

Transnational Public Spheres via Strategic Policy Narratives: Afghanistan's Political Role in Chinese, Russian, and Iranian Media Discourses

Abstract

The Trump Administration's inconsistent efforts to bring democracy to Afghanistan in recent years opened discursive opportunities for Chinese, Russian, and Iranian media outlets to not only narrate America's interests in Afghanistan but also to construct the Afghani government and publics in ways that serve their foreign policy interests. While China's, Russia's, and Iran's national media narratives diverge, they also converge regarding the political role of Afghanistan's government and publics in rebuilding and stabilizing its political situation. Analyzing Afghani publics and institutions from the perspective of media narratives is key in understanding the changes and continuities in China's, Russia's, and Iran's short-term and long-term policy interest in Afghanistan. We argue that Washington's recent reversal from an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned policy to a policy that de-emphasizes the Afghan government and people in the peace-process created a rhetorical arena for Russian, Chinese, and Iranian media to strategically narrate Afghanistan's political future and thereby aid in the emergence of transnational public spheres.

Transnational public spheres research often occurs within the European context (Risse, 2010; Kantner, 2014, Rauchfleisch, 2017). Few studies examine the emergence of transnational public spheres outside of EU contexts and even fewer focus on foreign policy issues. We are bringing together insights from transnational public spheres research and media narrative research in order to reveal the political role of Afghanistan in Russian, Chinese, and Iranian media narratives. Foreign media narratives, which implicate publics and political institutions as actors of societal stability enable those publics to debate norms and goals for foreign policy conduct. While conflicting media narratives often speak to a realist or strategic understanding of communication with predetermined positions and interests, converging media narratives potentially open up opportunities for what Habermas refers to as communicative action, aiding in the construction of lifeworlds and publics (Habermas, 1984, 1987) and reflecting Wessler et al.'s (2010) second stage of emerging transnational public spheres.

This project analyzed Chinese, Russian, and Iranian media narratives concerning Afghanistan's political role through three phases: Phase I (May-June, 2018; 79 articles), Phase II, (July-August, 2018; 124 articles), Phase III (October-September, 2018; 180 articles). In total, the study analyzed 383 news articles from over 30 Russian, Iranian, and Chinese sources using the Media Monitoring System (M3S) and the Factiva online database. Preliminary findings suggest that Iran describes Afghanistan as a nation divided between the Taliban and the United States, with the role of the Afghani government shown as respectable, but often sidelined. Russian media present Afghanistan in constant chaos amid a power struggle between the US and Taliban. The Afghani government is shown as a puppet regime with little to no legitimacy, contrasted to the Taliban who are shown as a viable political and military body capable of making direct demands to the US. Finally, Chinese media present Afghanistan as a nation in the midst of failing US policies that have led to a practical reality of the Taliban being the de-facto ruling power that must be brought to the bargaining table in order to achieve stability.