

Constructing the Taliban Discourse: Analysis of the U.S. Presidential Rhetoric (1993-2024)

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Abstract

This paper analyses the progression of the U.S. presidential discourse regarding the Taliban from 1993 to 2024. It explores how the discursive formation of identity and the rhetorical framing of the Afghan Taliban constitute foreign policy, provide legitimacy and thus shape negotiating dynamics. Drawing on Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach and Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (textual analysis, discursive practices, and social practices), this work is a critical discourse analysis (CDA). It investigates how successive administrations — Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden — have been developing narratives that redefined the Taliban from mere 'terrorists' to 'negotiating partners' in the peace process. The findings demonstrate that changes in discourse are indicative of both domestic changes within successive U.S. administrations and broader geopolitical shifts. Bush's moral supremacy and declaration of 'war on terror,' Obama's pragmatism rooted in human rights, Trump's transactional rhetoric marked by implicit legitimisation, and Biden's recalibration centred on the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan have been studied and examined in this study. Ultimately, the research underscores that U.S. engagement with the Taliban exemplifies the complex dynamics of U.S. regional aspirations, the role of the Afghan Taliban in future governance assurances regarding the denial of safe havens for terrorist groups, and future counter-terrorism strategies.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Afghanistan, Taliban, Global War on Terror (GWOT), Discursive Practices, Securitisation, Language & Power.

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Introduction

Conflict has long remained an inherent element of human civilisation. The phenomenon has been studied and analysed by philosophers, political theorists and strategists alike, who acknowledge that the potential for discord is embedded in the structure of international relations. The persistence of warfare and the cyclic nature of conflict and violence have continued to challenge societies attempting transition from war to peace. Among many such turbulent regions on the globe, Afghanistan remains a quintessential study — a country marked by a persistent scale of violence since the end of the Second World War. The history of Afghanistan is replete with invasions, internal divisions, and foreign interventions that had left Afghanistan in the continuum of war and reconstruction. Situated at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, its complex ethnic makeup and strategic location have made it a constant battleground for regional rivalries and the global power politics. And, in these times Afghan Taliban have played a central role, with their radical Islamic outlook and fierce opposition to the outside powers. The dynamics of Afghanistan characterised by four decades of incessant violence, involving the foreign powers — first the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and then the United States of America (U.S.), Afghan Taliban and various other Afghan groups, changed not only the politics and security of the region but also how the rest of the world saw Afghanistan as an epicentre of terrorism.

In August 2021, the Taliban regained control following of the withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan — a process aligned with a peace agreement established with the Taliban in 2020, a result of Doha talks.¹ The resurgence of the Afghan Taliban represents a significant development in the realm of global politics. In light of the prolonged military interventions led by the U.S., which have persisted for over 20 years, the Taliban successfully regained control in Kabul. However, this didn't occur overnight. It happened against the backdrop of a gradual relinquishing of strategic space by the U.S. and the recognition of Afghan Taliban as legitimate actors in the conflict, a recognition which they acquired in Doha negotiations. This development necessitates critical examination of the changing dynamics in the U.S.

¹ Lindsay Maizland, "The Taliban in Afghanistan," *Council on Foreign Relations*, updated August 14, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/background/taliban-afghanistan>.

foreign policy since Clinton administration to Biden. This study is an analysis of the discursive representation of Afghan Taliban, and how their identity as the radical, threatening other, a non-negotiable terrorist group transformed, incorporated and thus legitimised as legitimate negotiating partners. The purpose of this study is to illustrate and analyse how discourse can effectively influence and explain policy in the context of international politics. This study has employed a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate and explain the Afghan Taliban's resurgence and how successive U.S. administrations from Clinton to Biden represented the Afghan Taliban in their official discourse and how the discursive representation of their identity influenced their policy choices. The major objective is to demonstrate how deliberate use of a particular language may significantly and profoundly influence the foreign policy of a country and interests. In this case, the main focus is how the U.S. is involved in both military and political conflicts in Afghanistan. When it comes to nation-states and their representation of 'the other,' their view is characterised by a friend-enemy distinction. According to this scenario, the U.S. appear to pursue multiple strategies, not limited to the domestic political discourse. In this framework, U.S. presidential speeches transcend mere political discourse; they serve as vital arenas where the dynamics of state power and the quest for international legitimacy are expressed and negotiated. This paper examines the rhetorical strategies utilised among former presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, President Obama, Donald J. Trump, and Joseph Biden, aiming to reveal the evolution of these discourses over time and their influence on the realities in Afghanistan as well as the U.S. strategic goals.

Scholars like Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk have greatly influenced the theoretical framework of the critical discourse analysis (CDA)² by highlighting the complex interplay of discourse and the power dynamics. The analysis offered in the said study underscores the importance of the presidential rhetoric in influencing the discourse which often translates into foreign policy objectives, thus impacting the international politics. Although, the heavy military losses and the logistical constraints cannot be rebuffed as the significant reason in the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan and its acceptance of Taliban as negotiating

² Morteza Farhadytooli, "Studying the Fundamental Approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis: Disclose the Criticism of Power and Ideology," *International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies* 5, no. 2 (February 2025): 156–64, DOI:10.55677/ijssers/V05I02Y2025-04

partners. This paper asserts that the construction of a particular and popular narrative is also crucial in shaping the dynamics of the conflict.

This study is based on three principal research questions: First, in what ways did various U.S. presidents address the Taliban in their official speeches over time? Second, how did the evolving military and political landscape in Afghanistan influence the prevailing discourses? Third, to what extent did rhetorical framing contribute to the resurgence of the Taliban? To address the aforesaid queries, this study aims at a thorough examination of the U.S. Presidents' state of union addresses, public statements, and policy documents through the CDA framework.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Discourse, Identity and Foreign Policy Construction

Unlike the mainstream theorisation of International Relations by realism or neorealism, which posits the material reality as objective and free from the discursive contingencies, the CDA emphasises the intricate relationship between language, power and social structures. Rooted in the works of Teun A. van Dijk and Norman Fairclough, it highlights how discourse rather merely functions as a reflection of social reality, is an active instrument in shaping it and legitimising political agendas and power relations. For CDA, language doesn't act as an innocent mode of communication but a mode of social production through which meanings are produced reproduced, limited, naturalised and legitimised.³ Identity and meaning rather being natural and unproblematic are produced and naturalised through the "discursive performances of the stylised repetition of acts."⁴ Instead of treating political discourse as a neutral reflection of reality, CDA posits that discourses actively shape perception, legitimises policy choices, thus influencing social and political action.

³ Teun A. Van Dijk, 'Structures of Discourse and Structures of Power', *Annals of the International Communication Association* 12, no. 1 (1989): 18–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.1989.11678711>.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (Routledge, 2006).

Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model and the U.S. Presidential Discourse on Afghan Taliban

Under Norman Fairclough's conceptualisation of discourse analysis, discourse operates simultaneously at three interconnected levels: i. Textual, ii. Discursive practice and iii. Social practices. The textual analysis looks closely at text and examines the linguistic features such as metaphors, tropes, vocabulary, modality, argumentation patterns and rhetorical strategies.⁵ In this study a close examination of the text helps to investigate how successive U.S. administrations from Bill Clinton to Joe Biden, linguistically represented the Afghan Taliban by labelling them as 'terrorists,' 'Taliban regime,' 'insurgents,' 'extremists,' 'de facto authorities' or 'negotiating partners.'

Second, discursive practice focuses on the production, circulation, consumption and legitimisation of the discursive representations of Afghan Taliban's identity in the U.S presidential discourses. To do so, this study examines how the official discourses encompassing presidential speeches, State Department statements, national security documents and policy declarations helped to constitute particular understanding of the Taliban across different administrations.

Third, social practice, situates discourse within broader political and historical contexts. At the level of social practice, the analysis tends to explore that how changing representations of the Afghan Taliban reflected wider transformations in the U.S. Foreign policy, the 'War on Terror,' peace negotiations, the ultimate withdrawal from Afghanistan and re-calibration of the U.S.'s global security priorities.

Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach: The Afghan Taliban as an 'Ideological Other'

While Fairclough theorises the relationship between discourse and social practice and the constitution of social structures, A. van Dijk emphasises the role of ideology and cognition in the production and interpretation of discourse. In Dijk's formulation, political discourse contributes to the

⁵ Norman Fairclough, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2023), 13.

formation of collective mental frameworks through which groups understand themselves and others. What is central to Dijk's approach is the process through which political actors create a distinction between 'Us' and "them" by emphasising positive characteristics of their group while highlighting the others as negative.⁶ This helps to reinforce group identities and legitimises political actions. In the context of this paper, Van Dijk's framework is employed to understand how the U.S. administrations from Clinton to Biden constructed the Afghan Taliban as an ideological "Other."

Significant attention is paid to the ways in which the U.S.'s foreign policy discourse reproduced the themes such as democracy, freedom, human rights, and security as essential characteristics of its identity in contrast to the representations of Afghan Taliban as violent, fanatic, extremists, anti-democratic and threatening.

Critical Discourse Analysis and the U.S. Representation of Afghan Taliban

In the context of the U.S. foreign policy on Afghanistan by successive U.S. administrations, CDA facilitates a critical examination of the discourses (presidential speeches and official communications) to reveal how the U.S. in its representation of the Afghan Taliban constructed their identity from terrorists to negotiating partners. Using the CDA, it emphasises and illustrates that how power is communicated by language and eventually turns into the policy and how discursive shifts tend to correspond to the evolving U.S. foreign policy objectives. The CDA excavates the discursive formation of Taliban identity by analysing metaphors, linguistic choices and rhetorical strategies. It also looks into rationalising the military interventions and diplomatic engagement. By doing so, this approach argues that foreign policy is not determined by material factors alone but is profoundly shaped through the social construction of meaning embedded in political language.

Policy in the context of international politics can be effectively explained through discourse. Using CDA the social construction of the

⁶ Van Dijk, "Structures of Discourse and Structures of Power."

Taliban, including how the term *Taalib*, which translates to student, was first synonymous with terror or terrorism or terrorist, will be analysed and how, later on, they were given equal standing in order to participate in peace talks. The deliberate use of a particular language may have a large and deep influence on the promotion and defence of a country's foreign policy and interests.⁷ Upon analysis within the framework of global power dynamics, the U.S., in its capacity as a superpower, seemingly adopts a diverse array of foreign policy strategies that fluctuate based on its classification of other nations as either allies or adversaries. The intricacies of this situation are especially pronounced in Afghanistan, where the involvement of the U.S. has fluctuated between military intervention and diplomatic engagement. The geo-strategic ambitions of the country, frequently characterised as a result of strategic overreach, significantly influenced the discourse that informed Washington's variable approach to the Taliban — transitioning from an initial characterisation of them as a terrorist organisation to ultimately acknowledging them as legitimate participants in negotiations. This discursive transformation signifies not only a pragmatic policy shift but also a more extensive paradigmatic change in the formulation of political narratives.

Within this conceptual framework, discourse operates as both an instrument and a manifestation of strategic objectives, primarily designed for public and international audiences. Thus, the strategy employed by the U.S. regarding its withdrawal from Afghanistan may be understood as primarily influenced by domestic political and economic factors rather than by ideological or moral imperatives. In this context, the current investigation employs a critical discourse analytical framework to scrutinise the oratory of successive U.S. presidents and pronouncements from the U.S. Department of State, investigating how changing linguistic selections illuminate transformations in policy justification and the social construction of the Taliban throughout various administrations. Thus, the study offered an alternate view dissecting critically extant speeches of U.S.' Presidents — Bill Clinton (1993-2001), George W. Bush (2001-2009), Barack Obama (2009-2017), Donald Trump (2017-2021), and Joe Biden (2021-2024) alongside supplementing the arguments by critically evaluating the language of statements made by the U.S. State Department during the said time period.

⁷ Anna Grzywacz, "Indonesia and Poland: Language (Foreign) Policy as a Soft Power," *Jurnal Linguistik Terapan* 2, no. 1 (May 2012).

Afghanistan and Taliban in Retrospect: Rise, Fall and Resurgence

The Taliban's emergence followed the post-Soviet power vacuum. It was the consequence of a subsequent era of instability and the civil war ensued between different warring factions in Afghanistan. After Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, President Najibullah remained in power for only three years.⁸ Once it was overthrown in 1992, multiple groups from Ahmad Shah Masud, Burhanudin Rabbani, Rashid Dostum to Hikmatyar sought to establish control over Kabul. And in that power struggle, Afghanistan especially Kabul was being destroyed. Afghanistan was effectively turned into a state of fiefdom by warlords and barons, inciting widespread chaos.⁹ Human Rights Watch reported that Kandahar residents faced murder, rape, looting, and extortion, while humanitarian groups endured office damage and worker threats.¹⁰

According to Ahmed Rashid, this resulting collapse of authority allowed the Taliban to seize control.¹¹ Amidst shifting alliances — including Dostum's move to shell the capital with Hikmatyar — and Pakistani traders acquiring assets from local warlords, civilians bore the brunt of the rampant lawlessness.¹²

Seeing these chaotic state of affairs, Mullah Muhammad Umar, an Afghan Pushtun from Ghilzai clan and Hotak tribe, led the Taliban movement to take control of the situation.¹³ Due to Mullah Umar's Robin Hood image, Afghans abused by local officials (Mujaheddin) sought

⁸ Shane A. Smith, "Afghanistan after the Occupation: Examining the Post-Soviet Withdrawal and the Najibullah Regime It Left Behind, 1989–1992," *The Historian* 76, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 308–343, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24456716>.

⁹ Rob Johnson, 'The Taliban and the Modern History of Afghanistan,' in *Routledge Handbook of U.S. Counterterrorism and Irregular Warfare Operations*, 1st ed., by Liam Collins et al. (Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003164500-12>.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan" *World Report 1989* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1989), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1989/WR89/>.

¹¹ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, October 7, 2008), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/1007_afghanistan.pdf

¹² Rifaat Hussain, "Pakistan's Relations with Afghanistan: Continuity and Change," *Strategic Studies* 22, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 43–75.

¹³ Shafiq Ahmad, "Who's Who in Taliban Interim Government?" *Anadolu Agency (aa.com.tr)*, September 9, 2021.

Taliban aid and the Taliban invaded Afghanistan's second-largest city, Kandahar, on November 3, 1994.¹⁴

Kandahar fell to Taliban under 48 hours, while the majority of provinces followed later. On February 11, 1995, the Taliban controlled 9 of 34 Afghan provinces.¹⁵ Herat was taken on September 5, 1995. Jalalabad fell over a year later, followed by Kabul, 15 days later on September 26, 1996.¹⁶ Mazar-i Sharif, was their final major city, invaded on May 24, 1997.¹⁷ City rebellion expelled the Taliban after 18 hours which did not last long, and Taliban gained control of the city in August 1998.

The Kandhar Fall inspired thousands of Afghan refugees, madrassa students, and Pakistani Jamiat-e Ulema Islam sympathisers to join the struggle. Over 12,000 Taliban joined by December 1994, according to Ahmed Rashid.¹⁸ Led by Mullah Omar, and, by calling themselves Taliban, the new group distinguished itself from Mujahideen. They wanted to straighten up rotten Afghan society, not battle for power. Many jihadists around Omar were dissatisfied with the fragmented Mujahideen leadership working against Shariah. The Taliban aimed to fix a failed guerrilla war, socioeconomic framework, and corrupt Islamic culture. Many Pakistani refugee children attended Pakistani madrassas and received warfare tactics from Mujahideen.¹⁹

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, "III. Pakistan's Support of the Taliban," in *Crisis of Impunity: Pakistan's Support of the Taliban*, Human Rights Watch, July 2001, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/afghan2/Afghan0701-02.htm>

¹⁵ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *Chronology of Events January 1995 – February 1997*, "Afghanistan Chronology 1995–97," (January 1995–February 1997), https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/01/16/Af_chronology_1995-.pdf

¹⁶ Michael Rubin, "Who Is Responsible for the Taliban?," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 1, 2002.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, *1997 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Afghanistan*, "Afghanistan," 1997, https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/human_rights/1997_hrp_report/afghanis.html.

¹⁸ Marion, "The Destruction and Rebuilding of the Afghan Air Force, 1989–2009."

¹⁹ "Afghanistan's Future Emirate: The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel* (Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy), <https://ctc westpoint.edu/afghanistans-future-emirate-the-taliban-and-the-struggle-for-afghanistan/>

Despite the Afghanistan's search for stability and peace under the Taliban regime, Afghan became an epicentre of transnational terrorism. The partnership between the Taliban and al-Qaeda positioned them as a primary focus of the U.S. foreign policy initiatives. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration initiated Operation Enduring Freedom,²⁰ successfully dismantling the Taliban regime in a matter of weeks. Nonetheless, following their removal from power, the Taliban re-established themselves in Pakistan, initiating an insurgency that escalated throughout the 2000s. In August 2021, following two decades of U.S. involvement, the Taliban regained control, effectively leveraging the circumstances surrounding the American exit.²¹

The factors contributing to this resilience extend beyond mere military strategy; they also encompass the evolving narrative that has shaped their international perception. As the U.S. grappled with escalating expenses and declining public backing for the conflict, its narrative shifted — recasting the Taliban from unyielding adversaries into essential participants in diplomatic discussions.

From Clinton to Biden: Afghan Taliban and the U.S. Foreign Policy Discourse

Bill Clinton (1993-2001): Afghanistan and Securitisation of Terrorist Sites

The Clinton administration's decision not to recognise the Taliban government severed the relations between the U.S. and Afghanistan. And post-Soviet withdrawal in 1989²² and later its subsequent dissolution in

²⁰ “President Bush Announces Military Strikes in Afghanistan,” *ReliefWeb*, October 7, 2001, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/president-bush-announces-military-strikes-afghanistan>

²¹ Oz Hassan, *Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt from 20 Years of Supporting Democracy, Development and Security*, Policy Department for External Relations, Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, PE 702.579 (Brussels: European Parliament, January 2023).

²² Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, “The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan 1989,” *National Security Archive Briefing Book* No. 665, February 27, 2019, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/afghanistan-russia-programs/2019-02-27/soviet-withdrawal-afghanistan-1989>

1991, Afghanistan almost faded into oblivion on the U.S. foreign policy front. The end of the Cold War marked this significant shift from geopolitics to geo-economics. President Clinton perceived the economy as the predominant influence in international relations. Washington officials have expressed a somewhat ambiguous desire for peace and stability in the Central Asia, even in the face of ongoing upheaval and civil unrest. An absence of a formal policy regarding Afghanistan was evident. In light of the existing formal relations gap, it is noteworthy that oil corporations have begun to engage in pipeline construction initiatives within Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. In the absence of a definitive political framework, the U.S. State Department extended its support to energy corporations aiming to establish connections with the Taliban, driven by the substantial economic interests involved. UNOCAL, the Union Oil Company of California, advocated for a robust and unchallenged government in Afghanistan to ensure the secure extraction of the Central Asian oil reserves.²³ During that period, the U.S. officials like Robin Raphel, the Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia under Clinton, advocated engagement with the Taliban to secure the pipeline deal.²⁴ She made trips in 1996, even earning the nickname “Lady Taliban” in the Indian media.²⁵

While Clinton Administration lacked a coherent Afghan policy, there was an increasing focus on terrorism especially emanating from Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorism, especially the one perpetrated by al-Qaeda. This became more evident after the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya.²⁶ These bombings are famous in FBI parlance as TANBOM and KENBOM²⁷ were later attributed to al-Qaeda. This marked

²³ Nat Weinstein, “Unocal Executive Sheds New Light on U.S. ‘War on Terrorism,’” *Socialist Viewpoint*, December 2001, vol. 1, no. 7, https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/socialist-viewpoint-us/dec_01/dec_01_3.html.

²⁴ Peter Symonds, “The Taliban, the U.S. and the Resources of Central Asia, Part 2,” *World Socialist Web Site*, October 25, 2001, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2001/10/tal2-o25.html>.

²⁵ Ronan Farrow, *War on Peace: The End of Diplomacy and the Decline of American Influence*, revised and updated edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021).

²⁶ U.S. Department of State, “The August 7, 1998, East Africa Embassy Bombings,” *National Museum of American Diplomacy*, August 3, 2023, <https://diplomacy.state.gov/the-august-7-1998-east-africa-embassy-bombings/>

²⁷ Peter Bergen, *The Rise and Fall of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 119.

the initial shift in the U.S. discourse from the stance of a benign neglect to that of securitisation, culminating in limited missile strikes under Operation Infinite Reach. Even then the Taliban had not yet been framed discursively as a principal adversary; instead, they were perceived as a regime offering refuge to transnational (militant) entities.

In his address on the eve of the U.S. bombing in Afghanistan and Sudan, on August 20, 1998, President Clinton consistently framed Afghanistan and those in Afghanistan providing sanctuaries to foreign terrorists especially al-Qaeda, as illegitimate, anti-modern, destabilising and fanatics. Using such language positioned the U.S. to an ethical position as a protector of global security, international norms and values of an open society. This sort of framing served as a moral justification to legitimise the U.S. foreign policy actions and constructing the terrorism emanating from Afghanistan requiring containment.

It was the time when Osama Bin Laden started to occupy a preeminent position in the U.S. discourse of terrorism. In his address President Clinton was clear of what he deemed as a major threat. He remarked:

“Our target was terror. Our mission was clear -- to strike at the network of radical groups affiliated with and funded by Osama bin Laden, perhaps the preeminent organiser and financier of international terrorism in the world today. The groups associated with him come from diverse places, but share a hatred for democracy, a fanatical glorification of violence, and a horrible distortion of their religion to justify the murder of innocents. They have made the United States their adversary precisely because of what we stand for and what we stand against.”²⁸

By securitising Afghanistan in his official discourse as a hub of transnational terrorism, Clinton legitimised the military actions against terrorism threatening the U.S., especially from Afghanistan. He argued, “The risks from inaction to America and the world would be far greater than action, for that would embolden our enemies, leaving their ability and their willingness to strike us intact.”²⁹

²⁸ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Address to the Nation By The President’, 20 August 1998, <https://clintonwhitehouse6.archives.gov/1998/08/1998-08-20-president-address-to-the-nation.html>.

²⁹ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Address to the Nation By The President.”

Despite the clear stance of the U.S. that Afghanistan is a sanctuary of terrorism and it's the moral responsibility of the U.S. to defend the value structure, Bill Clinton administrations refrained direct naming of Taliban and their representation as evil, which became a motif under the Bush administration.

George W. Bush (2001-2009): Global War on Terror and Moral Binaries

While the Clinton administration, refrained from explicit and over-representation of Afghan Taliban under moral dichotomies, the 9/11 attacks during the George W. Bush administration significantly changed it. Throughout his presidency, George W. Bush (2001-2009) positioned Taliban in a dichotomous moral framework, often capitalising on the religious symbolism in his political discourse. The Taliban has always been depicted as ones partnered with al-Qaeda in executing 'acts of evil' directed at the U.S.³⁰ His narrative and assessments painted Taliban as evil-doers, backward, and symbol of tyranny and terror. The word regime was consistently used for Afghan Taliban, depicting the latter as illegitimate and invoking the Western responsibility to liberate the other as they are living under a brutal occupation. It is apparent in Bush's address to a joint session of Congress and the American people after 9/11. He remarked:

“The United States respects the people of Afghanistan -- after all, we are currently its largest source of humanitarian aid -- but we condemn the Taliban regime. It is not only repressing its own people, it is threatening people everywhere by sponsoring and sheltering and supplying terrorists. By aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder.”³¹

³⁰ “Afghanistan War: How Did 9/11 Lead to a 20-Year War?,” *Imperial War Museums*, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/afghanistan-war-how-did-911-lead-to-a-20-year-war>

³¹ Bureau of Public Affairs Department of State. The Office of Electronic Information, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” Department Of State. The Office of Electronic Information, Bureau of Public Affairs., <https://2001-2009.state.gov/coalition/cr/rm/2001/5025.htm>

On the same occasion, the Afghan Taliban were represented as an embodiment of backwardness, institutionalising policies which runs counter to the modernity. He argued:

“In Afghanistan, we see al-Qaeda’s vision for the World. Afghanistan’s people have been brutalised -- many are starving and many have fled. Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television. Religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough.”³²

Bush via his rhetoric created a distinct dichotomy, positioning the U.S. as the torchbearers of freedom, honour and justice, in a stark contrast with the Taliban. These heavy adages and the use of metaphors in his rhetoric laid the ground for the initiation of the ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ along with the subsequent NATO-led International Security Assistance Force.³³ He even termed it as a crusade. Thus, employing moral terminologies and the framing of the U.S. relation with Afghanistan in a crude dichotomy of Good vs Evil, Bush’s rhetoric significantly constrained the potential for negotiation; the Taliban were depicted as illegitimate actors, effectively excluded from the sphere of diplomatic engagement.

Bush formed a rhetoric using terminology to portray evildoers, terrorists, and suicide bombers as primitive, evil people who dig their way into society and lurk in order to murder innocent people. They do so because they despise the concept of freedom and this is what America represents. They are not anti-Christ; they are anti-American, and this is their distinguishing characteristic. They live in many countries and share no common ground other than their terrorising goals. However, Bush promises to purge the world of evildoers; We’re a nation that can’t be cowed by evil-doers.”³⁴ For that the rhetoric here was supposed to turn into a geopolitical discourse to shape the foreign policy objectives or to

³² Department Of State, The Office of Electronic Information, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People.”

³³ Claire Taylor, *The International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan*, Standard Note SN/IA/4854, International Affairs and Defence Section, House of Commons Library, updated February 9, 2009, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04854/SN04854.pdf>.

³⁴ “President Holds Prime Time News Conference,” *The White House (George W. Bush archives)*, October 11, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011011-7.html>.

revise them; we will rid the world of the evil-doers. We will call together freedom loving people to fight terrorism.³⁵

This discussion needs to be placed within the broader context of the aftermath of September 11 attacks, which acted as a pivotal turning point in reshaping the U.S Foreign Policy. Bush's administration clearly and officially defined the GWOT as a struggle between the civilisations; a crusade, rather than just a counter-terrorism effort. However, the refusal of the Taliban regime to extradite Osama bin laden served as the primary rationale for the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. As a result, Operation Enduring Freedom was commenced in 2001,³⁶ integrating precision air-power, CIA and paramilitary offensives and special assistance to the Northern Alliance. The swift downfall of the Taliban regime bolstered administration's narrative of ethical and military dominance. Nevertheless, the ensuing phase of insurgency beginning in 2003 introduced complexities to this dichotomous narrative, as the Taliban re-emerged not solely as 'vanquished villain' but as a tenacious insurgent entity intricately woven into the fabric of Afghan society.

Additionally, Bush's rhetoric institutionalised a policy framework, encompassing doctrines of preemption, enhancing surveillance measures, and a formation of a coalition in line with invocation of the Article 5 of NATO³⁷ — the first instance of such an invocation in organisation's history. The Taliban were consequently framed not merely as insurgents or terrorists but an integral part of a wider instability axis that threatens the established global order. This rigid framework effectively precluded initial diplomatic engagement and solidified a militarised strategy regarding Afghanistan.

³⁵ Sarfraz Khan and Shuja Ahmad, "Good Versus Evil: Argument to Begin Global War on Terrorism," *Central Asia* issue no. 64 (Summer 2009), 25, posted May 9, 2016, SSRN, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2775610.

³⁶ RAND Corporation, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2006/RAND_MG166-1.pdf.

³⁷ Joel R. Paul, "The Bush Doctrine: Making or Breaking Customary International Law?," *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review* 27, no. 4 (2004): —, https://repository.uclawsf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1617&context=hastings_international_comparative_law_review.

Obama's Administration (2009-2017): Pragmatic Surge and Reconcilable vs Irreconcilable Interests

President Barak Obama (2009-2017) shifted the narrative by embracing a pragmatic and measured approach. In his discourse, Obama maintained a portrayal of the Taliban as violent extremists,³⁸ yet he introduced complexities that acknowledged the internal divisions present within the organisation. The speaker's rhetoric delineated between elements deemed "reconcilable" and those classified as "irreconcilable," effectively creating a framework for potential negotiation within constrained parameters. Nonetheless, the Taliban continued to be depicted primarily as a hindrance to the establishment of peace, democratic governance, and the advancement of human rights within Afghanistan. Obama's recurrent emphasis on women's rights in Afghanistan served to further solidify the Taliban's position as fundamentally opposed to progressive ideals.³⁹ Concurrently, his rhetoric rationalised a military escalation in 2009 by portraying the Taliban as re-emerging forces that posed a significant risk to regional stability. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly on September 24, 2013, Obama said:

"We will dismantle terrorist networks that threaten our people. Whenever possible we will build the capacity of our partner, respect the sovereignty of nations and work to address the root cause of terror. But then it is necessary to defend the United States against terrorist attacks, we will take direct actions and finally we will not tolerate the development or use of weapons of mass destruction so we reject the development of nuclear weapons."⁴⁰

³⁸ "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," *The White House (Barack Obama Archives)*, March 27, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan>

³⁹ Elise Jordan, "Will President Obama Stand With Afghan Women?," *Washington Examiner*, December 2, 2009, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/820246/will-president-obama-stand-with-afghan-women/>

⁴⁰ "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly," White House Office of the Press Secretary, September 24, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>

Obama's discourse should also be analysed through the lens of 'AF-PAK' strategy, which has shaped the conflict into a regional concerns rather than solely being Afghanistan's. This also represents a shift from Bush's ideological framing towards more counterinsurgency (COIN) driven doctrines. The surge in troops in 2008, adding approximately 30,000 U.S troops⁴¹ was rationalised with the framework of necessity and stabilisation rather than moral absolutism. Obama's Afghanistan policy was to reduce the U.S. military involvement and build a conventional presence for development, economic assistance, and military and civilian training.⁴² The "clear, hold, and build" counter-insurgency approach is now "clear, hold, build, and transfer." It indicated that numerous interconnected activities would meet Obama's goal. The U.S. and its partners enhanced international troop presence, utilised a population-focused counter-insurgency strategy, and bolstered the Afghan National Security Forces to stop the Taliban. Second, the U.S. was looking to shoulder Afghanistan's government with the counter-insurgency efforts and proper functioning of their government. It mattered. After insurgents are evacuated, significant security troops (ideally Afghan) must stay to prevent extremists from seizing control, and the Afghan government must rebuild and restore the rule of law. Governance capacity development takes time and may not generate policy results quickly. However, battlefield triumph must be immediate. According to Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, the Taliban are part of Afghanistan's political fabric, unlike al-Qaeda in Iraq.⁴³ Despite believing the U.S. and its allies cannot "kill their way out of Afghanistan," the Obama administration supported "reintegrating" the Taliban and opposed President Karzai's "reconciling" plan, which some Afghans regarded as a bargain.

Concurrently, the Obama administration initiated indirect channels for negotiations, thereby establishing a ground for the subsequent diplomatic

⁴¹ Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Lessons of the Surge," Brookings Institution, November 4, 2008, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/lessons-of-the-surge/>

⁴² *Exploring Three Strategies for Afghanistan*, hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 111th Cong., 1st sess., September 16, 2009 ("Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations"), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111shrg55538/html/CHRG-111shrg55538.htm>.

⁴³ *Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and Other Extremist Groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, S. Hrg. 112-70 (U.S. Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, May 24, 2011), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112shrg67892/html/CHRG-112shrg67892.htm>

efforts, including the opening of the Taliban diplomatic office⁴⁴ in Doha in 2013. This indicates a significant discursive shift from Bush administration complete exclusion to the framework of conditional engagement.

Importantly, Obama's rhetoric sought to balance competing narratives including counter-terrorism, reconstruction and withdrawal thus breeding a more hybrid discourse that subsequently legitimised and bolstered the rationale of military escalation and eventual disengagement. This strategic cum deliberate ambiguity would later shape the U.S.-Taliban negotiations and peace talks.

Donald Trump: Transactional Normalisation

The Donald Trump marked a significant shift from the previous U.S. administrations by reconstructing Taliban. The subsequent discourse not merely re-framed Taliban as an adversarial entity but also as a negotiating partner in the broader transactional foreign policy framework. During his tenure (2017-2021) Donald. J. Trump used a transactional rhetoric focusing the costs, benefits and the burdens shared by the America's national interests.⁴⁵ For nearly a decade, the U.S have endeavoured to confabulate a deal between Afghan government and the Taliban. The actions taken by him and the discourse he followed eventually dismantled all prior U.S. administrations efforts establishing a trust worthy partner in Afghanistan. By excluding the Afghan government from the subsequent peace talks, the move highlighted the gaps in the U.S. foreign policy, thus, affirming the Kissinger's saying, "The foreign policy of the U.S. is, that, it has no foreign policy."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ "Office Opened in Doha: Taliban Say Seek Political Solution," *Business Recorder*, June 19, 2013, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/4101375/office-opened-in-doha-taliban-say-seek-political-solution-201306191200803>

⁴⁵ Habib Badawi, "The Impact of Trump's Policies and Rhetoric on U.S. International Relations and Domestic Politics (2016–2024) [O Impacto das Políticas e da Retórica de Trump nas Relações Internacionais e na Política Interna dos EUA (2016–2024)]," *Revista Portuguesa de Ciência Política [Portuguese Journal of Political Science]*, no. 21 (2024): 17–36, <https://doi.org/10.59071/2795-4765.RPCP2024.21/pp17-36>

⁴⁶ *Henry Kissinger and the Study of Global Affairs*, Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins SAIS, <https://kissinger.sais.jhu.edu/about/legacy/>.

The future of the Afghan government was dependent on negotiations under the proposed agreement. Reports suggested that the U.S. proposed a transitional government with the Taliban and other political figures, potentially renaming the country to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This suggests that the U.S. was negotiating the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. However, the Trump administration has stated that its goal in Afghanistan is to prevent international terrorists from using Afghanistan as a safe haven and preventing the U.S. terrorist attacks. Direct peace discussions with the Taliban, despite their increased strength, have been the greatest achievement of the Trump presidency. Trump's rhetoric was focused on 'ending endless wars' thus reconstructing Taliban from irreconcilable terrorists to rational actors capable of negotiations. It is also noteworthy that the Afghan government was excluded from this complete process highlighting a narrative shift that positions Taliban as a legitimate political entity.

His discourse was different from Bush's moral absolutism and Obama's practical appeals to human rights. Trump administration was purely transactional in its approach; he talked about the Taliban as if they were negotiating deals. Trump kept calling them brutal killers, but he also talked about the chance of making a 'good deal.' This pragmatic approach to language led to the 2020 Doha Agreement,⁴⁷ which was the first time the Taliban was officially recognised as a real negotiating partner. Trump's speech went back and forth between demonisation and conditional legitimisation, which was in line with his "America First"⁴⁸ philosophy. He attacked his predecessors' attempts to 'rebuild a country in our own image' by risking the lives of Americans and investing 'too much time, energy, and money.' He advocated that the U.S. should simply pursue its own 'security interests' instead of nation-building in Afghanistan. The discourse during the Trump administration thus revolved around making America great again, divorced of any moralising elements and based on pure transactional

⁴⁷ *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and the United States of America*, signed February 29, 2020, Doha, Qatar; PDF from the U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

⁴⁸ Ashish Kumar Sen and David A. Wemer, "Trump Puts America First at the United Nations," *Atlantic Council (New Atlanticist)*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/trump-puts-america-first-at-the-united-nations/>

considerations. This discursive shift also normalised Taliban's role in Afghanistan's future political order and marked a critical transformation in the U.S. foreign policy discourse.

Joe Biden: Strategic Withdrawal and Realignment

President Joe Biden inherited the negotiation framework from President Trump but redefined it with strategic re-calibration of the U.S. priorities abroad. His discourse consistently highlighted ending America's longest war, thus framing the withdrawal not as a failure but a necessary strategic realignment. Since assuming office in 2021, Joe Biden pursued a pragmatic approach directed at bringing an end to the protracted military involvement often referred to as 'Forever War.'⁴⁹ The rhetoric he followed portrayed the Taliban as exhibiting military resilience yet deemed them strategically peripheral to the enduring American interest. In his address to media at the White House, in Washington on August 31, 2021 — the last day of the complete withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan, Biden framed the withdrawal from Afghanistan not as a surrender, but as a strategic manouvre and alignment of U.S. influence in the broader geopolitical competition with Russia and China. He said:

“I was not going to continue this forever war, and I was not going to extend this forever exit,” Biden said, adding that “the war in Afghanistan is now finished.”⁵⁰

The U.S. withdrawal in August 2021⁵¹ and the subsequent Taliban takeover marked a significant shift both in the discourse and in tangible

⁴⁹ David E. Sanger and Michael D. Shear, “Biden, Saying It Is ‘Time to End America’s Longest War,’ Declares Troops Will Be Out of Afghanistan by Sept. 11,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/14/us/politics/biden-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal.html>

⁵⁰ “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan,” White House Office of the Press Secretary, August 31, 2021, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/>

⁵¹ S. Haimed, “A Critical Analysis of the Representation of America’s Withdrawal and the Taliban’s Takeover in Global Media,” *Cogent Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2024), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23311886.2024.2435595>

realities. Biden and his administration approached the Taliban not primarily through the moral and ideological lenses rather as a reality to be managed than to be transformed. This yet again marked a shift from the interventionist discourse to the one rooted in restraint and strategic rivalry vis-a-vis great power politics. In the aftermath of the Taliban's resurgence in 2021, Biden's rhetoric has consistently highlighted apprehensions regarding terrorism, the status of women's rights, and the unfolding humanitarian crises. Biden's approach, characterised by a departure from the moralistic tendencies of Bush and the caution exhibited by Obama, signifies a notable shift towards a re-calibrated geopolitical strategy.⁵² Biden's rhetoric, as observed through CDA, indicates a significant shift in discourse: transitioning from characterising the Taliban as adversaries to recognising them as the de-facto authorities in Afghanistan, while simultaneously expressing reservations about formal recognition. This duality reflects a pragmatic yet cautious engagement strategy. The discourse surrounding Biden's withdrawal illustrates a significant transformation of narrative, portraying defeat as strategic necessity. Instead of recognising the defeat, Biden administration framed it as a necessary conclusion of an operation whose primary objective had already been achieved. This helped administration redefine success not in terms of construction and peace building but in terms of operational limitations. Ultimately, the tumultuous withdrawal resulting in the fall of Kabul was framed as unpredictability and contingency. By attributing the swift collapse to the failing and fragile Afghan institutions, the administration effectively shifted and redistributed its responsibility, thus maintaining the integrity of its withdrawal narrative.

Afghan Taliban Transitioning from Terrorists to State Actors in the U.S. Discourse: An Analysis

Examining the evolution of the U.S. presidential rhetoric through the CDA lens reveal that discourse serves as the foundational element; a constitutive force in foreign policy rather than simply reflecting it. The study of presidential discourses indicates a complex interplay of continuity and transformation in the framing, legitimisation, and de-legitimisation of the

⁵² Zainab Mohsin and Muhammad Akram Zaheer, "Shifting Strategies: A Comparative Analysis of U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Pakistan Under Obama and Biden Administrations," *ACADEMIA International Journal for Social Sciences*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2025): 2993–3010, <https://doi.org/10.63056/ACAD.004.03.0588>

Taliban throughout different periods. Throughout the tenure of all four presidents, the Taliban have been uniformly depicted as the foremost impediment to achieving peace, modernisation, and stability within Afghanistan. The methods of representation exhibited significant variation, influenced by the political orientation of each president, the domestic constraints they faced, and the prevailing international context. The ongoing narrative consistently positions the Taliban to be violent extremists fundamentally at odds with the U.S. values. This narrative framework effectively bridged partisan divides, sustaining public backing for the U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan over a span of two decades. Throughout the evolution of the U.S. military and diplomatic strategies — from the Bush administration’s war on terror to Obama’s surgical surge, followed by Trump’s negotiation efforts and Biden’s eventual withdrawal — the Taliban has consistently been framed as a counterforce to American principles of freedom and democratic rule.

Change is manifested in the sophisticated discursive strategies that are being utilised. The moral dichotomies characterised by Bush, steeped in religious undertones, transitioned to Obama’s more pragmatic approach, emphasising human rights and the importance of reconciliation. Trump’s transactional rhetoric redefined the Taliban as viable negotiating partners, whereas Biden’s discourse relegated them to a less pivotal role within the U.S. global strategy. The observed shifts underscore the dynamic interplay between discourse and material developments, illustrating how narratives can actively reshape policy objectives.

Moreover, the narrative surrounding the Taliban illustrates the complex dynamics between internal and external stakeholders. The rhetoric employed by Bush effectively galvanised domestic backing for a worldwide campaign against terrorism, whereas Obama’s discourse sought to navigate the complexities of international legitimacy in the context of prevailing domestic war fatigue. Trump’s narrative resonated with his supporters by emphasising the financial implications of the Afghanistan conflict, whereas Biden’s language mirrored the evolving public sentiment that favoured a withdrawal from the region. Consequently, discourse operated not only as an instrument of policy implementation but also as a strategy for managing public perception.

The implications of these discourses have been profound and enduring for Afghanistan. The portrayal of the Taliban through ethical, civil rights, or economic lenses has frequently led the U.S. presidents to oversimplify the intricate realities of Afghanistan. This reductionist approach has led to misguided policy decisions, characterised by an excessive dependence on military interventions, a failure to accurately gauge the resilience of Taliban, and a disregard for the intricate political dynamics at grassroots level in Afghanistan. The analysis reveals that language played a crucial role not only in characterising the Taliban but also in influencing the strategic options available for action against them.

This development underscores a fundamental premise of critical social constructivism: the influence of language and ideas on international politics is as significant as that of material power. The transformation of the Taliban's identity through discourse enabled the U.S. policymakers to rationalise significant changes in strategy, evolving from military invasion to diplomatic negotiations and ultimately to withdrawal. The resurgence of the Taliban cannot be comprehensively analysed through security or geopolitical frameworks alone; it necessitates an examination of the underlying discursive practices that contribute to its emergence.

Conclusion

This analysis reveals that the discourses employed by the U.S. presidents regarding the Taliban transcended mere rhetoric, serving as pivotal elements in the formulation and justification of foreign policy decisions. Utilising CDA, the study uncovers the ways in which language has persistently framed the Taliban as the other, with variations in its manifestation and focus across different administrations. The discourse analysis in this study demonstrates that the U.S. representations of the Afghan Taliban were dynamic in nature. They were neither static nor objective reflections of political reality. Rather they were the outcome of a careful socially and political discursive practices, continuously shaped and reshaped in response to the changing strategic priorities, foreign policy objectives, and geopolitical circumstances.

The contrasting approaches of Bush's moral binaries, Obama's human rights pragmatism, Trump's transactional deal-making, and Biden's

strategic recalibration exemplify rhetorical strategies and discursive practices that underpin policy choices, encompassing a spectrum from military intervention to diplomatic engagement and eventual withdrawal. This dynamic play and policy evolution confirms the central assumption of critical social constructivism that identities are not stable and fixed but are constituted through social interactions and discursive practices. The shift in the Taliban's identity in foreign policy discourse of the U.S. from an obscure regional actor to an epicentre of terrorism, then to a negotiating counterpart and ultimately to a recognisable force and a governing authority whose existence could no longer be ignored in post-withdrawal Afghanistan, reveals that the discursive construction of the other's identities are contingent, relational and historically situated, rather than fixed or inherently given. Rather than a mere reflection of some natural, objective meaning they reveal the social situatedness and inherent instability of the meaning ascribed to an identity.

The research's primary contribution lies in its application of CDA to reveal how discourse and foreign policy functions in a mutually constitutive relationship, instead of a mono-causal one as the positivist epistemology suggests. As Fairclough sees discourse as social practice, the official language of various U.S. administrations did not merely describe the Taliban, it actively participated in the construction of strategic and political realities within which the policy choices and decisions became conceivable and legitimised. Employing the strategies and discursive frameworks of nomination, securitisation, and legitimation successive U.S. administrations framed the Afghan Taliban in ways which legitimised specific policy responses: sanctions, military intervention, counterinsurgency, peace negotiations and strategic withdrawal.

Moreover, the research further highlights van Dijk's argument that political discourse reproduces ideological frameworks by delineating the boundaries between 'the self' and 'the other.' It is revealed that the U.S. administrations repeatedly employed 'Us vs Them' binaries which positively portrayed the U.S. as a defender of freedom, democracy and international security while positioning the Afghan Taliban as a radical, illegitimate, threatening Other. But as the strategic priorities of different U.S. presidents changed, the ideological representations of the Afghan Taliban modified, too. During the period of negotiations, the seemingly hardcore discursive boundaries became more flexible, which enabled the

policymakers to politically engage with the actors, previously depicted as irredeemable, illegitimate enemies exemplified by the exclusion of the Afghan Taliban during the Bonn process. This suggests that discourse does not function as mere rhetoric but also serves as a mechanism through which states identify friends and enemies, establish legitimacy and either expand or constrain policy choices.

The ramifications of this study reach far beyond the borders of Afghanistan. The dynamics of political discourse play a crucial role in influencing both public perceptions and tangible results in the realms of war and peace. The experience of the U.S. highlights the importance of analysing political discourse, and dynamics of global interactions. For academics and decision-makers, acknowledging the fundamental influence of discourse could avert future simplifications that mask intricate realities. Ultimately, the situation with the Taliban illustrates that the narratives we create extend beyond mere description. They actively influence the dynamics of policy, public perception, and the trajectory of historical events.