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Discourse, Polarization, and the Ideological Square: A CDA of Middle East Peace Narratives in Traditional and Social Media

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Abstract

This study critically examines the political discourse surrounding peace negotiations in the Middle East through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). By applying van Dijk's socio-cognitive model and Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the research shows that language holds significant weight in constructing ideology, power relations, and national identity. A primary Urdu political commentary, translated into English, is analyzed alongside neutral and Western policy perspectives, as well as contemporary social media reactions from X (formerly Twitter). Findings demonstrate that the primary text employs emotive language, presuppositions, and ideological polarization to position Pakistan positively while framing global actors strategically. Social media discourse intensifies these binaries through hashtag-driven echo chambers and memetic warfare. The study concludes that such discourse conditions reader perception through simplified binaries and emotional resonance, risking the oversimplification of complex geopolitical realities. Recommendations comprise the implementation of digital competency programs and the systematic corpus-based tracking of manipulative discursive strategies.

1. Introduction

The landscape of global politics is not merely a theater of military actions and diplomatic summits; it is a battleground of narratives and clash of discourses. Political discourse plays a central role in shaping how the public understands global conflicts. In the contemporary era, where information is propagated instantly across traditional media and digital platforms, the linguistic choices made by commentators, journalists, policymakers, and even ordinary citizens are far from neutral. Language serves as a powerful tool that constructs realities, assigns identities, and reinforces ideological positions. The rise of social media has further liberalized—and disintegrated—narrative production; that allowed non-state actors to participate in discourse previously reserved for aristocrats.

This study focuses on the ongoing peace negotiations in the Middle East, a region characterized by historical unpredictability, sectarian divisions, and competing interests among global and regional powers. Through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), we aim to uncover the "hidden" meanings within political commentary, taking into account emergent social media content. By analyzing a primary Urdu text, comparing it with neutral and Western policy perspectives, and examining digital reactions, this research addresses:

The construction of ideological positions through text and multimodality.

Linguistic strategies used to represent global actors like the US, Iran, and Israel.

The discursive framing of Pakistan's role in regional stability.

How social media platforms reproduce or challenge elite narratives.

2. Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis is rooted in the belief that language is a form of social practice. To understand the expansion of this field, we must look at the foundational theories as well as contemporary adaptations that integrate digital communication.

2.1 The Evolution of CDA

CDA emerged as a response to traditional linguistics, which often ignored the socio-political context of language. Norman Fairclough (1989, 1995) was central to this transformation, proposing that discourse is both a reflection of and a contributor to social change. His three-dimensional model—focusing on the text (micro-level), the discursive practice (meso-level), and the social practice (macro-level)—facilitates researchers in connecting microscopic linguistic features (e.g., passive voice, nominalization) to macroscopic social structures such as capitalism, nationalism, and colonialism. For instance, when a political commentary states "mistakes were made" without ascribing agency, it discursively evades accountability—a strategy frequently observed in diplomatic language.

2.2 Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach

Teun van Dijk (1998) introduced a cognitive dimension to CDA, arguing that discourse does not influence society directly but mediates it through "mental models." When an individual reads a political commentary, they do not just process words; they update their mental representation of the event based on the writer's ideological framing. Mental models are subjective, context-dependent representations stored in episodic memory. Repeated exposure to similar discursive strategies can reinforce these models into social cognitions embraced by entire communities.

A core component of van Dijk's model is the Ideological Square, a discursive strategy where authors:

Emphasize positive things about "Us" (the In-group).

Emphasize negative things about "Them" (the Out-group).

De-emphasize negative things about "Us".

De-emphasize positive things about "Them."

This four-fold strategy is observable in political speeches, news headlines, op-eds, and social media threads as well. For example, describing a drone strike as "surgical" (positive Us-action) versus "indiscriminate bombing" (negative Them-action) activates alternative mental models despite mentioning similar events.

2.3 The Role of Emotion and Manipulation

In political discourse, persuasion often crosses into manipulation. Van Dijk (2006) notes that manipulation involves a power imbalance where the audience is intentionally directed toward a specific conclusion without recognizing the underlying ideological bias. Unlike legitimate persuasion, which respects the audience's capacity for rational judgment, manipulation exploits cognitive heuristics and emotional vulnerabilities. This is frequently achieved through:

Presuppositions: Presenting an assumption as an established fact to bypass critical questioning. For example, "When will Pakistan stop Iran's aggression?" presupposes that Pakistan has the ability and obligation to do so, and that Iran is aggressive—none of which have been substantiated.

Lexicalization: Choosing specific words (e.g., "freedom fighter" vs. "terrorist" vs. "militant") to trigger emotional responses and align events with in-group values.

Metaphor: Conceptual metaphors like "the peace process is a journey" or "negotiations are a battlefield" frame complex social phenomena in terms of simpler, more affective domains.

2.4 Social Media and Digital Discourse

Recent scholarships have extended CDA to digital environments. Zappavigna (2012) introduced the concept of "searchable talk," where hashtags like #PeaceTalks or #IranDeal function not merely as metadata but as discursive anchors that establish ad-hoc publics. On platforms like X (Twitter), users engage in "ambient affiliation"—bonding through shared evaluative language without engaging or interacting directly. This has profound implications for peace negotiations: a single tweet by a political commentator can be retweeted thousands of times, shaping communal perception and public opinion faster than traditional media.

Furthermore, digital discourse introduces multimodality. Memes, images, and short videos carry ideological messages that may be implicit or explicit. For instance, a meme showing a chessboard with Pakistan as the queen piece and the US as a rook signals power relations visually, bypassing textual argumentation. Analyzing such content requires extending Fairclough's framework to include visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

2.5 Polarization and Echo Chambers in Middle East Discourse

Research on digital polarization (Tucker et al., 2018) indicates that political discourse on platforms like X and Facebook tends to fragment into echo chambers where users are exposed chiefly to in-group narratives. In the context of Middle East peace negotiations, this means that a Pakistani Urdu commentary may circulate within a nationalistic echo chamber that reinforces anti-US or pro-Iranian perspectives, while a different chamber is shaped by the circulation of a Western policy analysis. Cross-chamber engagement is rare and often hostile. This fragmentation compromises the possibility of a shared factual basis for negotiation and democratic deliberation.

2.6 Media Framing of Conflict: A Critical Discourse Analysis Perspective

Within the existing scholarship, studies drawing on Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework highlight how media discourse constructs conflict through competing polarizing and peace-oriented narratives. Using mixed-method approaches and analyzing diverse media texts such as debates, editorials, and news reports, this body of research shows that polarizing frames tend to dominate over peace-focused representations. Such findings reinforce the view of media as a powerful agenda-setter that shapes public perception and contributes to societal division. Moreover, CDA-based analyses reveal that linguistic and framing strategies often normalize separation while marginalizing discourses of reconciliation, thereby influencing patterns of public opinion and social polarization.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated framework that merges van Dijk's socio-cognitive model and Fairclough's three-dimensional model, while also accounting for digital discourse.

3.1 Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model

We examine the Macrostructure, or the global themes of the texts, to discern the overarching message (e.g., "Pakistan is a stabilizing force" vs. "Pakistan is economically constrained"). We then proceed to examine Local Semantics, including Lexicalization and Polarization, to see how individual words and sentence-level choices create a "divide and conquer" narrative between actors.

3.2 Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

The Text: We analyze grammar, metaphors, transitivity (who does what to whom), and modality (degrees of certainty or obligation).

Discursive Practice: We consider how the text was produced (as a commentary, a news report, or a tweet) and received (by a local vs. international audience; by followers vs. casual browsers).

Social Practice: We situate the text within the broader context of Middle Eastern geopolitics, Pakistan's economic constraints, and the globalized attention economy driven by social media.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative research design with purposive sampling.

4.1 Data Selection and Procedure

Four distinct texts were chosen to provide a comparative spectrum:

Text 1: A translated Urdu political commentary from a leading Pakistani newspaper (Dawn, Op-Ed section, October 2024). Chosen for its dense deployment of affect-laden and idiomatic expressions.

Text 2: A neutral media narrative from Reuters (October 2024), exemplifying a "standard" journalistic approach with balanced attribution.

Text 3: A Western policy-oriented analysis from the International Crisis Group (October 2024), centering on strategic realism.

Text 4: A purposive sample of 20 tweets (now posts on X) from verified Pakistani political commentators and ordinary users, posted during the same week, using hashtags #PeaceTalks, #PakistanRole, and #MiddleEastCrisis.

The analysis followed a five-step procedure: translation (for Text 1), identification of linguistic markers (presuppositions, lexicalization, metaphor), comparative mapping across texts, social media thematic coding, and final interpretation using the CDA frameworks.

5. Data Analysis: The Anatomy of Discourse

5.1 Analysis of Primary Text (Text 1 – Urdu Commentary)

The primary text opens with a dramatic metaphor: *"The ongoing peace negotiations have reached a point of no return"*.

Linguistic Feature: The phrase "point of no return" is a powerful lexical choice that evokes a sense of fatalism and urgency. It derives from aviation (the point in flight after which return is impossible) and carries connotations of inevitability.

Ideological Function: By framing the situation as a crisis, the author validates the need for strong, decisive roles, such as the one attributed to Pakistan later in the text. The audience is implicitly led to accept that ordinary diplomatic measures have proven ineffective, and that extraordinary intervention is required.

The text further states, *"the United States seeks control over uranium and the Strait of Hormuz, while Iran has rejected these demands"*.

Polarization: This creates a binary of "Aggressor" (US) vs. "Resistor" (Iran). The US is agentively constructed as "seeking control" (negative, predatory), while Iran is "rejecting demands" (positive, principled).

Presupposition: The clause presupposes that US motivation is definitively known (resource control) without substantiation or alternative interpretations. It also presupposes that "demands" were made, framing the US as a unilateral enforcer rather than a negotiator. This effectively "others" the Western power as predatory.

Later, the text asserts: *"Pakistan's balanced approach is a significant achievement that has frustrated Western designs"*.

Ideological Square (In-group positivity): Pakistan is characterized as "balanced" and "significant." The term "achievement" implies victory against constraints. The mention of "frustrating Western designs" positions Pakistan in opposition to a negative out-group, heightening in-group solidarity.

Transitivity: Pakistan is the agent of "achievement" and "frustrating," positioning it as an active, powerful protagonist rather than a reactive state.

5.2 Analysis of Neutral Media Narrative (Text 2 – Reuters)

Text 2 uses phrases like *"negotiations remain uncertain but possible"* and *"diplomatic sources indicate cautious progress"*.

Hedging: The use of "uncertain but possible" and "cautious" avoids the alarmism of Text 1. Hedging is a discursive practice that indexes indeterminacy and polyvalence. It reduces the author's epistemic commitment, permitting readers to exercise independent interpretation.

Attribution: Instead of stating facts directly, Text 2 relies on attributed sources: "diplomatic sources indicate." This is a standard journalistic practice that distributes accountability and enhances ostensible neutrality.

Pakistan's Role: Text 2 mentions Pakistan only once: "Pakistan, along with other regional states, has maintained a neutral stance." There is no evaluation of this stance as "significant" or "frustrating." The absence of ideological loading is itself an ideological choice—one that aligns with professional journalism norms that prioritize disengagement.

5.3 Analysis of Western Policy Analysis (Text 3 – ICG)

Text 3 recontextualizes Pakistan's role entirely. While Text 1 views Pakistan's balance as a "significant achievement," Text 3 states: *"Pakistan's position is shaped by strategic constraints, including its dependence on IMF loans and historical military ties with Gulf states."*

Re-framing: The term "strategic constraints" shifts agency away from Pakistan. Instead of an active hero, Pakistan becomes a reactive agent limited by structural forces (economy, alliances). This is not necessarily negative, but it deflates the heroic narrative of Text 1.

Nominalization: "Dependence on IMF loans" nominalizes a complex relationship, framing it as a static condition rather than a series of policy choices. This eliminates accountability from Pakistani policymakers.

Power Relations: Text 3 implicitly constructs the US and China as primary shapers of regional order, with Pakistan as a secondary actor. This embodies a realist ontology where middle powers have limited autonomy.

5.4 Analysis of Social Media Discourse (Text 4 – X/Twitter Posts)

To expand our dataset, we analyzed 20 tweets posted between October 15–22, 2024, using the hashtags #PeaceTalks, #PakistanRole, and #MiddleEastCrisis. The sample encompasses 10 tweets from verified accounts (journalists, analysts) and 10 from unverified users. Representative examples are discussed below.

Example 4a (Verified analyst, 15K followers):

"Pakistan's 'neutrality' isn't weakness—it's strategic patience. While the US bombs and Iran postures, we hold the line. #PeaceTalks"

Lexicalization: "Strategic patience" (positive in-group) vs. "bombs" (violent out-group) and "postures" (performative, negative out-group). The deployment of "we" creates direct identification between the analyst and the audience.

Polarization: The US and Iran are both negatively framed but for different reasons (action vs. inaction). Pakistan is the rational, restrained actor.

Example 4b (Unverified user, 200 followers):

"America wants our blood for oil. Iran is no better. Only Pakistan can save the region. #PakistanRole"

Hyperbole: "Our blood for oil" constitutes an excessive emotive appeal, evoking colonial exploitation narratives. This tweet offers no empirical grounding but gains retweets through moral outrage.

In-group heroism: "Only Pakistan can save the region" mirrors Text 1's framing but in a more radical, unsupported form.

Example 4c (Verified journalist, 50K followers):

"Interesting how Pakistani commentators cry 'US imperialism' while ignoring Saudi money and Chinese debt. Real peace needs honesty. #MiddleEastCrisis"

Counter-discourse: This tweet explicitly challenges the dominant in-group narrative by introducing alternative out-group dynamics (Saudi, China). It leverages derision ("cry") to invalidate alternative perspectives.

Polarization reversal: Here, the in-group (Pakistani commentators) is criticized, and the implied out-group (skeptics of US imperialism) is valorized. This indicates that digital discourse is not monolithic.

Example 4d (Unverified user with meme): A meme image showing a chessboard. The US is a rook, Iran is a bishop, Israel is a knight, and Pakistan is the queen. Caption: *"Everyone moves. Pakistan dominates. #PeaceTalks"*

Multimodality: The chess metaphor visually communicates power, strategy, and hierarchy. The queen is the most powerful piece, capable of moving any direction. This bolsters the hero narrative without needing textual arguments.

Ideological function: The meme presupposes that international politics is a zero-sum game (chess) rather than a cooperative enterprise. This construes peace negotiations as a competition for dominance.

Comparative Summary Table (Expanded)

Feature	Text 1 (Urdu Commentary)	Text 2 (Neutral)	Text 3 (Western Policy)	Text 4 (Social Media)
Tone	Emotive, Alarmist	Balanced, Cautious	Analytical, Realistic	Varied: Outraged, Sarcastic, Heroic
Pakistan's Role	"Significant achievement"	"Neutral stance"	"Strategic constraints"	"Savior" / "Hypocrite" (polarized)
US Portrayal	Dominant/Seeking control	Diplomatic actor	Stabilizing force (with flaws)	Imperialist / Necessary evil
Use of Evidence	Minimal, presupposition-heavy	Attributed sources	Policy citations	Emotional claims, memes
Audience	Nationalist local readers	General international	Policy elites	Niche digital publics

6. Discussion: Power, Perception, and Digital Amplification

The findings suggest that the primary text (Urdu commentary) functions as persuasive discourse rather than neutral reporting. It uses the Ideological Square to safeguard the national identity of Pakistan while casting "other" actors in a light of suspicion or aggression. Social media discourse (Text 4) amplifies this dynamic, frequently escalating toward a radical stance due to the attention of the economy: emotional, polarized content receives more engagement (likes, retweets) than nuanced analysis.

6.1 Shaping National Identity Through Discourse

By framing Pakistan's role as "balanced" and "significant," Text 1 reinforces a positive mental model for the local reader. It constructs a narrative of moral superiority—that Pakistan is the equilibrating force in a world of greedy or intransigent powers. This narrative fulfills a domestic political function: it bolsters national self-esteem, notably amid phases of economic difficulty or perceived international isolation. Social media users reproduce this narrative through hashtags and memes, creating a feedback loop where elite commentary and citizen discourse bidirectionally strengthen each other.

However, Text 3 (Western policy) reveals that this heroic narrative is not universally accepted. From a realist perspective, Pakistan's "balance" is not a sign of agency but of structural weakness. The friction between these two framings is not purely theoretical; it has real-world consequences. If Pakistani policymakers internalize the heroic narrative, they may miscalculate their leverage in negotiations. Conversely, if Western analysts dismiss Pakistani agency entirely, they may miss opportunities for sincere collaboration.

6.2 The Risk of Simplification and the Role of Social Media

While rhetorically effective, this style of discourse risks oversimplifying the Middle Eastern crisis. By using binaries (Stability vs. Conflict; Us vs. Them), it neglects the internal complexities within the US government (e.g., differences between State Department and Pentagon), the varied political blocs in Iran (reformists vs. hardliners), and the nuanced reasons for Pakistan's diplomatic choices (economic dependence, domestic politics, historical ties).

Social media exacerbates this simplification. The character limit on X (formerly 280 characters) encourages pithy, affect-laden utterances over detailed argumentation. Hashtags create echo chambers where dissenting views are =screened out. Memes communicate complex power relations through analogy but lack the capacity for caveats or counterexamples. A meme showing Pakistan as a chess queen is rhetorically powerful but analytically vacuous.

6.3 Manipulation and Hegemony

Van Dijk (2006) argues that manipulation occurs when an audience is guided toward a conclusion without being aware of the bias. Text 1 and much of Text 4 engage in manipulation in this technical sense: they advance ideological positions as common sense, using presuppositions and emotional language to bypass critical reasoning. However, we must be =circumspect about attributing malicious intent. Many commentators and social media users genuinely believe the narratives they propagate. Manipulation may operate unconsciously; stemming from socialization within a specific discourse community rather than a deliberate conspiracy.

Fairclough's concept of hegemony is useful here. Hegemony is the dominance of one social group over others through a combination of coercion and consent. In the context of Middle East discourse, Western policy frameworks (Text 3) have historically been hegemonic. However, Text 1 and Text 4 represent a counter-hegemonic struggle: Pakistani commentators using local linguistic resources (Urdu idioms, Islamic references, anti-colonial rhetoric) to contest Western discursive construction. This is not simply manipulation; it is a form of resistance. The ethical evaluation depends on whether the counter-narrative enables genuine understanding or merely substitutes one set of simplifications with another.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that political discourse—whether in traditional commentaries, neutral journalism, policy analyses, or social media—is profoundly inscribed with ideology. By employing emotional language, strategic presuppositions, polarization, and multimodal metaphors, authors and users guide public perception to harmonize with specific national or ideological goals.

7.1 Summary of Contributions

Our expanded analysis makes three primary contributions:

Empirical: We have demonstrated how the Ideological Square operates across different text types, including social media. The four texts analyzed uncover a spectrum from overt persuasion (Text 1, parts of Text 4) to attempted neutrality (Text 2) to analytical realism (Text 3).

Theoretical: By integrating van Dijk's socio-cognitive model with Fairclough's three dimensions and extending it to digital discourse, we have furnished a framework that can be extensible to other geopolitical contexts (e.g., Ukraine-Russia, India-Pakistan, US-China).

Methodological: Our inclusion of social media data demonstrates that CDA must transcend beyond traditional texts to account for hashtag-driven publics, memetic warfare, and multimodal argumentation.

7.2 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size while sufficient for qualitative CDA—is not representative. Social media discourse is extensive and heterogeneous; our 20 tweets capture only a fraction. Second, the translation of Text 1 from Urdu to English inevitably forfeits certain idiomatic and cultural subtleties. Third, we did not conduct audience reception analysis; we cannot state with certainty how readers actually interpret these texts. Future research should combine discourse analysis with experimental methods or focus groups.

7.3 Practical Recommendations

As geopolitical strains escalate, the ability of citizens to critically deconstruct political narratives is vital. We offer three recommendations:

Digital literacy interventions: Educational programs should teach CDA-informed skills, such as identifying presuppositions, recognizing the Ideological Square, and questioning emotional appeals. These skills are particularly important for social media users.

Cross-platform monitoring: Researchers and civil society organizations should track narrative divergence across platforms (X, TikTok, Telegram, traditional media) to identify emerging polarizations before they escalate into conflict.

Dialogue-promoting design: Social media platforms could be redesigned to encourage cross-cutting discourse. For example, algorithmic adjustments that occasionally render users susceptible to respectful counter-narratives (without triggering reactance) might reduce echo chamber effects.

7.4 Future Research Directions

Future research should look toward corpus-based methods, analyzing thousands of texts to see if the patterns identified here generalize across different languages (Urdu, Arabic, Hebrew, English) and longer timeframes (pre- and post-Abraham Accords). Additionally, multimodal CDA should be further developed to systematically analyze memes, videos, and infographics. Finally, computational CDA using natural language processing to detect polarization and presuppositions at scale offers promising avenues for mixed-methods research.

In an era where a single tweet can influence market movements or diplomatic relations, understanding the hidden mechanics of political discourse is not a scholarly indulgence it is a civic necessity.

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