

**How Media Coverage of Focusing Events Impacts Agenda Setting: Case Studies of Beslan School Siege (Russia) and Peshawar School Attack (Pakistan)**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper analyzes the Beslan School Siege in Russian in 2004 and Peshawar School Attack in Pakistan in 2014 on the criteria of focusing events given by Thomas Birkland and proves that these events were focusing events. The paper analyses different theories regarding focusing events and agenda-setting in the literature review section. A detailed discussion of both the events and resulting policies follows. A structured focus comparison of both the events is made according to the criteria of focusing events given by Thomas Birkland. The media attention given to both the events is analyzed, and it is shown that how powerful policy actors in Russia and Pakistan used the media attention to further their own policies and solutions to tackle the problem of terrorism faced by both nations.*

**Keywords:** Media Coverage, Beslan School Siege, Russia, Peshawar School Attack, Pakistan

**INTRODUCTION**

The world every now and then faces incidents that change the course of policies and leave a profound impact on society and polity. The incidents like Three Mile Island nuclear incident of 1979, Exxon Valdez Oil Spill of 1989 and September 11 attacks on World Trade Center New York in 2001 have changed the policies in respective areas of concern. Long after the occurrence of these incidents, they are still a topic of discussions and debates.

In the field of public policy, these sudden and shocking events which exert tremendous pressure on relevant policymakers in government to adopt policies that can effectively mitigate the impact of these events as well as prevent the happening of such incidents in the future are called focusing events.

Agenda-setting is one of the most critical stages in the public policymaking process. The traditional policymaking process involves problem identification, agenda-setting, policy formulation and adoption, policy implementation, and policy evaluation. In this process, problems are typically identified and advocated by different policy stakeholders to be on the government agenda (Dye, 2012).

Focusing events are those events which can suddenly bring some problem on top of the government agenda or provide those in government a window of opportunity to implement a policy they were waiting for (Kingdon, 1995). The two most defining characteristics of the focusing events put forward by

Birkland (1997) are their visibility, aka how much media attention they garner and aggregation of harms they inflict.

Aggregation of harms means relatively more significant harm is concentrated in one geographical location. Another important thing here is that the harm generated by is an event is significantly larger than the harms caused by similar events before faced by the same policy community (Birkland, 1997). Aggregation of harms is a relative term and depends on the nature of the event. A nuclear accident killing a dozen people may trigger a dramatic policy shift, but an earthquake killing 1000 people may not be able to move the policymakers. The policy community's perception of harm is critical. In the cases under study, the harm was relatively large and concentrated in one geographical location.

For an event to become a focusing event, this must attract sufficient media attention. Here sufficient mean the media create serious drama and sensational story out of it depicting harm in a very negative way. Usually, the media give attention to rare events. For example, media gives significantly gives more attention to an air crash than to the daily road accidents because air crashes do not occur daily. So if the event is rare and harmful, it is more likely that media will generate compelling stories and symbols to draw the policy maker's attention.

Another important thing is whether public and policy advocates were already concerned with the potential occurrence of a similar event. If they were and the event occurs, then they will exert tremendous pressure on the government to change policy (Birkland, 1997). The events under study here were also rare events in the respective communities no such school attacks happened in Russia and Pakistan before so they garnered a lot of media attention. There is no hard and fast rule to measure media attention. But for focusing events, media devotes and a lot of time and energy to depict the harm in a maximum negative way possible and for a more extended period. It can also frame the event in a particular policy perspective, implicitly or explicitly suggesting the policy options during the coverage of the event.

This paper will analyze case studies of Beslan school siege (Russia 2004) and the Peshawar school massacre (Pakistan 2014) as focusing events triggering a policy change in counterterrorism policies of Russia and Pakistan.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Theories about the agenda-setting process go from complex to simple. According to Cobb and Elder (1983), different types of problems can affect the agenda-setting. These problems may include shocking events apart from other triggering mechanisms. Agenda can also be a process of group and actor competition. These groups and actors engage in policy battles trying to place a particular problem on the agenda while at the same time denying other groups and actors a place at the agenda-setting stage (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). The competition mentioned above is not only about problems to be placed on the agenda but also about preferred solutions to those problems (Lowrence & Birkland, 2004). John Kingdon (1995) also had a very detailed discussion on agenda-setting. He divides the policy process into three streams, i.e., problem stream, politics stream, and policy stream. Problem stream contains the ideas about problems faced by society, politics stream contains political discourse, political situation, and dynamics and policy stream contain ideas about potential solutions to those problems present in the problem stream. He also says that a window of opportunity called policy window opens when two or more of these streams come together. Kingdon also had an in-depth discussion on focusing events. According to him, focusing events draw public attention because they represent an urgent and symbolic example of policy failure, which is picked up by policy entrepreneurs to exert pressure on the government to put problems on the agenda and implement their favorite solutions. Some opponent policy entrepreneurs may argue that the existing policies will tackle the issue. The focusing events enable policy advocates to make more significant claims of policy failure leading to a greater search of solution and

likelihood of policy change (Birkland T. , 2006). The likelihood of problem making onto the agenda and bringing a policy change increases with the increase in influence and power of policy actors (Baumgartner & James, 1993).

An issue with Kingdon's discussion of focusing events is that he gives a very broad definition of focusing events. For him, the important thing is the powerful symbols that portray the problem. For him political and economic events, natural disasters man-made incidents may have the same appeal as focusing events if powerful symbols represent them. The more evocative the symbol is, the more powerful the focusing event (Birkland & Lowrence, 2002).

Birkland defines the focusing events more narrowly. According to him, a focusing event should be highly visible and rare. It should contain aggregated harms (harms concentrated in a particular geographical area) in order to gain prominence on the agenda (Birkland T. 1995). Birkland (1997) defines the focusing event as an event containing the element of suddenness, rarity, and aggregation of harms and comes to knowledge of public and policymakers simultaneously.

(Edelman, 1988) and (Stone, 2002) shed light on how news media plays a role in shaping the rhetoric and metaphors in conjunction with the event. They also talk about how issues gain the attention of journalists and how journalists use stories and symbols to generate a particular kind of narrative. By definition given by Birkland (1997), focusing events create a lot of public attention. According to Baumgartner and Jones (1993), usually, the attention generated by these events is negative attention, which creates further debate in the policy arena, thereby pushing the issues on to the agenda and increasing the chances of policy change. Those who construct stories and symbols can frame them in a particular way. This framing of stories allows the policy entrepreneurs to push and compel the government to implement a policy of their choice (Bennett, 2003). Some events are so shocking and powerful that they do not need any policy individuals to reach the agenda. The media generates such powerful symbols and images that the groups only need to repeat them to push the issue to the agenda. According to Carpenter and Sin (2007), those were the images of fragile and weak children, which triggered a strong outcry, which led to stringent regulation for medications in the Food and Drug Act of 1938. The policy changes after Beslan and Peshawar attack can be explained in light of this argument.

We can find examples of terrorism events that acted as focusing events on bringing new policies. According to Cobb and Primo (2003), following the September 11 attacks, the policy changes in aviation security were unprecedentedly broad and speedy. Birkland (2004) also states that the 9/11 attacks brought sweeping policy changes in aviation security. But he also argues that aviation security was already under discussion in policy circles following the cases of Pan Am 103 and TWA Flight 800.

## **METHODOLOGY**

There are different methodologies for case study research in social sciences. One of them is Structured Focused Comparison, which I will be using in my research. In the method of structured, focused comparison, each case study is examined using similar criteria or set of questions. Here I will be examining the two case studies mentioned above on the criteria of focusing events established by Birkland. The 'Focused Comparison' means only the specific aspects of cases will be examined. In this method, the researcher identifies a universe, which is a class or subclass of events. The cases under study must be the instances of the same universe (George & Bennet, 2005). Here it can be said that terrorism is the class, and domestic terrorism waged by non-state actors fighting against the government is the subclass. The term focused is fundamental here. A case study can be examined for a variety of theoretical implications (George & Bennet, 2005). For example, the case studies mentioned above can also be examined in the context of disaster preparedness, situation handling, coordination among security organizations, to name a few. Still, in our case, I will be examining the cases in the context of the

Birkland's framework for the study of focusing events and how these events influence the agenda-setting stage of public policymaking. Focusing events will act as independent variable and agenda-setting as the dependent variable.

Birkland (1997) defines a focusing event as "an event that is sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harm, inflict harms or suggest potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographical area or community of interest and that is known to policymakers and public virtually simultaneously."

Birkland (1997) also says that for an event to be able to come to the agenda and change the policy, the media must give it a lot of attention. This is because, through media, it will come to the knowledge of public and other policy advocates who will press policymakers to tackle the issue. But media attention is mainly a function of suddenness, novelty, and harmfulness of an event. If the event meets the criteria defined in the definition of focusing event, it will most likely garner the due media attention. Birkland (1997) and Birkland (2004) tested his theory on Natural Disasters, Oil Spills, Nuclear Incidents, and Aviation Security w.r.t terrorism. This paper will try to test his theory on domestic terrorism involving schools and children and will judge whether these events can also be considered as candidate focusing events for policy change.

### **THE BESLAN SCHOOL HOSTAGE CRISIS**

September 1, 2004, was the first day of the new school year at Beslan's School No. 1. More than a thousand school children aged between 6 and 16 and their parents had gathered at the school's courtyard to celebrate the beginning of the new school year when about 32 gunmen who were riding hijacked military vehicles stormed the school. They quickly subdued the police personnel present there and took more than 1000 children and adults hostage into the school building. They took most of the hostages to the school gymnasium. They planted the gymnasium with homemade bombs and connected the bombs through wires. The first day they demanded the release of four rebel fighters who were jailed in Ingushetia. Soon they made a more stringent demand of ending the Chechen war and withdrawal of all Russian troops from Chechnya. Meanwhile, Russian security forces had surrounded the school compound. The troops included several different Russian law enforcement agencies.

On the first day, militants took 20 men from the hostages and killed them. The next day, a negotiation by Dr. Leonid Roshal was started with the militants for the provision of water and food to the hostages, but the militants refused. They even refused to allow the removal of dead bodies of men they have killed on the previous day. Then again, on the second day, the former president of Ingushetia talked to the terrorists and managed to secure the release of 20 people, including the youngest children and their mothers. On Friday, the militants agreed to the removal of dead bodies from the premises. As the medics were preparing for the removal of dead bodies, an explosion occurred, and windows of the gymnasium shattered. The hostages nearby the windows started fleeing through them. The militants opened fire on the fleeing hostages hitting them in their backs. Russian forces stormed the compound, and a battle ensued between terrorists and security forces. Then terrorists detonated the remaining bombs planted. This caused the roof of the gymnasium to fall on the heads of those who were still inside, making most of the casualties. By midnight of September 4, when the operation ended, more than 300 people, including 186 children and 27 terrorists, died one militant was captured, and others fled. According to Shamil Basaev, the Chechen field commander who has since claimed responsibility for the hostage-taking, the group included 12 Chechen men and 2 Chechen women, 8 Ingush, 2 Ossetians, 2 Arabs, 2 Russians, a Kabarda, a Tartar, and a Guran. This horrific incident shocked Russia and was branded as the 9/11 of Russia (Boykewich, 2005).

### **Russia's counterterrorism policy after Beslan**

Although the year 2004 was marked by many terrorist attacks by North Caucasian Islamist rebels, making it the deadliest year in the Russian history in terms of domestic terrorism-related casualties (Johnston, 15). Beslan school attack was particularly surprising and shocking. It is still the largest attack on school children in the history of the world.

A huge number of losses at Beslan School exposed the limitations and deficiencies of the Russian security structure responsible for the prevention of terrorism. It also exposed the shortcomings in the coordination and information sharing among different security organizations and ministries. The crisis not only had an immediate and substantial impact on Russia's counterterrorism policy but had broader implications. It not only triggered an overhaul of the structure of the Russian anti-terrorism apparatus but impacted Russian foreign and domestic policies in the years to come. The Russian government was visibly embarrassed by its inability to prevent such a horrible attack. Immediately after the attack Russian president, Putin pledged to reform the Russian security and law enforcement services, including developing procedures for interagency coordination (Lynch, 2005). The immediate measures to reform the security service concentrated on the following three areas.

### **Information Exchange and Coordination among Different Security Entities**

Regarding information exchange and coordination among different organizations and ministries, the 2004 reform focused on four distinct areas. First was information exchange inside the Russian security and law enforcement system. Changes were made, and new departments created in both the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the Federal Security Service (FSB). The central administrative board on the fight against organized crime (GUBOP) was changed to DBOPiT, the department on the fight against organized crime and terrorism of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia. In FSB, The Department for the Protection of the Constitutional System and the Fight against Terrorism was renamed into Service for the Protection of the Constitutional System and the Fight against Terrorism (Soldatov & Borogan, 2005). The second was the information exchange with the special services of other countries. After the attack, Putin and most of the Russian state-controlled media linked the attack with the international Islamist terrorism, so The Directorate on the fight against international terrorism (UBMT FSB) was created within FSB. As a result, a special representative of the president of the Russian Federation concerning the international cooperation in the fight against terrorism and transnational organized crime was appointed. Director of FSB and Director of FBI signed a memorandum of collaboration between two services in December 2004. The third measure was specifically focused on North Caucasus and aimed at improving coordination and information sharing in that region. Before the Beslan attack, two parallel counterterrorism structures were operating in North Caucasus. The Regional Operations Staff (ROSH) created in 2001 under the presidential decree. It was working under the anti-terrorism department of FSB; however, in July 2003 president transferred responsibility of the management of ROSH to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). The other structure working in the North Caucasus was The Combined Group of Forces (OGV) headed by a general of Russian armed forces. In July 2005, OGV was placed under the command of Evgeny Lazebin, who was an assistant to the commander-in-chief of internal troops (VV), the armed wing of MVD. Hence both ROSH and OGV were brought under the command of MVD for better coordination and counterterrorism operations in North Caucasus. The fourth measure was about coordination in case of a terrorist attack or hostage-taking event. Response to terrorist or hostage-taking was decentralized at the time of the Beslan attack, and it remains so with some significant doctrinal development to enhance coordination and information sharing the authority to start the operation remains with local commanders (Soldatov & Borogan, 2005).



### **Changes in information sharing on preventing terrorist attacks from happening**

Before the Beslan attack, different structures like divisions of FSB, Military Intelligence, and MVD were operating separately for information gathering and prevention of terrorist attacks. After Beslan, this structure was altered. A prospecting service was created to unite the efforts of all the agencies mentioned above (Soldatov & Borogan, 2005).

### **Reforms on terrorism persecution**

In February 2005, Putin ordered the creation of federal and regional level Counterterrorism Committee (NAK). On 6 March 2006, Russia adopted new Federal Law No. 35-EZ "On Counteraction to Terrorism," which replaced the 1998 law. The new law codified all of the reforms mentioned above. The act of 2006 defines terrorism as "the practice of influencing decision-making by state and local agencies or international organizations by means of frightening the population or other forms of unlawful violent action, from terrorist activity (i.e., various forms of assistance, preparation, and instigation of terrorism), and terrorist acts (explosion, arson, hostage-taking, and other actions)." The Russian Federation, for the first time, defined terrorism, not a separate act of violence but a multifaceted social phenomenon designed to achieve political objectives (Omeliicheva, 2012). The new law, for the first time, brought all the agencies tasked with fighting terrorism under one single command. It created an operational headquarters for coordinating and executing anti-terrorism operations. An office of operational headquarters was placed with each NAK to monitor and enforce the decisions (Omeliicheva, 2012).

The 2006 law also went so far as to regulate the method of counteraction operation and selection of weaponry. It legalized the use of the military in counterterrorism operations. It legalized the use of the Russian army in Russia's inner waters and its sea limits as well as targeting terrorists and their hideouts abroad (Omeliicheva, 2012). As opposed to 1998 law 2006 prohibits giving any concessions to hostage-takers. It only permits negotiations for the sake of saving people's lives but, again, explicitly prohibits giving any political concessions to the terrorists. Only a negotiator appointed by the chief of the counterterrorism operation can negotiate with the terrorists. During the Beslan crisis, many civilians armed with light weapons stormed the school, creating a chaotic situation that negatively impacted the effectiveness of operation there. 2006 law also goes to length to legalize the temporary restrictions on individual rights and liberties to facilitate the execution of any such operation (Omeliicheva, 2012).

### **PESHAWAR SCHOOL MASSACRE**

On December 16, 2014, at 10 am in the morning 7 Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants carrying automatic weapons and chanting slogans of "Allah-hu-Akbar" (God is great) entered an army-run school (called Army Public School) in the garrison and restive city of Peshawar which is also capital of one of the provinces of Pakistan call Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa (KPK). They started indiscriminate firing on school children and other staff. Some of them went into an auditorium where students were taking an exam and started killing them. On their killing spree, they went room to room in search of children and adults. After 15 minutes, the Pakistan army commandos stormed the school compound, and a firefight ensued between terrorists and commandos. By the evening when the army declared the building cleared from the militants, at least 152 people had died, including 132 children ten school staff including school principal three soldiers and seven militants. One hundred others were injured, some of them critically. Most of the children killed were between 12 to 16 years old. Later on the day, TTP spokesman Mohammad Khurassani claimed the responsibility of the attack calling it revenge for the ongoing operation Zarb-e-Azb by the Pakistani military in different agencies of Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. World leaders, including US President Barak Obama and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, condemned the attack. Even Tehreek-e-Taliban Afghanistan condemned the attack

for its brutality (Saifi & Botelho, 2014). According to the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database, this is the largest terrorist attack in the history of Pakistan.

### **Pakistan's Counterterrorism Policy after Peshawar Attack**

The Peshawar attack was the largest terrorist attack in the history of Pakistan. It was one of the largest attacks involving children only second after Beslan school siege in Russia 2004 (Johnston, 15). On February 18<sup>th</sup> 2015 speaking at an event organized by United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Pakistan's interior minister Ch. Nisar Ali Khan said that this singular incident changed the mind of every Pakistani and this particular incident changed the mindset of even those who were against the military solution. He also mentioned that the Peshawar incident provided the opportunity for all political parties to get together, and even religious parties changed the policy. There has never been this kind of unity of purpose and focus, which has evolved in the length and breadth of the country (C-SPAN, 2015).

Before the attack on Peshawar school, Pakistan was already facing an acute terrorism problem, and the government was struggling to tackle it. In February 2014 Pakistani government started negotiations with TTP to convince them to lay down arms and stop activities against the state. Contrary to the expectations, these negotiations emboldened the TTP, which portrayed itself as a legitimate actor with whom the government is negotiating. The talks were going on and off when on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2014, TTP militants attack the Karachi international airport in which 40 people, including ten terrorists, were killed and dozens wounded (BBC News, 2014). This attack ended the negotiations between government and TTP, and on June 15<sup>th</sup> 2014, Pakistan military started operation against TTP in North Waziristan region of FATA. Also, the government passed the Pakistan Protection Act (PPA) in July 2014, giving vast discretionary powers to law enforcement personnel to detain and shoot suspected terrorists. At the time of the Peshawar school attack, the government of Nawaz Shareef was already under pressure due to staged sit-ins by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf and Pakistan Awami Tehreek outside the parliament house Islamabad. Both these political parties had joined hands to topple the government. At this time, the government was looking towards the army for its survival and had already ceded ground to the military regarding security and foreign policy (Rumi, 2015). After the attack, the army further pressurized the government and parliament to adopt a counterterrorism policy solely envisioned by the military (International Crisis Group, 2015). This shows that the military is the most influential actor in the agenda-setting stage regarding security policy in Pakistan.

An intensification of the operation Zarb-e-Azb was the natural consequence of the Peshawar school attack, so we cannot say it a policy change. The first step the government took was the lifting of the moratorium on the death penalty on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2015, the second day of the attack, which was enacted by the PPP government in 2008. On December 19<sup>th</sup> serving and retired bureaucrats, military and police officials, lawyers, civil society members and representatives of some political parties developed a National Action Plan (NAP) Framework. On December 25<sup>th</sup> PM Nawaz Shareef chairing a meeting of different political parties said, "Peshawar tragedy has transformed the country. We have to counter the terrorist mindset to curtail extremism and sectarianism" (The Nation, 2014). The salient features of Pakistan's counterterrorism after the Peshawar school attack are.

### **Lifting of the Moratorium on Death Penalty**

Just one day after the Peshawar school attack, the government of Pakistan lifted the moratorium on the death penalty enacted by Pakistan People's Party government in 2008. On 19<sup>th</sup> December 2014, just three days after the attack, Pakistan hanged two persons on terrorism charges. Since then, 299 people have been put to death, and the vast majority were not convicted of terror charges (BBC, 2015).

### **National Action Plan (NAP)**

The 20 point National Action Plan (NAP) was announced by Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on December 25, 2014, just nine days after the school attack. The main features of the National Action Plan are 1. Execution of convicted terrorists 2. Establishment of special trial courts 3. Ensure no armed militias are allowed to function in the country 4. Strengthening and activation of the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) 5. Countering hate speech and extremist material 6. Choking financing for terrorists and terrorist organizations 7. Ensuring against re-emergence of proscribed organizations 8. Establishing and deploying a dedicated counterterrorism force 9. Taking practical steps against religious persecution 10. Registration and regulation of madrassas 11. Ban on the glorification of terrorism and terrorist organizations through print and electronic media 12. FATA Reforms 13. Dismantling communication networks of terrorist organizations 14. Measures against abuse of internet and social media for terrorism 15. Zero tolerance for militancy in Punjab 16. Taking the ongoing operation in Karachi to its logical conclusion 17. Baluchistan reconciliation 18. Dealing firmly with sectarian terrorists 19. Policy to deal with the issue of Afghan refugees 20. Revamping and reforming the criminal justice system (National Counterterrorism Authority, 2015).

### **Counterterrorism Force**

A counterterrorism force is being established in all the provinces. This counterterrorism force (CTF) will be trained by military and counterterrorism experts from Turkey and other countries. Eight hundred corporals have been graduated till July 2015. They are trained to confront heavily armed groups and operate in a high-risk environment like barricaded buildings (International Crisis Group, 2015).

### **Military Courts**

Pakistan parliament passed the 21<sup>st</sup> amendment to the constitution on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2015, paving the way for the establishment of military courts. Nine military courts were established. The army was long pushing for the setting up of such courts because Pakistan's flawed justice system often fails to convict people detained on terrorism charges. Civilian courts are often unable to try terrorism suspects due to weak cases and threats to judges, prosecutors, and witnesses. On April 2, 2015, chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif approved the first death sentences given by military courts (International Crisis Group, 2015).

### **TESTING BOTH EVENTS ON BIRKLAND'S DEFINITIONS OF FOCUSING EVENTS**

As mentioned previously Birkland (1997) defines a focusing event as "an event that is sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or reveal the possibility of potentially greater future harm, inflict harms or suggest potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographical area or community of interest and that is known to policymakers and public virtually simultaneously."

If we judge both events according to the criteria outlined in Birkland's definition of focusing events, we can safely say that these events meet the definition of focusing events. Take the Beslan attack first. According to Boykewich (2005), "As parents and children gathered in the school's courtyard at 9:30 that morning, hijacked military personnel carriers roared in. At least 32 masked terrorists leaped out and quickly overwhelmed the few police officers who happened to be present before forcing over 1,000 people, adults, and children, into the school" this shows that the attack on the school was sudden. No one was expecting it; otherwise, there should have been visible security presence outside the school, or school would have been closed for some days. The attack was rare also. No such shooting in the history of Russia can be found where so many children are taken a hostage and later killed in a terrorist incident. There is no question that the attack was harmful. According to the Johnston archive compiled by Wm. Robert Johnston, the Beslan attack is the sixth-largest terrorist attack in the history of the world, and it is the deadliest attack on children in a school, so far. The attack was geographically limited to the school



concerned, so we can say that all the harms were aggregated in a single geographical area and affected a single community of interest. The attack also came in the knowledge of the public and policymakers simultaneously. Russian and world media started running the stories shortly after the people were taken, hostage. CNN, the BBC, and the Euronews were running live footage from the school when the fighting broke out (Boykewich, 2005).

The Peshawar school attack was also sudden. The TTP gunmen entered the school at 10:30 am and started indiscriminately killing children and staff. They entered the auditorium where the children were busy in exams and started firing on them without giving them a chance to hide or flee. The attack was rare as well. No such attack can be found in the history of Pakistan, where gunmen stormed a school and started killing children for political purposes. The attack was harmful without any doubt. Peshawar attack was the deadliest of all terrorist attacks in the history of Pakistan. (theguardian, 2014). Also, according to Johnston archive, the Peshawar school attack is the second deadliest school attack in the history of the world after the Beslan school siege. Like Beslan school siege, the attack was concentrated in a specific geographical area, i.e., the premises of the Army Public School Peshawar, so all the harms were aggregated in a single geographic area. Both national and international media started covering the incident one the same day, even when the army operation was still going on (Dearden, 2014).

The occurrence of both of the events was similar as both targeted school children in school premises resulting in deaths of mostly children. There is one significant difference. In Beslan, the terrorists took the people hostage and presented political demand, but in Peshawar, the terrorist just started killing people and later on accepted the responsibility saying that this is revenge for the army's ongoing operation in the tribal areas.

### **Media Coverage of the Events**

Both the events were rare and unexpected, resulting in significant harm to children who are universally considered innocent in all conflicts. This was the reason both the events got substantial media attention. Still, there was one significant difference the Russian media significantly took the line of the Russian regime and presented the facts as Kremlin wanted people to know, but that was not the case in Pakistan where media is significantly free.

At the time of Beslan, Russian was not unfamiliar with terrorism. Only days before the Beslan tragedy, the terrorists destroyed two civilian planes. But at Beslan, it was for the first time that children were taken a hostage and killed, so it drew tremendous media attention (Zaytseva, 2005). Izvestia, a Russian language newspaper with a broader audience in Russia, published on average five articles daily during September 2004. It published 15 articles on September 6, 2004, the first issue after the event (Zaytseva, 2005). Izvestia, in its coverage, presented Russian people as a symbol of innocence and good while Chechens as barbaric and evil. Izvestia also published pictures of children in pain to cement the narrative that terrorists are inhuman and cruel people (Zaytseva, 2005).

The state-owned Russian media mostly took the line of the regime. Rossiiskaya Gazeta, the state-owned newspaper, shifted the narrative from Chechnya to international Islamic terrorism emanating from the whole of the North Caucasus and threatening the very existence of the Russian state (Snetkov, 2007). Rossiiskaya Gazeta portrayed Russia as a vital partner to the west in the latter's fight against terrorism. It argued that the west should help Russia in its fight against terrorism, which can spread to other countries as well. The Russian state-owned TV channels Rossiia and Channel One, which have a reach to 93 percent of Russian households, delayed their coverage until 2 pm on the day the fighting started. Overall Russian media kowtowed to the instructions of Kremlin. Putin wanted media not to link the event with

Chechnya to show that his policies in Chechnya are a success. This can be judged from the fact that terrorist demands were on Putin's desk within ten minutes of the takeover of the school by militants, but Russian media reported that there were no demands (Boykewich, 2005).

In the overall Beslan incident received tremendous media coverage. Searching the phrase "Beslan school hostage crisis" gives 610 results on the website of Rossiiskaya Gazeta. Searching the incident on google.com with different phrases gives thousands of stories and images. The stories were run by all major newspapers and media outlets like the New York Times, The Washington Post, Time Magazine, BBC, CNN, The Guardian, and Telegraph, to name a few.

Pakistani media also gave tremendous attention to the Peshawar school attack. Pakistan's media enjoyed relative freedom when democracy was restored in Pakistan in 2007. Dawn is the most influential and has a wide readership in Pakistan's policymaking circles. On 17<sup>th</sup> December 2014, the next day of the attack, it published 12 stories about the attack. On 18<sup>th</sup> December it published 21 stories with all the headlines on the front page and national page about the attack. Pakistani TV channels were telecasting live from the school while the operation was going on. Both print and electronic media did not shy away from showing very graphic images of the children soaked in the blood. Overall I searched the phrase "Peshawar school attack" on google.com, on youtube.com, on dawn.com, and thenews.com. On google.com it generated 364000 results, on youtube.com it gave 16500 videos (these videos also include clips from top TV channels like ARY News, GEO TV, AAJ TV etc.), on dawn.com it generated 457 results and on thenews.com it gave 129 results. Replacing the word attack in the above phrase with word carnage gave 796 results on thenews.com. The news is the second most influential newspaper in Pakistan. The Pakistani media discussed the attacks from all aspects. Writers and columnists extensively wrote of state's policy regarding terrorism in the country. Questioning the effectiveness of intelligence agencies is very rare in Pakistan, but writers openly criticized intelligence failure in preventing the attack. Since Pakistan's then chief of army staff, General Raheel Sharif was famous for preparing an army to fight against terrorists, and on his orders army started operation Zarb-e-Azb in FATA following the Karachi Airport attack in June 2014 the media criticism was mainly directed towards the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif. Nawaz Sharif is considered as a center-right politician who had a soft corner for militants when he came to power in 2013. He started a negotiation process with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in February 2014, which resulted only in emboldened TTP, which attacked Karachi Airport in June 2014, resulting in a complete breakdown of talks. On both occasions, the Nawaz government was heavily criticized by the media for not taking a bold stance against TTP. The Army, under the leadership of Raheel Sharif, cashed this opportunity to get further concessions from a civilian government to consolidate its grip on security policy.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the above analysis, we can see that in both cases, the media played a significant role in shaping the policy discourse. In the Russian case, Putin used media to shape public opinion in the way he wanted. Russian media branded the Beslan attack as an international terrorist attack originating from North Caucasus and blamed the operational ineffectiveness of Russian security agencies in preventing and tackling the attack. Putin used this rhetoric to restructure the security services and also portray Russia as a partner of the west in the fight against global terrorism.

In Pakistan's case, the army was waiting for an opportunity to implement the policy it wanted. Peshawar attack and resulting media discourse opened a window for the military to almost take over the security policy in Pakistan. The Army was frustrated by the practically broken criminal justice system of Pakistan, so it pushed the government to legitimize the establishment of military courts. Pakistan Protection Act (PPA) and National Action Plan (NAP) both gave army sweeping powers and legal cover to take on the

terrorists. Peshawar attack and resulting media coverage eliminated whatever public sympathy terrorist was having among the religiously conservative public. The difference in both cases is that Putin used media to propagate his policy discourse and implemented the policy he was looking for. Pakistan army used the media discourse to legitimize its policy discourse and implemented it.

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