



CONSTRUCTING THE CONFLICT: A COMPARATIVE CORPUS-ASSISTED CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CA-CDA) OF MEDIA DISCOURSE IN PAK-AFGHAN BORDER CONFLICT OF 2025

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Abstract

The study conducts a comparative Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis (CA-CDA) of the selected media discourse on Pak-Afghan Border Clashes of 2025. The research investigates how the media of each country linguistically construct the conflict and what are the ideological implications of those constructions by analyzing the specialized corpora, constituting of online news reports and articles from *Dawn* and *TOLOnews* for Pakistan and Afghanistan respectively. The study uses Sketch Engine software for quantitative analysis to extract keyword lists for both Pakistani Corpus and Afghan Corpus. The generated keyword lists are used to extract key lemmas based on their statistical salience and discursive frames of securitization, blame, sovereignty, and legitimacy from the corpus. The study examines the collocational and concordance patterns of the selected lemmas. Furthermore, the research uses Fairclough's 3D model of CDA as its interpretative framework along with van Dijk's ideological square. The findings reveal the discursive differences in three areas: the grammar of blame evidenced through transitivity and nominalization, the construction of legitimacy and Illegitimacy done by labeling strategies, and the contestation of sovereignty, which manifest in the nature of border itself. The paper argues that the purpose of these contrasting discourses is not innocent, but rather a manifestation of state propaganda to justify state actions, entrench national identities, and foster conflict by closing common ground. Hence, this research contributes to the growing field of CA-CDA and highlights the mechanisms through which power and ideology is enacted in media discourse.

Keywords: *Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CA-CDA), Durand Line, Fairclough, Ideology, Legitimization, Pak-Afghan Conflict, Transitivity, Van Dijk.*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan is an intricate tapestry of shared culture, geography, and persistent geopolitical friction. Drawing on current scholarly research, the following sections provide a sequential analysis of how this relationship evolved from its foundational disputes to modern-day security strategies.

The historical genesis of the bilateral conflict lies in the 1893 treaty between the British representative Sir Mortimer Durand and the Afghan ruler Amir Abdur Rahman Khan. This treaty established the Durand Line, a 2,640-kilometer boundary intended to demarcate British India from Afghanistan. According to Hussain et al. (2023), while successive Afghan governments in 1905 reaffirmed the treaty, 1919, and 1930, the establishment of Pakistan in 1947 triggered a complete reversal in Kabul's stance. Upon Pakistan's independence, Afghanistan rejected the treaty and asserted claims over territory reaching the Indus River. Kaleem (2025) notes a critical historical fact that Afghanistan was one of those countries that was against Pakistan's membership in the United Nations, due to a territorial dispute over the Durand Line. This rejection laid the groundwork for decades of turbulent relations between the two countries.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, relations remained strained due to divergent Cold War alliances. Pakistan forged ties with the United States (joining SEATO and CENTO), while Afghanistan aligned with the Soviet Union. A major point of contention during this era was the Pakhtoonistan issue, which Kaleem (2025) describes as the concept of a separate homeland for the Pashtun ethnic group spanning both sides of the border a movement Pakistan viewed as a direct threat to its territorial integrity. The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan marked a temporary shift toward cooperation. Pakistan became a primary supporter of the mujahideen, providing moral and material support to counter Soviet expansionism. However, this period also initiated the massive refugee crisis. Hussain et al. (2023) report that more than 2.7 million Afghan migrants entered Pakistan following the invasion. The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan fundamentally altered regional dynamics. Pakistan, under international pressure, aligned with the U.S. in the "War on Terror," leading to severe domestic repercussions. As Ali et al. (2020) state, that Pakistan has equally been affected by terrorist attacks, smuggling, and the illegal surge of immigrants in its territory ever since America attacked Afghanistan.

The human and economic costs of this era were devastating. For decades, the border was characterized by loose security, where individuals could cross the border without any resistance.

The porous nature of the border defined by Mahmood et al. (2023) as a breach allowing the illegal migration of people, goods, and ammunition facilitated three primary threats, which are border porosity, smuggling, and illegal migration. Mahmood et al.

(2023) found that 98.1% of military personnel agree that the rise in terrorism is directly linked to the border's porosity. Ali et al. (2020) report that about 70% of the export of goods from Pakistan to Afghanistan is smuggled back to Pakistan through the different border gaps, causing annual losses of roughly \$3 billion. Pakistan currently hosts 1.35 million registered refugees and an estimated 600,000 illegal Afghan immigrants.

In 2017, Pakistan transitioned to an offensive policy by commencing the construction of a high-tech border fence. This double fence stands 3.6 to 4 meters high and is topped with razor wire. Mahmood et al. (2023) report that 85% of the fencing has been completed despite the volatile security situation. Ali et al. (2020) conclude that border fencing is a vital solution for a developing nation that building a border fence is the only legitimate solution for protecting countries from terrorists, drug cartels, insurgents, or suicide bombers of the neighboring countries." Furthermore, securing the border is now essential for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) ; Mahmood et al. (2023) note that 94.2% of respondents view terrorism as a direct threat to CPEC routes in the border provinces of KPK and Baluchistan.

Armed conflicts broke out in several strategically important frontier towns, most notably Spin Boldak, in mid-October 2025, marking the most severe stage of the recent escalation of the Pakistan–Afghanistan border. The two neighboring states' bilateral relations drastically deteriorated because of these clashes, which caused significant casualties, including civilians. Temporary closure of important border crossings like Torkham and Chaman exacerbated the issue, which affected trade, humanitarian aid, and cross-border travel.

On October 19, 2025, Pakistan and Afghanistan negotiated a ceasefire deal in response to the intensifying hostilities, with Qatar and Turkey serving as mediators. Despite this diplomatic success, further rounds of negotiations in Saudi Arabia and Istanbul failed to produce a long-term political agreement, demonstrating the fragility of the diplomatic process as well as the level of mistrust. Tensions have increased due to wider political and strategic issues in addition to direct military involvement. Islamabad's demand that Kabul take decisive action against armed groups purportedly operating from Afghan territory has increased due to Pakistan's worsening domestic security environment, which is characterised by frequent militant strikes in border districts and the emergence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). However, Afghan authorities have categorically denied these charges, claiming that Afghanistan cannot be held responsible for all cross-border occurrences that are linked to non-state actors.

The conflict has had equally dire humanitarian and economic repercussions. While refugee displacement and increased security restrictions have increased humanitarian burdens and further strained bilateral ties, the closing of important border crossings and disruption of commercial flows have caused major economic costs for both countries.

The conflict between Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2025 is essentially the result of a complicated interaction between past border conflicts, conflicting security narratives, cross-border militancy, and inadequate diplomatic channels. In addition to influencing regional dynamics, this unstable environment has a significant impact on how state narratives are discursively constructed. Examining how each state creates, defends, and legitimizes its position within the conflict is made possible by the official press releases, media reporting, and government communications that were released during this time. Thus, the main emphasis of the current study is on this comparative construction of conflict reporting through the media outlets of both countries.

1.2. Research Objectives

This research endeavours to analyze different lexical patterns in both Pakistani Corpus and Afghan Corpus. The objective of this study is to examine the strategies of legitimation and delegitimation employed by the media outlets of both countries. Moreover, the study aims to evaluate how linguistic patterns contribute to broader sociopolitical context with its ideological consequences.

1.3. Research Questions

1. How the key actors and actions are represented differently in each corpus with the use of lexical and grammatical choices?
2. How these linguistic patterns act as strategies of legitimation and delegitimation in the discursive practice of the media of each nation?
3. How these different discourses can be explained in relation to the sociopolitical context of Pak-Afghan border conflict and what are the potential consequences?

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study demonstrates the significance of CDA by integrating corpus linguistics with Critical Discourse Analysis. The study contributes to the growing body of Corpus-based CDA, showing how the corpus analysis tools can assist in the interpretations of ideology and power in media discourse. Moreover, this research also offers empirical evidence from legitimate news texts. It also reveals how language constructs blame, agency, victimhood, and legitimacy in conflict reporting by media. Further, it also enhances understanding of media's role in shaping state narratives by unpacking how the lexical choices act as ideological tools in media discourse. This study also enhances media literacy by making the audience conscious of the linguistic bias during conflict reporting. Hence, it promotes responsible reporting. Finally, it provides a foundation for future research on media discourse and its link with conflict and ideology.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have explored the portrayal of Pak-Afghan relations and conflicts in media. A comparative study by Mushtaq (2015) investigated the media framing of bilateral relations through content analysis of news reports published in 2013 and 2014.

The study found out that the media sets of both sides aligned with the foreign policies of the respective governments. Ahmad and Hussain (2025) studied the representation of the new Afghan-Taliban government in 2021 Pakistani media reports from *Dawn* and *The News*. By using Fairclough's 3D model of CDA, the researchers find a dramatic shift in media portrayal, which aligns with the government's shifting interests of the state (Ahmad & Hussain, 2025). This study shows how media portrayal aligns with state interests and policies. Another study by Marwan and Naz (2024) explored how prominent television channels covered the August 2021 fall of Kabul. The study focused on primetime news bulletins from *Geo News*, *PTV News*, and *TOLOnews* over eight days after the takeover. Pakistani channels covered the event primarily from the vantage point of elite officials (Marwan & Naz, 2024), *Geo News* and *PTV News* primarily framed events from the perspective of elite officials and emphasized Pakistan's role in facilitating safe evacuations, while *TOLOnews* focused on the local Afghan populace and the impact of the Taliban on daily life. The media largely ignored cross-border security implications, border closures, or diplomatic tensions. Moreover, the research by Batool (2019) examined how Pakistani print media framed Afghan refugees following APS attack and Operation Zarb-e-Azb. The study found out that the media prioritized "national security" over refugees' problems, thus indicating that media operates according to state policies and interests (Batool, 2019, p. 470). Similarly, Ahmad and Hussain (2025) argue that the media's role extends beyond reporting events to actively shaping ideological and social narratives, particularly in post-conflict settings.

In Pakistan, historical rivalries, postcolonial identities, and geopolitical insecurities significantly influence media discourse on Afghanistan. The unresolved status of the Durand Line, cross-border militancy, and refugee flows have contributed to the securitized framing that emphasizes threat, instability, and national defense (Batool, 2019). Media framing reproduces state-centric ideologies and constructs moral binaries between Pakistan and Afghanistan (Salih et al., 2025).

To study the role of media in portraying border conflict, a recent study by Salih et al. (2025) shows how the Pakistani media framed the border conflict of October 2025. With the help of CDA analysis and framing theory, the textual analysis revealed that Pakistani media used securitized and state-centered frame, reflecting the alertness of Pakistan's military and defensive orientation (Salih et al., 2025). The study further identified how the media attributes blame to the other side in the conflict, thus associating terrorism and violence to Afghanistan in Pakistani media discourse.

Media plays a central role in constructing the 'Other' during crises. Several studies depict how the othering of the opposing side is done in different platforms of Pakistani and Afghani media. In the context of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, media framing is intertwined with political, social, and economic concerns, shaping public perceptions in

ways that justify state policies (Batool, 2019; Ahmad, 2025). Using CDA, studies have revealed mechanisms of 'Othering' in Pakistani media, including lexical choices, passivation, modal certainty, and intertextuality. For instance, English-language newspapers such as *Dawn* and *The News* employ passive voice and hedging strategies to obscure state responsibility in deportations, while Urdu newspapers like *Jang* and *Dunya* use active constructions, legal terminology, and Islamic references to legitimize state actions (Urooj et al., 2025). This study shows how Pakistani media narratives construct Afghan refugees as the 'other' during the repatriation crisis of 2025. The Critical Discourse Analysis reveals that the media marginalized Afghan refugees. Grammatical bias was noticed as passive voice was used to describe state actions, thus obscuring responsibilities of the authorities. This clearly demonstrates that media reporting legitimize state policies and reinforce dominant ideologies. Similarly, Fatima et al. (2021) notices how identities are constructed through language in newspapers by analyzing 252 columns from *Dawn*, published between March 1 and April 30, 2017. The study employed content analysis and found out that along with other identities, Afghan Taliban were constructed as other and identified as militant other 8 times. The categorization separated groups associated with terrorism from the Pakistani public.

The othering is also prevalent in Afghan discourse. Aziz et al. (2025) conducted a study to notice the phenomenon of 'othering' in famous Afghan social media platform. The open-ended readings of the posts revealed that posts related to Pakistan were 43% on Politics and 22% on terrorism. The individually managed pages frequently used negative lexicalizations to describe Pakistan such as "terror state" and "lawless neighbor" (Aziz et al., 2025, p. 9). Hence, the existing literature reveals that the process of othering is noticeable on both sides of the border.

2.1. Research Gap

Although previous studies have explored the Pak-Afghan relations and conflict by using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) predominantly and other techniques such as content analysis, but none has used corpus-assisted approach to triangulate the linguistic patterns analyzed through CDA. Furthermore, the media representation of border conflict is an understudied area. The current study aims to address these gaps. The existing literature also lacks the comparative analysis of the media representations on both sides that are Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is noticeable how Afghan discourse is not analyzed in comparison to Pakistani media discourse in most studies. This is significant to uncover how media outlets construct the opposing side in a conflict. This study addresses these gaps by using comparative CA-CDA to new articles and reports from both sides and their respective outlets.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Type

This research employs mixed-methods approach. Quantitative corpus methods identify lexical patterns across the two corpora and Qualitative CDA techniques such as transitivity, agency, naming strategies interpret how linguistic choices construct the particular representations across the news outlets of each country.

3.2. Data Collection

The researchers opted for event-based data collection approach. They started collecting the data after the onset of the conflict. The data comprises of online news articles and reports. The researchers compiled a list of biggest instances in the initial period of the conflict (October- November). They focused on the reporting of the conflict on both sides. For Pakistan, the researchers gathered data from *Dawn* and from Afghan side; *TOLOnews* was considered as a source for reports on border conflict. Then, the authors searched for relevant websites. They compiled and collected articles from the online open archives of the respective websites manually. *Dawn* and *TOLOnews* were chosen because these outlets are internationally recognized, and credible. Another reason is their English language coverage, which aided comparative analysis. Their consistent coverage of the conflict also served as reason for selecting these outlets. The relevant reports and articles were selected that focused on cross-border clashes, military actions, peace talks, diplomatic encounters, and international interventions to resolve the conflict. 27 articles were selected from *Dawn* and 26 articles were selected from *TOLO news* to ensure the depth and enough coverage of the recent conflict. The data on articles from Afghan side was sparse, so that would be considered in the analysis and similarly the word difference in the corpora would be considered as a limitation.

Online articles and reports were chosen instead of government statements because they are comparable and primary genre used by the news outlets to report the real-time conflict. They offer consistent, factual information related to the events suitable for corpus analysis. Reports capture immediate events and articles provide context along with the reporting, thus they offer a complete representation of how the conflict is constructed by the media of each country.

Then, two corpora were created for this study, both consisting of news texts from each side. Each text was converted into plain text file for compatibility with the corpus tool. The texts were cleaned in the process by removing images, captions, extra line breaks, hyperlinks, and advertisements etc. After cleaning, the files for each outlet were compiled into two folders named Dawn Corpus and TOLO Corpus, which were uploaded on the Sketch Engine. Thus, the researchers compiled the two corpora and labeled them as Pakistani Corpus and Afghan Corpus for Pakistan and Afghanistan respectively. The Pakistani Corpus consists of 27 documents, totaling 1,045 sentences, with a word count of

24,481 and 28, 190 tokens. Similarly, the Afghan Corpus consists of 26 documents with 340 sentences, 7,496 words, and 8, 581 tokens. The researchers did no linguistic preprocessing. The keyword analysis was performed using Sketch Engine. Pakistani Corpus was compared to Afghan Corpus as a reference corpus to find words that are statically more frequent in Pakistani discourse and vice versa. Then, key lemmas were extracted from these lists based on their statistical salience and relevance to discursive frames. For each selected lemma, Sketch Engine was used to generate collocation profiles from both corpora and then concordance lines were extracted from each corpus which were then subjected to Qualitative analysis using Fairclough's and Van Dijk's CDA theory.

3.3. Research Design

This study opts for Corpus Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CA-CDA) design, hence combining corpus linguistics with qualitative critical discourse analysis. The reason for choosing this is the efficiency of corpus tools in revealing certain linguistic patterns, which is helpful for unveiling the ideological patterns in discourse. Thus, corpus tools aid in providing quantitative findings for in-depth CDA analysis that will further interpret those patterns. This research follows a comparative design, analyzing the two national news outlet of each country to study the representation of Pak-Afghan border conflict. This research treats Pakistan and Afghanistan Corpus separately. This enables comparison through keyword, concordance, and collocation analysis.

3.4. Theoretical Framework

Corpus linguistics serves as the quantitative foundation for this research, and it is a "new research enterprise" (Leech, 1991, p.106). Observation of linguistic facts lead to formulation of hypothesis and generalizations, which are then unified in a theoretical statement. This approach moves beyond intuition. Corpus linguistics is diverse, thus it encapsulates various approaches to corpus building and use instead of a single fixed method (McEnery & Gabrielatos, 2006). Hence, the study employs following corpus tools to unveil the hidden ideological patterns. Keyword analysis is significant as it provides a measure of saliency, important in discourse analysis, as compared to the word list that just provides frequency (Baker, 2023). According to Stubbs (1996), collocations show the "associations and connotations" of the words (p.172). Then, the study employs the "qualitative aspect" of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis for in-depth examination of textual patterns to identify "discourses and repetitions" (Baker, 2023, p. 114). This is looking at the concordance lines for analysis. Baker (2023) calls it as a "context-driven" form of the analysis (p.114). The CA-CDA approach combines corpus linguistics with qualitative discourse analysis. The purpose of this approach is to unveil "non-obvious meanings" (Partington et al., 2013, p. 11). According to Baker (2023), functional or qualitative interpretation is an important step in Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis (p.2).

The “statistical overviews” of large amounts of discourse” are analyzed with “detailed analysis of particular stretches of discourse” (Partington et al., 2013, p. 11).

CDA provides the foundational and interpretive framework for analysis progression. It draws on Fairclough’s 3D model that target to unveil the connection between “language, power, and ideology” (Fairclough, 1989, p.5). The three dimensions of Fairclough’s model are description, interpretation, and explanation. The formal linguistic characteristics of the text (vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures) are examined in the description stage. According to Fairclough (1995), discourse practices involve processes like production, distribution, and consumption. The examination of discourse practice with an emphasis on the connection between the production and interpretation processes and the text. The cognitive presumptions and expectations people use to make sense of conversation are known as Members’ Resources (MR) in this stage. In the Explanation stage, the study of social practice examines how discourse is socially determined and how it reproduces power relations at the institutional, societal, and situational levels (Fairclough, 1989). The Sociocognitive Interface of Van Dijk presents a triangulated framework that connects society, speech, and cognition. He contends that social cognition mediates the relationship between discursive micro-structures (text, discussion) and social macro-structures (power, inequality). Through subjective mental representations of events, language users link micro-interactions to macro-structures. Social power is the ability to control other people's thoughts and behaviors. Groups that control can indirectly influence recipients’ knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies

Naturalization is the process by which an ideological discourse becomes so prevalent that it is perceived as common sense or natural rather than as a single viewpoint. This ubiquitous intergroup polarization tactic entails emphasizing ‘Our’ positive aspects and ‘Their’ negative aspects while mitigating ‘Our’ negative aspects and ‘Their’ positive aspects (Van Dijk, 2015). Oppressed groups can employ emancipatory discourse to question and change established discourse orders, whereas dominant groups utilise discourse to enforce ideological common sense.

The Framing Theory proposed by Goffman in 1974 and elaborated by Entman (1993) is used to select, emphasize and interpret information. The current study also employ frames of sovereignty, security, and blame on the media texts to analyze the data and the discourse strategies.

3.5. Summary of Methodology

This study employs an integrated framework of Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis (CA-CDA) to conduct a comparative analysis of Pakistani and Afghan media discourse on 2025 border clashes. Two specialized, monolingual corpora were constructed through purposive sampling, the Pakistani Corpus and the Afghan Corpus, comprising 27 and 26 news reports and articles each from leading outlets of Pakistan and Afghanistan

respectively, focusing on a defined period of heightened conflict. *Dawn* was selected as the outlet representing Pakistan and *TOLOnews* was selected as the Afghan representative media outlet in this study. The analysis started with a quantitative, data-driven description of the text selected for this study. Using Sketch Engine software, keyword analysis identified the statistically salient terms, which distinguish each corpus. From these lists, key lemmas were selected for in-depth study. For each lemma, collocation profiles and full concordance lines were generated from Sketch Engine to map their habitual linguistic patterns. Then, the salient lemmas were first grouped into dominant discursive frames: Agency/Blame, Legitimacy/Illegitimacy, and Sovereignty. Each lemma within these frames was then subjected to Critical Discourse Analysis using Fairclough's three-dimensional model, examining textual features (description), their communicative function (interpretation), and their social role (explanation). This framework is complemented by van Dijk's ideological square to uncover "us vs. them" polarization. This integrated methodology systematically links linguistic patterns to their ideological functions within the Pak-Afghan media discourse.

4. Analysis

4.1. Keywords

In comparison of one data set against the other, keyword list yields words that occur statistically frequent in the target corpus than the reference corpus (Partington et al., 2013; Baker et al., 2013).

Table 1: *Keyword List of Pakistani Corpus with Reference Corpus as Afghan Corpus*

Keyword	Keyword
Afghan Taliban	Afghan force
Taliban regime	Last month
border clash	intelligence-based operation
Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan	force in intelligence-based operations
Foreign Office	safe haven
defence minister	security force in intelligence-based operations
armed force	Gul Bahadur group
security source	terrorist attack
Taliban government	Pakistani troop
terrorist element	Pakistan-Afghanistan border
Pak-Afghan border	Afghan national
possible measure	Fitna al Khawarij
last week	Afghan authority
air strike	conducting air

affiliated terrorist	President Zardari
workable solution	Fitna al-Khawarij
Bahadur group	Precision strike
interim Afghan government	Information Minister Attaullah Tarar
information minister	Group camp
terrorism emanate	border skirmish
Inter-Services Public Relations	militants operate
Gul bahadur	Turkish capital
verification mechanism	multiple casualty
terrorists belong	Fitna al Hindustan
terrorist organization	conducting air strike

Note. This table demonstrates the keywords extracted from Pakistani Corpus. The table contains top 50 keywords in the Pakistani Corpus that were extracted from Sketch Engine with Afghan Corpus as the reference corpus.

Table 2: *Keyword List of Afghan Corpus with Reference Corpus as Pakistani Corpus*

Keyword	Keyword
Political analyst	Asim Munir
defense minister	regional effort
Pakistan's military	Kunar River
Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan	patience of Afghans
civilian government	civilian area
Pakistan's Defense Minister	certain circle
spokesperson for the Islamic Emirate	bilateral issue
attack on Afghan soil	Sadiq Khan
Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan	Afghan Peace
negotiating team	purpose of this visit
various pretext	Pakistan's issue
Afghanistan's airspace	Pakistan's Ministry
hostile action	Pakistan's Foreign Ministry
Zalmay Khalilzad	Pakistan relation
Iran's Foreign Ministry	strong response
political activist	Pakistani soldier
escalating tension	Pakistan's airstrike
Rahmatullah Najib	other group
violating Afghan airspace	central government
unreasonable demand	legitimate right
Pakistani Defense Minister	late last night
Pakistan's action	Khyber TV
Closed door	Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani

Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman	mechanism of the current agreement
Turkish delegation	Khawaja Muhammad Asif
TTP activity	issuance of a fatwa
territory of other countries	Hypothetical line
Pakistan's policy	good relation

Note. This table demonstrates the keywords extracted from Afghan Corpus. The table contains top 56 keywords in the Afghan Corpus that were extracted from Sketch Engine with Pakistani Corpus as the reference corpus.

4.2. Grammar of Blame

This theme applied Fairclough's (1989) concepts of transitivity and nominalization. This is done by examining the collocations and analyzing the concordance lines. This shows how linguistic choices assign or obfuscate responsibility for their actions.

4.2.1. Attack

Attack is a key lemma in both corpora, but its grammatical usage differs.

Pakistani Corpus. The collocates of the noun attack is modified by the adjectives "unprovoked," "terrorist" "terror," and "cowardly" from Pakistani Corpus (see Figure 1), whereas in Afghan Corpus, the modifiers are ISIS-K, retaliatory. The attacks are assigned to Pakistan as the possessor of attack in the corpus is *Pakistan* (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Screenshot of Collocates of Attack in Pakistani Corpus



modifiers of "attack"	
cross-border	... of cross-border attacks
unprovoked	... launched an unprovoked attack on
terrorist adjective	... surge in terrorist attacks
deadly	... a series of deadly attacks inside Pakistan that
terror	... terror attacks
gun-and-bomb	... gun-and-bomb attack
audacious	... audacious gun-and-bomb attack
indirect	... indirect attack
cowardly	... cowardly attack
terrorist noun	... terrorists attacks
overnight	... overnight attack
militant	... militant attacks

Note. Collocational profile for *attack* in the Pakistani Corpus

Example 1. *on the night of Oct 11/12, 2025, [after] Afghan Taliban and India-sponsored Fitna-al-Khawarij launched an unprovoked **attack** on Pakistan, along the Pak-Afghan border" (PK12October).*

This is the official statement of ISPR quoted in Pakistani news article. The agents are Afghan Taliban and Fitna al-Khawarij. Moreover, noun *attack* is modified by evaluative adjective “unprovoked,” thus assigning the agency and moral blame to the opposing side.

Example 2. *that during the 48-hour ceasefire, terrorists operating from Afghanistan attempted to launch multiple terrorists **attacks** inside Pakistan, which were effectively countered by security forces. (PK18October)*

The Pakistani media assigns blame to the terrorists operating from Afghanistan while quoting the Information Minister Attaullah Tarar’s post on X.

These active constructions are prevalent in Pakistani media in reporting the statements of Pakistani military and Government officials totally assigns the blame to the opposing side in the conflict. This positioning of Pakistan as the victim and Afghanistan as the instigator of violence shape the actions of Pakistani military and government as justified.

The framing does not simply describe an event; it is a practice of pre-packaged moral judgement. The audience is positioned to consume not just neutral reporting, but to approve and conform an ongoing threat.

Afghan Corpus. The framing of *attack* is different in Afghan Corpus.

Figure 2: Screenshot of Collocates of *Attack* in Afghan Corpus

modifiers of "attack"	verbs with "attack" as object	possessors of "attack"
failed ... failed attack	condemn ... condemned the attacks	Pakistan ... Pakistan's attacks
ISIS-K ... ISIS-K attacks	carry ... attacks are carried	
retaliatory ... retaliatory attacks	consider ... considered the attacks	
several ... several attacks	launch ... launched retaliatory attacks	
recent ... recent ISIS-K attacks	be ... been several attacks	

Note. Collocational profile for *attack* in the Afghan Corpus.

Example 1. *In response, the Islamic Emirate launched retaliatory **attacks** on Pakistani positions, killing and wounding more than 80 Pakistani soldiers (AF14October).*

Here, the “attacks” is modified by the adjective “retaliatory”, thus indicating and justifying their action by blaming the other side for initiating the attacks. The verb *attack* is used as a noun to hide the agents, obscuring the responsibility as the state action is reported by state news channel. Nominalizations are used to hide or downplay the violent or negative actions of the state agents (Van Dijk, 2015).

Example 2. *Pakistan’s special envoy for Afghanistan, Sadiq Khan, was in Kabul and had positive talks with Afghan officials, but during the same period, Pakistan carried out **attacks** on Afghan soil. The civilian government seeks to build relations, but the military damages them,” he added. (AF01November).*

In Afghan Corpus, agency is assigned to Pakistan. This example is a direct statement of spokesperson for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The discursive practice is of primary blame assignment. This framing produces a narrative of violation for the audience, reframing a retaliatory attack as justified against the sovereign breach by the opposing side, thereby firmly assigning the role of aggressor to Pakistan. The consumption of the news allows the public to perceive the other country as the aggressor and the self as victim.

4.3. Violate

Pakistani Corpus. In Pakistani Corpus, the subjects of violate are Taliban, Pakistan (when quoting Afghan news) and the pronominal subject “they” (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Screenshot of Collocates of the Violate in Pakistani Corpus

objects of "violate"	subjects of "violate"	pronominal subjects of "violate"
sovereignty ... the former of violating its sovereignty	ceasefire ... ceasefire violated	they ... they violate
territory ... and also violated the territory of the capital	side ... side violates	
airspace ... again , Pakistan violated Afghan airspace , bombed a	Taliban ... Taliban had violated	
party ... violating party	Pakistan ... Once again , Pakistan violated Afghan airspace	
truce ... violating the truce		
right ... violates human rights		
agreement ... violated the Doha agreement		

Note. Collocational profile for *violate* in the Pakistani Corpus.

Example 1. *"If their territory is used and they **violate** our territory, then, if we need to go deep into Afghanistan to retaliate, we surely will," he added. (PKa29October)*

Defence Minister Khawaja Asif gives this statement. The statement explicitly gives the warning. The use of object “territory” and subject “they” constructs Pakistan as the victim, hence this positionality shapes the military and government’s actions as justified.

Example 2. *He added that Pakistan had always desired peace and had played a constructive role, adding that the Taliban had **violated** the Doha agreement before as well and let down all parties to the deal” (PK29bOctober).*

In this statement by Information Minister of Pakistan, Attaullah Tarar, the blame is assigned to the Afghan government in violating the agreement by using active voice where the agent is “Taliban” in the sentence. The choice of object frames the violation as a breach of a procedural contract. This production, often sourced from official statements, intertextually evokes language of law and diplomacy for the international and national audience. This frames a narrative where Pakistan is the victim upholding accords.

Afghan Corpus. In Afghan Corpus, the agent is Pakistan and passive agent is Afghanistan. The active use is a discursive act of indictment.

Figure 4: Screenshot of Collocates of the Violate in Afghan Corpus

objects of "violate"	subjects of "violate"
airspace ... Pakistan to stop violating Afghan airspace and to refrain	force ... forces violated
territory ... their interests , violate the territory of other countries	country ... country violates
agreement ... agreement is not violated	Pakistan ... Pakistan has violated
	Afghanistan ... violated by Afghanistan

Note. Collocational profile for *violate* in the Afghan Corpus.

Example 1. *The conflict, launched by Pakistan's military regime on October 9, began after Pakistani forces **violated** Afghanistan's airspace, with reports stating that fighter jets reached as far as Kabul (AF19bOctober).*

Pakistan is the agent in the example from Afghan Corpus, where *violate* is used in active voice constructions. This transitivity pattern assigns blame. Moreover, the choice of object airspace frames the violation as the unnecessary invasion into the territorial space. It positions Pakistan’s actions as foundational violation of national rights, thus justifying defensive resistance.

4.4. Legitimacy

This theme examines the strategies used by media outlets from both sides for positive self-presentations and negative other-presentation, which is significant in ideological construction and framing of the conflict.

4.5. Taliban

Pakistani Corpus. A significant divergence is observed in the naming of the Afghan governing authority. Taliban is predominantly used in the Dawn Corpus and as “interim Afghan government,” whereas multi-word keyword “Islamic Emirate” is salient in the Afghan corpus (see Table 1).

Figure 5: Screenshot of Collocates of the Taliban in Pakistani Corpus

modifiers of "Taliban"	verbs with "Taliban" as object	verbs with "Taliban" as subject
Afghan noun *** the Afghan Taliban	accuse *** accused the Taliban	seize *** point since the Taliban seized power in Kabul
Afghan adjective *** to the Afghan Taliban	say *** said Afghan Taliban	stop *** long demanded that Taliban stop terror groups from
		acknowledge *** acknowledged by Afghan Taliban
		regard *** with the Afghan Taliban regarding "persistent cross-border
		deny *** Taliban denied
		follow *** and the Afghan Taliban follow weeks of shuttle
		suspend *** Taliban have suspended
		coopt *** coopted by the Afghan Taliban
		declare *** Taliban declare
		settle *** Taliban are settling
		resort *** Taliban resorted
		accept *** Taliban accepted

Note. Collocational profile for *Taliban* in the Pakistani Corpus.

Example 1. ISPR concluded its statement, saying: "Last night's episode vindicates Pakistan's long-standing position that the **Taliban** government is actively facilitating the terrorists" (PK12October).

Pakistani military and Government officials use this term. The labelling aids in delegitimizing the other group (van Dijk, 2015). Pakistani military and government use the terms that are delegitimizing, such as “Taliban regime,” “Interim government,” and “Taliban government,” (see Table 1). The use of “interim” presupposes lack of permanence. Regime carries negative connotations of illegitimacy.

4.6. Islamic Emirate

Afghan Corpus. Afghan government labels itself differently from Pakistani officials and authorities.

Example 1. *The Ministry of Defense of the **Islamic Emirate** of Afghanistan also condemned Pakistan's airstrikes on Kabul and Paktika. (AF10October).*

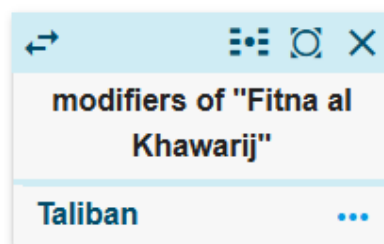
Example 2. *Additionally, the Ministry of Defense of the **Islamic Emirate** had previously warned Pakistan over the violation of Kabul's airspace and the recent Pakistani airstrikes on Paktika. (AF11October).*

A close reading of concordance lines shows that this term is used in official statements. Hence, this self-chosen label asserts the religious and political sovereignty/legitimacy to both domestic and international audience. It functions to counter the delegitimizing labels used by Pakistani media. Furthermore, the keyword list of Pakistani Corpus does not demonstrate the use of this term (see Table 1). This contrast shows how Pakistan denies the legitimacy of Afghan Government and how Afghanistan counter the Pakistan's view and representation.

4.7. Fitna al-Khawarij

Pakistani Corpus.

Figure 6: Screenshot of Collocates of *Fitna al-Khawarij* in Pakistani Corpus



Note. Collocational profile for *Fitna al-Khawarij* in the Pakistani Corpus.

Collocates of the term are Taliban in Pakistani media corpus. Pakistani Corpus shows a strong preference for the religiously loaded compound *Fitna al-Khawarij*, appearing as a key multi-word. This term is absent in the Afghan Corpus (see Table 2). This refusal to accept Pakistan's theological framing, thus locating the group as a particularly Pakistani issue and refusing the external religious label.

Example 1. *"Pakistan has repeatedly shared its concerns related to the presence of **Fitna al-Khawarij** and **Fitna al-Hindustan** operating from the Afghan soil," the FO stated. (12October).*

Example 2. *Khawarij are trained and sponsored there before they enter Pakistan. **Fitna al-Khawarij** is a term the state uses for terrorists belonging to the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (18October).*

This term is a strategic production of the Pakistani state. In the examples, it is used by official government sources such as Foreign Office. This term invokes historical Islamic schisms, thus framing TTP as heretics. The discursive purpose of this is more than labeling, it is to issue theological condemnation targeted at the audiences of both sides of the border. Thus, justifying the military actions as well as to make Taliban distance themselves from TTP.

4.8. TTP

Afghan Corpus.

Example 1.

*According to the Islamic Emirate's delegation, the **TTP** issue is not an Afghan problem but a Pakistani one and not a new issue but an old and internal challenge for Pakistan. (AF28October).*

The example statement rejects to accept the blame and issue by both refusing to accept the label Pakistan has used, thus labeling the group as *TTP* and explicitly refusing it by using a negative syntactical structure.

This is discursive practice of political containment and narrative redirection. This production distinguishes the group from Afghan Taliban and intertextually refutes Pakistani narrative. This positions Afghanistan as a sovereign state dealing with the problem of its neighbor.

4.9. Airstrike

Airstrike is a key lemma in both corpora, indicating the violence.

Afghan Corpus.

Figure 7: Screenshot of Collocates of Airstrike in Afghan Corpus

modifiers of "airstrike"	possessors of "airstrike"	"airstrike" and/or ...
recent ... recent Pakistani airstrikes	night ... night's airstrike	airspace ... airspace and the recent Pakistani airstrikes
Pakistani ... Pakistani airstrikes	Pakistan ... Pakistan's airstrikes on	

Note. Collocational profile for *airstrike* in the Afghan Corpus.

Example 1. *The Ministry of Defense of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan also condemned Pakistan's **airstrikes** on Kabul and Paktika (AF10October).*

In Afghan Corpus, it appears in keyword 45 as Pakistan's airstrike (see Table 2). The possessor of the lemma *airstrike* in Afghan delegitimizes Pakistan's military action

by naming the actor as “Pakistan” where it occurs as the possessor of the noun *airstrike*. This assigns blame and direct accusation to the opposing side (Fairclough, 1989). Moreover, this is the practice of forensic accusation. The consumption is framed where the reader is positioned as a witness to an aggression.

Pakistani Corpus. In Pakistani corpus, it appears three times in the keyword list as “airstrike”, “conducting airstrike,” and “precision strike” (see Table 1). The last one is packaged with an inherent quality that presupposes legitimacy, minimalized collateral damage, and technical supremacy. The collocate “precision strike” demonstrates the discursive practice of technocratic legitimization. It uses genre conventions of a technical briefing to sanitize violence and background human cost. This promotes lawful professionalism for public consumption. The possessor of the lemma *airstrike* in Afghan delegitimizes Pakistan’s military action by naming the actor as “Pakistan” where it occurs as the possessor of the noun *airstrike*. This assigns blame and direct accusation to the opposing side (Fairclough, 1989).

4.10. Sovereignty and Presupposition

This theme analyses how the main object of the conflict or the contestation point, border, is linguistically constructed through presupposition and argumentation (Fairclough, 1989).

4.11. Durand

The key lemma *Durand* is framed differently. In Pakistani corpus, it modified nouns such as line, dispute and issue. In Afghan Corpus, it is modified by hypothetical and disputed.

Afghan Corpus. The Pak-Afghan border is represented differently in Afghan media discourse.

Figure 8: Screenshot of Collocates of *Durand* in Afghan Corpus



modifiers of "Durand Line"	
hypothetical	---
disputed	---

verbs with "Durand Line" as subject	
intensify	---
have	---
be	---

Note. Collocational profile for *Durand* in the Afghan Corpus.

Example 1. *Afghan Defense Minister: Durand Hypothetical Line Not Discussed in (AF19aOctober).*

This is the headline of a report. The Durand line is modified by the term “Hypothetical,” This is used by Afghan Defence Minister, hence this presupposition offers a contrast against Pakistan’s framing of the border.

Example 2. *The forces of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan carried out retaliatory operations against Pakistani forces in several Afghan provinces along the disputed **Durand** Line on Saturday night. Zabihullah Mujahid warned that any violation of Afghanistan's sovereignty will not go unanswered (AF12aOctober).*

This example from the Afghan report clearly demonstrates the use of disputed with Durand Line. This presupposition underscores the discursive practice of world making. Hence, the use of modifiers such as hypothetical and disputed intertextually cites discourses of anti-colonial resistance. Moreover, this framing also shapes the views of the domestic and international audience.

4.12. Border

Pakistani Corpus. The Pak-Afghan border is also framed differently in Pakistani media.

Figure 9: Screenshot of Collocates of Border in Pakistani Corpus

nouns modified by "border"	modifiers of "border"	verbs with "border" as object
clash border clashes	Pak-Afghan along the Pak-Afghan border	equip border fully equipped
skirmish along with frequent border skirmishes, has long	Pakistan-Afghanistan place along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border Meanwhile	trace border are traced
hostility continued to prevent border hostilities while the two	legitimate Line as a legitimate border	reopen borders reopened
area border areas	western western border	discuss border was not discussed
crossing border crossing	Kurram Kurram border	defend defend their borders
tension border tensions	deadly shuttle diplomacy after deadly	kill border are not killed

Note. Collocational profile for *border* in the Pakistani Corpus.

Example 1. *Expressing his “deep concern” over the attack from the Afghan side, Deputy PM Ishaq Dar said “unprovoked firing and raids along Pak-Afghan **border** by the Taliban government is a serious provocation” (PK12October).*

The modifier of border in Pakistani corpus is legitimate, presupposing the border as settled whereas Afghan corpus presupposes the opposite: the border as imposed, artificial, illegitimate, and colonial construct by modifying it by “hypothetical” (see Figure 9).

This is the discursive practice of world making. Each side presupposes an entire historical and legal reality. The use of Pak-Afghan border intertextually cites colonial-era agreements, and the use of hypothetical line intertextually cites discourses of anti-colonial resistance. The consumption of one term rejects the reality proposed by the other, hence creating a difference of opinions across the border.

5. Discussion

5.1. Discourse as a Social Practice

Discursive conflicts are not merely over words; language is used to control the contours of the social world and reality. It also legitimizes particular political actions, for instance in the Pakistani media's construction of Afghani repatriation of 2025 (Urooj et al., 2025). The present research demonstrates that media discourse is characterized by a struggle to establish legitimacy and fix responsibility, often by manipulating the language's transparency to make specific ideological representations appear as simple matters of fact (Fairclough, 1989).

5.2. The Ideological Square in Action

To understand the social function of this discourse, the study applies van Dijk's "Ideological Square, which explains general strategy of intergroup polarization. This involves emphasizing "Our" good things and "Their" bad things, while at the same time mitigating "Our" bad things and "Their" good things (van Dijk, 2015, p. 474). In the context of conflict, this polarization is a structural feature designed to ensure that the dominant group's discourse type becomes naturalized (Fairclough, 1989), signifying that it is no longer seen as one possible perspective but as the only natural and legitimate way of perceiving things. This aligns with Fairclough's (1989) Explanation stage, which seeks to show how discourse is determined by social structures and what possible effects it has on those structures, such as sustaining unbalanced power relations.

5.3. Legitimize State Action

Ideology is primarily used for manufacturing consent, and power is exercised through consent rather than coercion (Fairclough, 1989). The control of mental models of the audience or recipients with the media discourse and the lexical choices allows the powerful groups to legitimize and justify an action (van Dijk, 2015). The use of precision strike in the Pakistani media discourse attempts to justify state action. This shapes ideological and political narratives (Ahmad & Hussain, 2025). The actions are also legitimized by assigning blame and responsibility to the opposing side as the textual level analysis of the lemmas *attack* and *violate* revealed. This blame attribution is done through the media discourse to legitimize and justify the actions of state (Salih et al., 2025).

5.4. Obstruct Diplomacy

Dialogue becomes difficult when there are presuppositions (Fairclough, 1989). Presuppositions are missing links in the text that leaves no common ground for negotiation (Fairclough, 1989). The presupposition in the media discourse of Pakistani and Afghan media related to the border creates obstruction in diplomacy and further creates a sense of threat and security in border conflict reporting (Salih et al., 2025).

5.5. Construction of National Identity

The ‘us vs. them’ discourse shape social subjects by placing them in a specific subject positions (Fairclough, 1995). Media has curated this discourse to assign shared character to a particular identity while marginalizing others. This is evident in Pak-Afghan border conflict reporting. This is evident in naming and labeling the others as out-group in a particular discourse as the use of the word *Taliban* marginalizes the Afghans, where the noun is collocated with terrorist and extremist (Fatima et al., 2021; Aziz et al., 2025), whereas it is not seen in their discourse. The same is evident in the prevalence of “Fitna al- Khawarij” in Pakistani Corpus as compared to Afghan media’s use of TTP.

6. Findings

Referring to the first research question, Pakistani corpus uses the religious and political label ‘Fitna al- Khawarij’ to label TTP. The term is used to legitimize the group’s religious claims, however this term is absent in Afghan Corpus. Afghan media uses its formal name “TTP,” the Afghan government is primarily labelled as Islamic Emirate, whereas Pakistani media label them with delegitimizing “Taliban government” and “interim government” (see Table 1). The Pakistani corpus uses precision strike but the Afghan government modifies it by possessive Pakistan to assign blame and agency. The verb “violate” is used grammatically different. The agent is the opposing group in both discourses. This further obscures responsibility and agency. Moreover, border is depicted as settled in Pakistani Corpus, but is a contested matter in Afghan discourse.

Referring to the second research question, the discursive strategies in the media discourse of both sides reveal that the conflict is ideologically sealed and locked in, where language creates two closed and self-justifying realities with no mutual understanding. The patterns discussed above merge into dominant discursive frame that is identified in other researches as securitization, victimhood, and sovereignty (Salih et al., 2025). The framing of militant action as precision strikes against Fitna al- Khawarij in defense of Pak-Afghan Border, the Pakistani media discourse legitimizes and justifies state action as a necessary and moral defense while simultaneously externalizing the blame. The terrorist labelling escalates the violence and delegitimizes the actors it targets (Salih et al., 2025). On the contrary, the Afghan media uses a sovereignty and resistance frame (Salih et al., 2025). The labelling as Pakistan’s airstrikes on Afghan soil and the rejection of Durand line’s legitimacy, Pakistan is constructed as an aggressive violator of sovereignty. This frames Afghanistan’s actions as legitimate and in self-defense, resisting to external aggression. Hence, the media of each side legitimizes the actions of the state as justifies and defensive, while framing the others as illegitimate and aggressive. This framing closes diplomacy and mutual understanding by shaping public opinion.

Referring to the third research question, these oppositional discourses, analyzed with the help of corpus linguistics, are rooted in the real-world dispute over Durand Line’s legitimacy and the accusations related to the militant groups TTP. The discourse of each

side reflects its state position, creating a closed space where language reinforces the political ideologies and policies (Ahmad & Hussain, 2025; Batool, 2019). The media discourse entrenches public opinions and presuppositions, fosters nationalism by portraying the self as victim and legitimate whereas the other as illegitimate and aggressor. This reduces mutual understanding and harbors nationalism, thus the public ignores the humanitarian costs and support the respective narrative of their respective state. This harbors public acceptance for state measures such as border closures and military actions, often at economic and humanitarian prize. The cycle perpetuates one-sided media framing which fosters the division of narratives and boundaries, which aids in the continuation of polarization, making it difficult for diplomatic resolution.

7. Conclusion

The study investigated how Pakistani and Afghan construct 2025 border conflict linguistically and to reveal the ideological implications of certain linguistic patterns. This research has employed Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis (CA-CDA) approach to provide a systematic and empirical evidence of linguistic patterns underlying the conflict narrative. The research reveal that media on both sides does not neutrally report the conflict, but construct the conflict through particular discursive strategies. The analysis structured around three thematic conflicts reveal ideological patterns. The first theme of assigning blame and agency revealed that linguistic choices assign or obscure responsibility and this was done through transitivity and nominalization in the case of "attack". This revealed that agency in not neutral in political discourse. Then, the research focused In the legitimacy in the conflict discourse. Pakistan's labelling of Fitna al-Khawarij, delegitimize TTP, however Afghan discourse reject this religious labelling to assert its sovereignty. This is further evident in their use of Islamic Emirate to refer to their ruling government as compared to Pakistan's use of interim and Taliban government. Lastly, the third theme discusses the discursive contestation of border. It is analyzed through the concept of presupposition. Pakistani border presupposition of the Pak-Afghan border as international border clashes with Afghan portrayal of border as a Hypothetical line. This forms the core of the conflict and links with the broader socio-political implications. These constructions has broader implications. By emphasizing positive qualities of in-group and negative properties of the out-group, the media outlets creates and shapes public perception, sense of national identity, and legitimizes state policies in a conflict. This limits mutual understanding and the biased reporting further escalates the conflict instead of preventing it. The study contributes to the field by showing the efficacy of CA-CDA in demystifying language of international conflict, revealing the strategies at micro level that connect with the macro ideological patterns.

8. Limitations and Recommendations

This study focuses exclusively on a confined period and a limited corpus based on one news outlet per country due to time limitations. Another limitation is the imbalance in the word count of both corpora, influencing the number of tokens and sentences as well. This is because of the scarce data on the Afghan side. Future studies can include more data such as social media discourse, more news outlets, or international media. Thus, future research can expand this comparative framework by including the above-mentioned voices. They can also do a longitudinal study to trace the discursive shifts over time. These recommendations can also foster understanding of the role of language in shaping the realities of conflicts and wars.

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