(1 8.50)	7(11 .5)	8(29 .8)	17(2 0.7)	44(1 8.8)	33(1 7.90)	16(2 6.20 )	10(3 7.0)	27(3 2.9)
NO PERP	76(3 2.5)	54(2 9.3)	20(3 2.8)	1(3. 70)	10(1 2.20 )	75(3 2.10 )	55(2 9.9)	22(3 6.10 )	4(14 .8)	11(1 3.4)
AGREE/ ST.AGR EE	136( 58.1 )	96(5 2.10)	34(5 5.7)	18(6 6.7)	55(6 7.10 )	115( 49.1 0)	96(5 2.20)	23(3 7.70 )	13(4 8.10 )	44(5 3.7)
TOTAL	234( 100. 0)	184( 100. 00	61(1 00.0 0	27(1 00.0 )	82(1 00.0 )	234( 100. 0)	184( 100. 0)	61(1 00.0 )	27(1 00.0 )	82(1 00.0 )
CHI-Sq	30.760*					23.163**				
Cramer'c	0.162					0.14				

**Analysis:**

1. The behaviours of Pakistani students from different ethnic backgrounds are notoverwhelmingly influenced by the liberal narrative on Afghanistan as shown in the above tables. The only two variables which are positively related to terrorism are support for democratic government in Afghanistan and support for Insurgency. On other issues like Afghanistan as security threat and Afghanistan's relation with India as threat to Pakistan, majority students from all ethnic groups are not influenced by the liberal narrative. It shows that liberal narrative is strong on the former and weak on later issues. The first one is positively related to military operations in FATA and the second one with peace talk with the Taliban. It confirms the existing literature claim that negative narratives against Afghanistan discourage counter-terrorism policies in Pakistan.
2. The ethnic and demographic landscape of Pakistan is complex, diverse and versatile. The five major ethnic groups living in Pakistan have different opinions from each other on the issues of terrorism and relationship with the Afghanistan. The level of support for democratic government in Afghanistan is strongestamong Pashtun (78.8%) and Baloch students (75.4%) respectively. There is a massive difference between students who support and those who don't (68%) and (62.1%)respectively.The variable of support for democratic government

in Afghanistan is positively related to military operations in FATA as shown in tables 1 and 5. It confirms the existing literature that positive narrative about Afghanistan increases support for counter-terrorism measures in Pakistan. Therefore there should be emphasis on promotion of democracy in Afghanistan.

3. The interesting aspect of the students' perception on the issue of Afghanistan as security threat is low level of margin between supporter and opponents as shown in Table 2. The conservative and religious narratives on Afghanistan as security threat, which is also state narrative, has bigger influence on all ethnic groups, but the margin of difference is between 10% to 15%, which could be covered if the liberal start emphasizing this point that Afghanistan is not a security threat. This variable is weakly related to peace talk with the Taliban as shown in table 5. There are similar pattern in students behaviour toward peace talk with the Taliban and Afghanistan as security threat to Pakistan. This finding goes against the existing literature that claims that negative association of Afghanistan with Pakistan's security increasing support for peace talk with the Taliban.
4. The striking feature of the table 3 is a strong perception in Pakistani students that Afghanistan relation with India does not pose security threat to Pakistan. 62.3% of Baloch, 54.9% Muhajir and 49.6 Punjabis oppose the proposition that Afghanistan's relationship with India poses a threat to Pakistan. The margin of difference is also significant as shown in table 3. This pattern of behaviour is similar to support for military operation in FATA. It again confirms the existing literature that positive narrative about Afghanistan increases support for military operation against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The liberal narrative successfully influenced bigger majority of students especially from Baloch, Muhajir and Punjabis than religious and conservative ones.
5. Liberal narrative again succeeded in influencing students' perception on opposing insurgency in Afghanistan. Baloch, Sindhi and Pashtuns are the bigger opponents of insurgency in Afghanistan as shown in table 4. The pattern of support is similar to military operations in FATA as shown in table 5. It again confirms the existing literature that support for insurgency in Afghanistan is negatively related to military operations in FATA. It is therefore essential to oppose insurgency in Afghanistan in order to increase support for counter-insurgency in Pakistan.

## **Conclusion**

The above discussion proves that liberal narrative is successful in influencing students' perception on support for democratic government in Afghanistan, Afghanistan's relationship US does not pose security threat to Pakistan and opposition of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan with a big margin as shown in tables 1, 2, 3. The liberal narrative is weaker on issue of Afghanistan as security

threat to Pakistan, but the margin of difference is massive. It could be covered with positive projection of Afghanistan. The above discussion also confirms the existing literature that there is a positive relationship between liberal narrative about the Afghanistan in Pakistan and counter-terrorism measures in FATA. It is also been witnessed that negative narrative damage counter-terrorism measures in the country. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that Pakistan powerful civil and military institutions should adopt liberal narrative on Afghanistan to counter the threat of terrorism in the country.

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