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Constructing Legitimacy in War: A Comparative Narrative Analysis of Ukraine and Afghanistan

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Abstract

Understanding why some conflicts sustain global attention while others fade requires examining how legitimacy is constructed through narratives, making this study essential for analysing contemporary international responses to war. This study compares the Russia- Ukraine conflict (2022-2024) and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan (2019- 2021) to analyse how media and institutional narratives shape perceptions of legitimacy, responsibility, and moral urgency. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of over 70 secondary textual sources- including global and regional media coverage and official statements from international organisations such as the United Nations, NATO, and the European Union- the study employs a deductive coding framework centred on legitimacy, agency, moral framing, temporal framing, civilian portrayal, and the role of external actors. The findings reflect that while the Ukraine conflict is portrayed as an active sovereign resisting an aggressor generating sustained international support, the Afghanistan conflict is framed as concluded resulting in diminished external engagement reducing it to a humanitarian issue, highlighting how discourse, rather than material conditions alone, structures international political responses. By revealing how narratives shape divergent global responses to similar conflicts, the study contributes to post structural and constructivist theories in international relations highlighting the role of discourse in framing war legitimacy and determining which wars remain morally urgent and which fade into the aftermath.

Keywords: *War, Legitimacy, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Discourse, Conflicts, War Narratives, International Relations.*

Introduction

Constructing legitimacy in Ukraine and Afghanistan conflicts were constructed by various media outlets (Babae & Avcı, 2024),(Ajana et al., 2024), (Maley, 2023) (Latitudes - FR, n.d.-b) governmental and international institutions and with a comparative analysis of both conflicts to examine the distinct media and institutional narratives; The study investigated the media's discourses that legitimize diverse civilian portrayals in conflicts, examining how these narratives were created and had distinct temporal scopes, comprising and constructed through major global powers with differing ideologies, public and international reactions. The conflicts were depicted distinctively in media portrayals, despite the external actors in both instances having invaded the region for their own interests. While external actors like the US justified their invasion as a means of fostering peace and stability in the region, the media depicted it similarly rather than as an act of invasion. In contrast, Russia is more critically depicted by the media than the US in Afghanistan, and portrayed as an invading force attempting to seize territory in Ukraine.

Although the aid provided to Ukrainian refugees in comparison to Afghanistan refugees is worth noting. "Whether it is transportation, accommodation, administrative or medical assistance, rapid integration into the education system and all other essential areas, Ukrainian expatriates have been supported by the international community, at the expense of Afghanistan" (Latitudes - FR, n.d.). The Ukrainian conflict is still ferociously supported by the international community, a disparity is noted in the Afghanistan conflict where the attention diverted from the international humanitarian responses to withdrawal.



The temporal scope of this study covers Afghanistan from 2019 to 2021 tracing the period of the international withdrawal, precluding an examination of Afghanistan's history prior to the year 2000. For Ukraine, the period spans between 2022 and 2024 encompassing outbreak and consolidation of war. This research aims to fill the existing gap in the literature by performing a comparative study through the narrative lens of the conflict, framing legitimacy, agency, morality, civilian suffering and role of external actors.

The study employs the neutral term “conflict” for both cases rather than “war” as an analytical and methodological choice. It reflects the use of contested language in the case of Ukraine where Russia as a primary actor refrains from using the term “war” in its narrative. This allows for conceptual consistency across both case studies in analyzing construction of legitimacy through competing narratives.

There are few scholarly works on the construction of legitimacy of narratives through the lens of media but has not emphasised enough on the narratives through the institutions, governments while this study fills in the academic gap by comparing two distinct yet similar conflicts. This study addresses the research gap by comparatively analysing how legitimacy is constructed and contested through narratives in the Ukraine and Afghanistan conflicts. The study addresses the research questions of how local media frames the respective wars, legitimizing or delegitimizing Ukrainian and Afghanistan conflict? How do the narratives built by international media influence international response to these conflicts? And, how do international responses differ on these conflicts justifying intervention or withdrawal in respective conflicts based on larger strategic interests of global actors?

The study would proceed with different sections: Literature Review with the reviewing of past scholarly works, Research methodologies and Coding Scheme, Narrative Analysis of Ukraine and Afghanistan, Conclusion, References.

Literature Review

Racial and Geographical Biases in Conflict Narratives: some lives are worth more than others

Russia began its invasion of Ukraine from the east in February 2022, just a few months after the complete withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, following 20 years of occupation, in August 2021. The difference in how the international community treats both events highlights one undeniable fact: the reaction to conflicts is not motivated by concern for the common good or the magnitude of humanitarian crises, but rather by political, economic, and ideological interests and discourses, as well as prejudices based on race, religion and origin.

Sandro Colombo (2022), a former Medical Officer at the World Health Organisation (WHO) with field experience in several war-torn countries, including Afghanistan, Sudan, Iraq, and Palestine, compares media coverage, country action, and donor response to the conflict in Ukraine with other simultaneous conflicts. He begins with a comparison between the massacres in Bucha, Ukraine, and Moura, Mali, which had a similar number of civilian deaths and occurred on nearby dates, but while the former generated worldwide outrage had led to more sanctions against Russia, the latter was not even reported. Colombo argues that the “CNN effect” – the weight of media coverage on political agendas and public opinion – and geopolitical priorities are more influential in resource allocation and decision-making in conflicts than the magnitude of human tragedy, which in practice renders the humanitarian principle of impartiality irrelevant.



In the short article “Afghanistan and Ukraine; How two similar invasions triggered contradictory reactions?”, Abdullah Azzam, Chief of Staff of Afghanistan’s deputy PM for Economic Affairs office, highlighted the very different responses from the world after “[...] similar events to these unfolded in Afghanistan” took place in Ukraine. According to him, these different reactions are motivated by racial and geographical prejudices, arguing that war crimes would be investigated and sanctions applied, and the struggle for freedom legitimised, if the Afghans had blue eyes and blond hair or were located in the “civilised world”.

According to Lailuma Sadid (2022), Afghan journalist, “the people of Afghanistan are very critical of the international community” due to the lack of support, both at the time of the invasion in 2001 and with the Taliban’s seizure of power from 2021 onwards, which has been attacking women’s rights and freedom of expression in the country. She also argues that Ukrainian refugees were seen as innocent civilians, warmly welcomed and protected and integrated as much as possible, while refugees from Afghanistan were given the opposite treatment, even though they were also innocent and victims of invasion or interference by foreign powers.

Media Portrayals: a comparative analysis of the approach to refugees

Most academic works comparing media narratives on Ukraine and Afghanistan take the issue of refugees as their perspective. Ajana et al (2024) compare the coverage of the British newspapers BBC and The Sun on the Ukrainian, Syrian and Afghan refugee crisis in Europe. Overall, the main conclusion of the article was that, although humanitarian and moral frames were dominant, the resource frame was common when discussing Syrian or Afghan refugees, while it was absent in coverage of the Ukrainian refugee crisis. In short, the resource frame focuses on the financial cost of that situation, which generates concern in society about the economy and quality of life. The fact that this approach is used for one segment of refugees and not for another, which was primarily covered from a humanitarian perspective, conveys the message that just one of them is a burden to the nation.

Babae and Avci (2024) conducted a similar study, but with Turkey in perspective, based on an analysis of the newspapers Sabah and Sözcü. Sabah portrays Ukrainian refugees in an extremely positive light, mainly as victims saved by the generosity and heroism of the Turkish state and people. Coverage focuses on national self-glorification rather than the suffering of the refugees themselves. In contrast, Afghan refugees receive little attention and are largely portrayed from a security perspective, associated with illegality, crime and irregular migration. Sözcü offers broader and more frequent coverage of both groups, but still reproduces obvious prejudices. Ukrainian refugees are generally portrayed in a neutral to sympathetic light, with attention paid to their suffering and the vulnerability of women. Afghan refugees, however, are predominantly depicted negatively, often as illegal migrants linked to crime and insecurity. Although Sözcü publishes more articles about Afghans than Sabah, it rarely humanises them and similarly ignores the experiences of Afghan women.

Synthesis and Research Gap

There are few truly academic works focusing on comparing narratives covering the issues of Ukraine and Afghanistan, with most texts sharing the spotlight between Afghanistan and other non-European countries versus Ukraine, and with the refugee and humanitarian issues being the main focal points in general. Although there is a relatively good amount of work that focuses on the media perspective (comparative newspaper coverage), it was not possible to find any work that examines the response of governments and international organisations, such as the United Nations. This paper is justified by its contribution in bringing a broader perspective to the subject, using media, governments, and international organisations to carry out a comparative study, as well as going beyond looking at the human aspect of the matter and addressing in depth the ambiguity of how the question of legitimacy is treated on both sides.



Theoretical Framework

Theories

This work is grounded in Critical Theory, Constructivism, and Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model due to their role in international relations in questioning dominant ideas and proposing alternative approaches to analysing political and social phenomena, with the latter focusing on the role of the media in this scenario. Robert Cox's Critical Theory expanded the range of central themes in international relations beyond security and foreign policy agendas, also prioritising concepts and themes such as hegemony, emancipation and inequality. In the 1980s, a period of transition in the global order, dominant conservative theories, such as realism, were no longer able to explain systemic changes and address phenomena such as terrorism, poverty, and the nuclear threat, which were beyond the scope of classical political agendas. Cox seeks to understand how vertical power relations occur in the international system, where rich and powerful states dominate weaker ones, approaching the debates of imperialism theories and bringing the Gramscian concept of hegemony to international relations. (NOGUEIRA & MESSARI, 2005, pp. 132-133; 142-143).

The maxim of Constructivism is that the world is socially constructed. Beyond politics and economics, ideas, discourses, and beliefs play a causal role in international politics, shaping how states act and behave. These positions, because they are not inherent but rather constructions, are subject to change over time according to interests, which would explain the shifting opinions of countries. In "World of Our Makings - Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations", Nicholas Onuf argues that politics is concerned with distributive asymmetries of power and their consequences. According to Onuf, social relations generate unequal distribution of power and create conditions for political domination of different kinds. (NOGUEIRA & MESSARI, 2005, pp. 162; 174-175).

In their book "Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media", Herman and Chomsky argue that, in a world dominated by income inequality and conflicts of interest, the role of the media goes far beyond simply communicating with the public – it is intrinsically linked to propaganda that serves the interests of the ruling class. By leaning to one side, one inevitably marginalises the other. The authors argue that this process, although actually embedded with the intention of influencing public opinion, is done so naturally that the public does not notice it and believes that it is forming its opinion independently - one must look beyond to see the patterns of manipulation and bias. (CHOMSKY & HERMAN, 2008, pp. 61-62).

In the Propaganda Model, Herman and Chomsky also highlight the contrast between "worthy" and "unworthy" victims. The first group consists of victims of states antagonistic to the United States. Their suffering is widely reported in the media and humanised, raising questions about morality and commitment to human life, even justifying military interventions 'in the name of the greater good'. The second group, on the other hand, victims of the United States, or its allies, or even of actions that align with US foreign policy, are often dehumanised and ignored - their suffering invalidated. From the perspective of this work, Ukrainians would be worthy victims, while Afghans would be unworthy ones. In short, those who do not serve to preserve the status quo are treated as statistics. (CHOMSKY & HERMAN, 2008, pp. 97-103).

Building on these theoretical foundations, this study conceptualises legitimacy as a discursively constructed and temporally mediated phenomenon. Rather than being based solely on legality or moral justification, legitimacy is sustained or eroded through narrative structures over time. Temporal framing is central to this process. It does not simply locate events in time but shapes how conflicts are understood in terms of past causes, present urgency, and future trajectories, thereby determining whether they remain politically actionable or are perceived as concluded.



This study introduces narrative closure as a key mechanism linking temporal framing to international disengagement. Narrative closure refers to the discursive construction of a conflict as resolved or exhausted, even when violence or instability persists. This shifts the conflict from a space of political urgency to one of humanitarian aftermath or historical memory. From a Constructivist perspective, this reflects how meanings evolve through discourse; from a Critical Theory lens, it highlights how powerful actors delimit the temporal horizon of responsibility, effectively deciding when a war “ends.” In Afghanistan, temporal framing around a “20-year war” and “closing a chapter” produces a sense of inevitability and completion, enabling a shift from intervention to withdrawal and reducing international engagement. In contrast, Ukraine is framed through an open temporality marked by continuity and uncertainty, which sustains its position as an active moral and political priority and legitimises ongoing support.

The Instrumentalization of Legitimacy

In “Legality and Legitimacy in the International Order” (2007) and “Legality and Legitimacy in Global Affairs” (2012), the authors argue that the abuse of the concept of legitimacy by global powers for geopolitical purposes poses significant structural risks to the international order. The main danger lies in the subordination of international law to geopolitical logic, where “legitimacy” is used as a self-assigned label to validate selfish goals.

Resorting to so-called legitimacy to ignore legality can weaken respect for international norms and the UN Charter. As the authors note, what is seen as “constructive flexibility” (as in the intervention in Kosovo) can quickly turn into a mechanism for abuse (as in the 2003 invasion of Iraq) (Popovski & Turner, 2007, p.2). Without democratic processes or clear legal texts to back them up, legitimacy becomes fluid and open to ideological manipulation and self-interest.

More harmful than violating the law is attempting to reshape it through unilateral manipulation. Examples cited include the use of terms such as “illegal enemy combatant” or “torture warrants” (Popovski & Turner, 2007, p.5), which aim to give an appearance of legality to inherently illegitimate acts, undermining the basic premises of humanitarian norms.

In conclusion, the rejection of legality in favor of subjective legitimacy often leads to human suffering and instability in the global order.

Discursive categories

To analyse the narratives selected for this study, we used categories already established in qualitative research, particularly for discourse analysis, framing analysis, and narrative analysis. These concepts help us to frame the news, statements and actions of the actors we examine (governments, media and international organisations), supporting our hypothesis of a double standard for dealing with international conflicts. They are mainly supported by Constructivism and Critical Theory discussed here, as well as other theories that similarly challenge the establishment, such as Postcolonialism and Feminist Theory. These analytical dimensions are also useful in helping us identify the bias described in the Propaganda Model.

The categories used were:

Legitimacy: Thomas Franck (1990, p. 19) defines legitimacy as the perception of those affected that the dominant force operates in accordance with principles commonly accepted as correct. In this sense, the actors involved seek to ensure legitimacy for their actions by presenting them as rightful (moral and legal) and necessary.



Agency: identifies how the agents involved are represented and positioned within the narratives – active vs. passive, with decision-making power vs. without decision-making power, aggressor vs. merely responding, among other dualities.

Temporal framing: chronology used to justify and legitimise a narrative – for example, it argues on the basis of past injustices, present threats and future consequences if something is not done now.

Moral framing: intends to define what is evil (wrong) and what is good (right). In this context, Michael Walzer (2006, p.15-20), in “Just and Unjust War”, draws attention to the hypocrisy of politicians and military personnel who know they are being immoral, but use subterfuge to make it appear otherwise. They assume that the public has a common moral understanding. If the world were governed solely by brutal realism, leaders would simply be frank about their intentions. However, they strive to appear to be acting justly because they know that morality has real meaning for people. When they lie, they describe it to make it seem fair, because they need their actions to appear morally appropriate to the public. Walzer says “Wherever we find hypocrisy, we also find moral knowledge”.

Civilian portrayal: focus on how the image of civilians is constructed, a perspective commonly used in studies of refugees and civilians in war zones.

External actors: through this perspective, we can analyse how actors who are not directly involved, such as foreign states and international organisations, are treated: as legitimate authorities or illegitimate interference.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyse how legitimacy in war is discursively constructed through media and institutional narratives. The research employs a comparative narrative analysis, focusing on two globally significant conflicts: the Ukraine conflict and the Afghanistan conflict - to identify patterns of narrative construction across contexts to enhance analytical depth. This methodology is particularly suitable as it enables the systematic examination of narrative framing and power embedded in language within international relations discourse.

The Ukraine and Afghanistan cases were selected through a purposive comparative design focusing on conflicts within defined temporal periods (2019–2021; 2022–2024) marked by active international engagement. Both cases involve significant foreign intervention and a central role of the United States, providing a common analytical basis, while differing in military capability and geopolitical importance- Ukraine as a relatively stronger state with external support, and Afghanistan as a weaker, dependent state. Other conflicts were not included as they either lacked comparable levels of global institutional engagement or did not exhibit similar intensity of narrative contestation across media and international actors. This comparative logic aligns with case selection strategies in qualitative research that prioritise analytical leverage through both similarity and variation (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007).

The temporal scope captures critical phases of each conflict: the withdrawal and aftermath in Afghanistan (2019–2021), and the outbreak, consolidation, and emerging donor fatigue in Ukraine (2022–2024).



The research context includes Global news agencies (Reuters, Associated Press, Agence France-Presse), Western (CNN, BBC), Middle Eastern (Al- Jazeera), and local media (where relevant), along with official statements from international organisations such as the United Nations, European Union, and NATO. These sources were selected based on their agenda setting role shaping global understanding of conflicts and influencing diplomatic, humanitarian, and military responses.

Data Sources and Sampling Strategy

The study relies exclusively on secondary textual data, defined as written or spoken communication that conveys meaning through language and can be systematically analysed to interpret social and political realities (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select texts that were most relevant to the research questions and analytical framework.

Purposive sampling is widely endorsed in qualitative research as an appropriate method for intentionally selecting information-rich cases that illuminate the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2014; Palinkas et al., 2015). Rather than statistical representativeness, the study prioritises thematic relevance, narrative richness, and discursive significance. Thus purposive sampling enabled the deliberate selection of information-rich texts directly relevant to the study's focus, enhancing the depth and interpretive validity of the analysis.

Texts were included if they directly addressed the Ukraine or Afghanistan conflict, were published between Feb 2022 and Nov 2024 for Ukraine and between 2019- 2021 for Afghanistan. Texts that contained explicit or implicit references to legitimacy, responsibility, morality, or international response based on our chosen codes and keywords related to these codes and were produced by chosen media outlets or international institutions were also included.

This approach mirrors established qualitative research methods, where relevance-based selection enhances interpretive validity.

Analytical Framework and Coding Scheme

The analysis is based on a dataset of over 70 textual sources compiled from media and institutional platforms. A qualitative coding approach, inspired by NVivo-style thematic analysis, was employed to systematically organise and interpret the data. While NVivo software is commonly used for qualitative data analysis, this study utilised a structured manual coding process replicating NVivo's core functions by organising textual excerpts into predefined analytical nodes, ensuring consistency, traceability, and methodological transparency. It was supplemented by elements of discourse analysis, to examine how meaning, legitimacy, and authority are constructed through language. Narrative analysis focuses on how events are organized into coherent storylines, while discourse analysis examines the power relations and normative assumptions embedded in those narratives.

A deductive coding framework was developed based on existing literature on legitimacy, media framing, and conflict narratives. These codes aid us to frame the news, statements and actions of the actors we examine (governments, media and international organisations).

Six core analytical codes guided the analysis:



Codes			
Code	Definition	Key indicators	Examples
LEGITIMACY	Discursive strategies used to legitimise or delegitimise actions in war	Is war framed as legal, moral, necessary , defensive or humanitarian?	“Unprovoked invasion”, “defending sovereignty”, “counter- terrorism”
AGENCY	Attribution of responsibility or initiative within the narratives	Who is portrayed as having the power to act or take decisions	Ukraine as defender , Russia as aggressor, West as supporter, Afghanistan as dependent, West as saviour
TEMPORAL FRAMING	Placement of conflict in time	Is the conflict sudden, ongoing, concluded, exhausted	“As long as it takes”, “20 years” ,, “enduring”, “concluded” “inevitable outcome”
MORAL FRAMING	Ethical language and value judgements	Are good/evil, victim/ perpetrator framing used to justify or delegitimise war	War crimes, human rights violations, justice, path to peace
CIVILIAN PORTRAYAL	Focus on how the image of civilians is constructed, a perspective commonly used in studies of refugees and civilians in war zones	Are civilians victimised, resilient, visible or marginal?	Casualties, humanitarian crisis, resilient actors, refugees
EXTERNAL ACTORS	Role of third party states and institutions as legitimate authorities or illegitimate interference.	How are EU, UN, NATO, US, or others positioned	Peacekeepers, security protectors, enablers, escalators, donors, supporters, saviours



Coding Procedure and Analytical Process

The coding process followed a systematic approach. First, texts were selected for each media outlet and international institution based on their relevance according to context and scope. Second, they were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with context and tone. Third, key excerpts were identified and assigned to the six analytical codes, functioning as thematic nodes. Where narratives overlapped, multiple codes were applied to preserve analytical nuance. While the framework was deductive, contextual variation and narrative shifts across time and actors were taken into account.

Although conducted manually, this process mirrored NVivo's node-based coding and thematic clustering, enabling systematic comparison across sources. Patterns were then identified within and across cases to trace how legitimacy narratives evolved, converged, or diverged across media and institutional contexts. This approach aligns with qualitative content analysis methods that combine theoretical guidance with close textual interpretation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To enhance credibility and transparency, coding criteria were clearly defined prior to analysis, and interpretations were based on direct textual evidence. The use of multiple media outlets and institutional sources enabled source triangulation, strengthening analytical rigor.

To conclude, by combining qualitative narrative analysis with purposive sampling and a theoretically informed coding framework, the methodology enables a nuanced examination of how legitimacy in war is constructed discursively. This approach is particularly suited to international relations research, where narratives, norms, and institutional discourse play a decisive role in shaping global political outcomes.

Analysis

Ukraine Narrative Analysis

The escalation of the Ukrainian conflict (2022-2024) can be considered an unambiguous Constructivist construction in which legitimacy is not only questioned through active military conflict but is consciously crafted using the "sovereignty-resistance" binary. Utilizing Nvivo-style coding thematic prevalence, this analysis reveals that whereas the story about Afghanistan was linguistically deconstructed via its transformation into managed decline and narrative closure, the language of the Ukrainian conflict is strengthened by its conceptualization as a matter of active agency and a temporal framing of indefinite endurance.

At the **local level**, the Ukrainian authorities employed declarative language to transform the geopolitical dilemma into an existential fight for national survival, exercising agency to integrate the state into the international legal framework. This is evident through their constant emphasis on "territorial integrity and sovereignty" (RNBO, 2019) which defines Ukraine as a legitimate actor of international law. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy (2024) demonstrated agency by ruling out a ceasefire, stating that Kremlin's forces would weaponise any hiatus to "rearm" (AP News, 2024). It is evident from the described approach that preventive self-defence is used as a legitimization strategy, which makes the state an important strategic player as opposed to a passive recipient of international help.



On the other hand, Russian domestic rhetoric depends on discourse of mitigation and justification. It utilizes euphemisms like “special military operation” (The Kremlin, 2022) and “denazify” of Ukraine (The Kremlin, 2022), which allows Vladimir Putin to create an alternative reality in which military actions become a defensive necessity. This narrative is additionally reinforced by calling for “security guarantees” (NIDS). From the perspective of Critical Theory, the above-mentioned linguistic construction can be regarded as a way of externalizing blame, which targets NATO in order to create a defensive identity.

The **Western** executive branch has institutionalized the temporal framing of the conflict as a protracted reality, a direct contradiction to the 20-year time span which was instrumental in making the decision for the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan. This framing technique has been facilitated by the Propaganda Model, which advocates an alignment of ideology, with the “Russian invasion” (Fella, s., 2022) viewed as a “tectonic shift in European history” (Fella, s., 2022), warranting a preservation of the “rules-based order.” (Fella, s., 2022). President Joe Biden (2023) lent further agency to this stance when he pledged his commitment to continue supporting the Ukraine “for as long as it takes” (CBC, 2023) during his visit to Kyiv. At the same time, the EU resorted to moral framing to construct Ukraine's “fortitude and determination” as part of its “shared European values” (European Council, 2024). Nevertheless, this logic of endurance faces growing pressure from “donor fatigue.” This trend was underscored in reports on an emerging “tiredness” of the partners (Reuters, 2023), with Ukrainian Finance Minister Serhiy Marchenko observing that it takes “twice the effort” now, since “some countries would like to forget about the war,” owing to their “internal political context” and pending elections (Reuters, 2023).

The **international news agencies** such as Reuters, AP, and AFP have established a narrative of attributional symmetry by becoming epistemic arbiters and allowing competing legitimacy claims to coexist. Whereas the fall of Kabul was filled with “panic”, the civilian depiction in the case of Ukraine is framed around “resilience” representing national survival. Through “strategic communications,” the narrative is built using nominalization in order to maintain the institutional power structure and reduce the military dynamics to theoretical ideas of “territorial integrity” (European Council). However, although the lexical strength related to the plight of the civilians is still significant, it is now being channeled through the sustainability discourse based on resource constraints. According to Martin Griffiths (2024), the “brutal truth” of humanitarian programs lies in their need to “prioritise” and compete for diminishing funding (Reuters). Hence, the new discourse shifts focus from victimhood emotions to an institutional perspective of managed support, creating a hierarchy wherein the Western external agents are presented as overstretched enablers rather than retreating powers.

Institutional actors including the UN and NATO produce the conflict through a discursive framework of legality and security. NATO describes the conflict as a “full-scale invasion” carried out in “blatant violation” of the UN Charter, using the capacity of the organization as the vanguard of international legality. They also add to this construction by defining the war as an act of “illegal, unjustifiable and unprovoked,” positioning the Alliance as the guardian of the normative community ensuring transatlantic stability. This dense layering of the representation of sovereignty with democratic resilience serves the purpose of constructing the moral authority necessary for collective action. In contrast to the strategic void created in Afghanistan, Ukraine is coded in linguistic terms as the front line of democracy, despite donor fatigue and the production of a conditional legitimacy which continuously requires reassertion because of “billions of dollars worth of weapons” (Reuters, 2024).



Ultimately, the Ukraine conflict represents how discourse can be constructed via selective application of sustainment and narrative openings. The NVivo-style coding reveals that these processes are underpinned by high prevalence of both Legitimacy (10) and Moral Framing (9). This is how the discourse is entrenched in “European values” and in the discourse of legal judgment. Unlike the closed linguistic discourse of the Afghan war story based on the theme of exhaustion, the Ukraine war story is built upon the timeline of endurance. Here, Temporal Framing (5) and Agency (6) move attention from an episodic problem to the issue of national “resilience.” Within this framework, Civilian Portrayal (4) shifts its focus from Afghan-style victimization towards that of resistance, thereby emphasizing the image of a population able to resist consistently.

Expressions such as “as war enters its second year” (Reuters, 2023) become part of an effort to make the endurance of the battle the norm, transforming a temporary problem into a more permanent political issue. External Actor code (8) emphasizes how military assistance is linked to the “struggle for freedom,” not just humanitarian aid. The move from crisis outrage to endurance politics helps provide justifications for sustained interventions amid domestic instability. Through repositioning of discourses from duty to protect to a struggle for freedom, the world has been able to elevate Ukraine as a system problem, which allows them to shift focus without concern about donor fatigue.

Afghanistan Narrative Analysis

The withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan (2019-2021) marks the transition towards Constructivism, wherein legitimacy is challenged through the issue of both military defeat and linguistic shifts that have taken place in the process. Unlike the dichotomy in Ukraine of sovereignty and resistance, the linguistic change in Afghanistan has gone through the stages of active agency to moral framing and collapse, traced via Nvivo-style coding of temporal framing, lexical intensity, and civilian portrayal.

At the **local level**, temporal framing was used by the government of Afghanistan to portray this withdrawal as a natural progression toward autonomy. Ashraf Ghani, the former president of Afghanistan, exercised agency by announcing on Twitter (now X) that “Afghanistan’s proud security and defense forces are fully capable of defending its people.” Here, declarative lexis was used to frame a state of readiness, thereby positioning the state as an active and capable subject. However, this agency was replaced by moral framing and civilian reclassification after the fall of Kabul. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, employed theological framing when he said, “God will hold him[Ghani] to account” (Al Jazeera, 2021). This marked a shift from political to moral authority, where legitimacy is no longer tied to any institution but to morality. At the same time, civilian representation was enhanced through high lexical intensity, with reports emanating from the West of scenes of bank crowds, “panic,” people who “headed for the airport,” and those who “making their way on foot”, “have blisters”, “difficult to stand.” The testimonies, such as “my family-they don’t have any way to escape” and “I don’t see a future” (BBC, 2021), work as narrative positioning devices, placing Afghans not as political actors, but as subjects of despair. This illustrates a transformation in representational density, where Afghans, through being associated with fear, trauma, and uncertainty, are constructed as a passive victim. Unlike in Ukraine, where the transition was linguistically coded as a gritty fight, in Afghanistan, it was a *betrayal*, illustrating a transformation from agency to victimhood.



At the western level, the U.S. executive branch simultaneously utilized temporal framing to create narrative closure through compartmentalization of the conflict as a 20-year long chapter. This is consistent with the Propaganda Model's emphasis on national interest, where framing disengagement as a completed chapter creates a legitimate endpoint, not a failure. President Joe Biden (2021) utilized agency framing to emphasize decision-making, where he stated he would not “pass this responsibility to the fifth” president. This assertion of agency, however, also utilized distancing, where State Department spokesman Ned Price (2021) utilized framing to create an “Afghan-owned and Afghan-led” future. This simultaneously creates a dual coding effect, where agency is retained at the level of decision-making, yet responsibility for outcomes is displaced externally. The subsequent failure, where forces surrendered without firing a shot, is pre-structured as a local failure. This illustrates the direct relationship between temporal framing and narrative closure, allowing for disengagement as a logical endpoint of a completed time period.

At the **global level**, international news agencies such as Reuters, AP, and AFP have employed a restrained narrative that focuses on the operationalization of civilian portrayal and lexical intensity, along with the diffusion of agency through nominalization. The emphasis on terms such as “humanitarian catastrophe,” “economic meltdown,” and “security conditions” serves to transform political failure into abstract states. At the same time, lexical intensity is concentrated on descriptions of civilian experience, such as war-weary population, precarious state of security, and “third successive generation of children is being traumatized.” Thus, there is a clear hierarchy of representation in which Afghan actors are related to political collapse, such as “fled,” “WE NEED HELP,” “suffering,” “daunting mix of hope and fear.,” in contrast to Western actors, who are related to “withdrawing.” From the perspective of Critical Theory, this can be understood in terms of structural power relations in which Western actors have discursive legitimacy even in withdrawal. The concentration of intensity on humanitarian suffering rather than political failure serves to facilitate a form of narrative closure in which the conflict can be reframed as a crisis to be managed.

This is further emphasized in the discourse of **international narrative** of the external actors such as the UN, the EU, and the NATO, which utilize a technocratic language focusing on words such as “human rights,” “rule of law,” “peace,” and “support to the people of Afghanistan.” Narratives including words such as “incredible fear” (UN Women, cited in Reuters, 2021), which amplify the humanitarian discourse, still remain within the institutional language emphasizing the importance of continuity. The bureaucratic lexis minimizes the level of political contestation and positions the situation within the discourse of humanitarian management, which is again emphasized by the closure established in the temporal framing.

This closure is challenged by the intensified moral framing and representational density of the regional outlets, such as the UAE-based Gulf News and Iranian-based Tehran Times. Their narratives, which frame the event as an “occupation” and reference the ‘graveyard of empires’ metaphor (Gulf News, 2021), mobilize temporal framing not as closure, but as the repetition of failure. Furthermore, the Tehran Times describes the withdrawal as the “worst-ever defeat,” using the pair “retreating”, “failure”, and “cowardice” to achieve the sustained delegitimization of the U.S. power. Lexical intensity is high compared to the Western narratives, with responsibility explicitly attributed. Moreover, the repeated reference to the U.S. as the agent of “failure”, “confusion”, and “credibility has been damaged,” which is characteristic of the **Middle Eastern narratives**, increases the density of representation, supporting the discourse of hegemonic decline. Unlike the Western narratives, which frame the event in relation to the humanitarian consequences, the narratives discussed here maintain Afghanistan in the geopolitical frame, refusing to allow the event to be closed.



In conclusion, the Afghanistan case study shows how discourse is formed by the dynamic interconnection between temporality, agency, lexicality, and representation. The use of NVivo-style coding, applied on a total of 38 articles, shows that there has been a clear shift of discourse wherein Legitimacy (14) and Civilian Portrayal (15) became the two predominant issues, reflecting a shift in focus from statebuilding to institutional breakdown. Although Agency (8) was initially represented in the context of state-capability, it quickly disintegrated into Moral Framing (10) and betrayal, redefining the people of Afghanistan as victims of humanitarian disaster.

This data provides a clear distinction that while the Ukrainian case can be characterized as an ongoing conflict that requires engagement using the framework of sovereignty-resistance, the Afghanistan case saw the creation of a discourse that was eventually closed using the dynamics of temporality, humanitarianism, and victimhood. At the Western governmental level, Temporal Framing (6) was used for narrative closure purposes by appealing to the 20-year war argument to lay the blame on the shoulders of the “Afghan-led” future in an effort to withdraw. By contrast, the regional discourse and international organizations have relied heavily on External Actor (9), including such keywords as “occupation” and “strategic failure,” to undermine the closure and to question its legitimacy and attribution of responsibilities. This highlights the idea that legitimacy is not lost but rather re-established during the construction of the discourse, whereby closure represents a tool of power that decides whether the conflict will have political relevance or humanitarian consequence.

Comparative Narrative Analysis Across the Ukraine and Afghanistan Conflicts

The comparative analysis of the Ukraine and Afghanistan conflicts demonstrates that legitimacy in war is not an inherent or material condition but a discursively produced outcome shaped through the strategic deployment of language, narrative structure, and representational hierarchies. While both conflicts involve foreign intervention, geopolitical stakes, and significant humanitarian consequences, their narrative constructions diverge across multiple discursive dimensions—particularly legitimacy, agency, temporal framing, lexical intensity, civilian portrayal, and the positioning of external actors. These divergences are not incidental but systematically produced, resulting in unequal regimes of visibility, urgency, and international engagement.

At the core of this divergence lies the construction of legitimacy, which is discursively stabilised in the Ukraine conflict but progressively dismantled in the Afghanistan case. In the Ukraine narrative, legitimacy is anchored in a sovereignty–resistance paradigm, consistently reinforced through legal and moral language such as “unprovoked invasion,” “territorial integrity,” and “self-defence.” These lexical choices do not merely describe events but actively situate Ukraine within the normative framework of international law and liberal democratic values. From a Constructivist perspective, such language constructs Ukraine as a legitimate subject of international politics, while Critical Theory reveals how this legitimacy is reinforced through alignment with dominant global norms shaped by Western power structures. In contrast, the Afghanistan narrative reflects a transition from an initial attempt at legitimacy construction—through assertions of capability and autonomy—to its eventual erosion through discursive closure. The reframing of the conflict as a completed “20-year chapter” replaces legitimacy with finality, shifting the narrative from political contestation to historical exhaustion. This demonstrates that legitimacy is not simply lost but actively reconstituted through temporal and narrative strategies that redefine the terms of engagement.



The distribution and stability of agency further illuminate this contrast. In the Ukraine conflict, agency is clearly structured and consistently maintained. Ukraine is positioned as an active and resilient defender, Russia as the identifiable aggressor, and Western actors as supportive allies operating within a framework of collective responsibility. This clarity is achieved through active syntactic constructions and direct attribution of responsibility, which sustain both accountability and moral coherence. In Afghanistan, however, agency undergoes fragmentation and displacement. Afghan actors initially occupy positions of autonomy and readiness, as seen in declarations of military capability, but are subsequently reconstituted as passive subjects through narratives of collapse, panic, and abandonment. Simultaneously, Western actors retain meta-agency by controlling the timing and framing of withdrawal while discursively displacing responsibility through formulations such as “Afghan-led future.” This dual coding mechanism allows for the retention of decision-making authority while externalising the consequences of that decision. The result is an asymmetrical distribution of agency, where one conflict sustains political subjectivity while the other dissolves it.

Temporal framing emerges as one of the most decisive discursive mechanisms shaping the comparative narrative. In the Ukraine conflict, time is constructed as open, continuous, and unresolved. The repeated emphasis on ongoing aggression, future uncertainty, and sustained resistance creates a sense of urgency that keeps the conflict within the active horizon of international politics. This open temporality facilitates continued intervention, support, and moral engagement. In contrast, the Afghanistan conflict is framed through a closed temporality, where the withdrawal signifies an endpoint rather than a transition. The emphasis on duration—“20-year war”—produces a narrative of fatigue and inevitability, transforming the conflict into a completed historical episode. This temporal closure functions as a mechanism of disengagement, allowing political responsibility to be replaced by humanitarian management. Thus, while Ukraine is narratively sustained as a present crisis, Afghanistan is relegated to the past, demonstrating how temporal framing determines whether a conflict remains politically relevant.

The role of lexical intensity and representational density further differentiates the two narratives. In the Ukraine case, lexical choices are both emotionally charged and politically precise, combining high-intensity descriptors with clear attribution of responsibility. Civilians are portrayed through vivid and personalised accounts that emphasise resilience, suffering, and moral worth, thereby reinforcing their position as “worthy victims” within the Propaganda Model. This high representational density ensures that civilian suffering is not abstract but politically consequential, strengthening the legitimacy of continued engagement. In contrast, the Afghanistan narrative demonstrates a shift toward abstraction and bureaucratisation. Terms such as “humanitarian crisis,” “economic collapse,” and “vulnerable populations” depoliticise suffering by transforming it into a condition to be managed rather than a consequence to be contested. Even where lexical intensity is present—through words like “panic,” “fear,” or “trauma”—it is oriented toward depicting civilians as passive recipients of crisis rather than active participants in political processes. This reduction in representational density contributes to the marginalisation of Afghan civilians within global discourse, reinforcing their status as “unworthy victims.”

The positioning of **external actors** reveals the operation of structural power relations within both narratives. In the Ukraine conflict, Western actors are constructed as legitimate defenders of international order, with their involvement justified through legal and moral discourse. Institutions such as NATO, the European Union, and the United States are positioned as protectors of sovereignty and stability, and their actions are framed as necessary, principled, and aligned with universal norms. This reflects the Constructivist reproduction of shared meanings as well as the Critical Theoretical insight that dominant actors shape the boundaries of legitimacy.



In Afghanistan, however, external actors are discursively contested. Western narratives frame withdrawal as strategic, responsible, and inevitable, thereby preserving legitimacy despite the outcome. In contrast, regional narratives—particularly from Middle Eastern sources—deploy high lexical intensity to construct withdrawal as “failure,” “retreat,” or “cowardice,” explicitly attributing responsibility and challenging Western authority. This divergence highlights the existence of competing discursive regimes, where dominant narratives seek to maintain legitimacy while counter-narratives attempt to expose its contradictions.

The dimension of **moral framing** further consolidates the asymmetry between the two conflicts. The Ukraine narrative is characterised by a clear ethical binary, distinguishing sharply between aggressor and victim through terms such as “war crimes,” “invasion,” and “defence of democracy.” This binary simplifies complex geopolitical realities into a morally intelligible framework that facilitates international alignment and intervention. In Afghanistan, however, moral framing is diffuse and ambiguous. The narrative shifts away from clear judgments toward a language of regret, inevitability, and humanitarian concern. The absence of a strong moral binary weakens the capacity for sustained engagement, allowing the conflict to be reframed as a tragic but concluded episode rather than an ongoing injustice. This demonstrates that moral clarity is not an objective feature of conflict but a product of discursive construction that shapes political response.

Another crucial dimension of comparison lies in the **interaction between discourse and power hierarchies**, as highlighted by Critical Theory. In the Ukraine case, dominant Western narratives align with institutional power structures, ensuring their widespread circulation and acceptance. In Afghanistan, however, the fragmentation of narrative authority—between Western, global, and regional perspectives—reveals the instability of legitimacy when it is no longer supported by coherent discursive reinforcement. The ability of Western actors to redefine withdrawal as strategic rather than failed illustrates how power operates not only through material capability but through control over narrative meaning. At the same time, the persistence of counter-narratives demonstrates that legitimacy remains contested, even when dominant actors attempt to stabilize it.

Taken together, these comparative dimensions illustrate that the divergence in international response between Ukraine and Afghanistan is fundamentally rooted in narrative construction rather than purely material differences. Ukraine is sustained within a discursive framework of urgency, legitimacy, and collective responsibility, ensuring its continued centrality in global politics. Afghanistan, by contrast, is relegated to a framework of closure, crisis management, and diminished agency, resulting in its marginalisation. Among the various discursive mechanisms analysed, temporal framing and moral framing emerge as the most decisive, as they determine whether a conflict is perceived as ongoing and actionable or completed and residual.

Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates that discourse does not merely reflect war but actively structures its meaning, duration, and political consequences. Legitimacy, agency, and moral responsibility are not fixed attributes but are continuously produced through language. The contrast between Ukraine and Afghanistan reveals how narratives can sustain or terminate international engagement, shaping not only how conflicts are understood but also how they are acted upon within the international system.



Code	Ukraine	Afghanistan
Legitimacy	Stabilised through sovereignty–resistance discourse and alignment with international norms	Reconstituted through temporal closure; shifted from political legitimacy to narrative finality
Agency	Clearly attributed and sustained (Ukraine = active subject; Russia = aggressor)	Fragmented and displaced; Afghan actors move from agency to passivity, responsibility externalised
Temporal Framing	Open, continuous temporality sustaining urgency and engagement	Closed temporality (“20-year chapter”) producing exhaustion and disengagement
Moral Framing	Strong ethical binary enabling clear moral alignment and intervention	Diffuse moral register (regret, inevitability) limiting political urgency
Civilian Portrayal	High representational density; civilians humanised and politically central (“worthy victims”)	Reduced representational density; civilians abstracted into humanitarian subjects (“unworthy victims”)
Lexical Strategy	High lexical intensity + precise attribution reinforcing accountability	Mixed: high emotional intensity (suffering) but bureaucratic abstraction reduces accountability
External Actors	Constructed as legitimate defenders of international order	Dual framing: legitimised withdrawal (Western discourse) vs delegitimised failure (regional discourse)
Narrative Outcome	Sustained discursive visibility and global political centrality	Narrative closure leading to marginalisation and humanitarian framing



Interpretive Note:

The contrast demonstrates that legitimacy is not lost but discursively reorganised: Ukraine remains within an open, morally charged narrative sustaining engagement, while Afghanistan is closed through temporal exhaustion and humanitarian abstraction, enabling disengagement.

Conclusion

The study analyses comparative study of the Afghanistan and Ukraine Conflicts from the media narrative lens. The study aims to investigate how legitimacy is constructed or contested in conflicts through various media outlets, governmental and international institutions.

The conclusion is framed based on the coding scheme mentioned in the methodology. The findings highlight a clear divergence in the narratives of both conflicts. Ukraine is also an actor, but Afghanistan is where the other actors perform. The conflicts involved divergent actors, temporal framing and yielded different international responses. The portrayal of conflicts, shaped through the perspectives of the major political powers advancing their interests in these conflicts, significantly influenced the international responses. Primary and external actors shaped these portrayals through the media presenting them to the international audience. Thus while the Ukraine conflict is legitimised as a war of self defence through the language of morality, civilian suffering is sustained by collective responsibility of the international community. In contrast, the Afghanistan conflict is framed as concluded or exhausted legitimising disengagement despite the continued humanitarian crisis. It elucidates the understanding of the importance of narratives influencing international responses for continued intervention in one case while withdrawing in the other.

The study relies on publicly available secondary data; there are no direct ethical risks to participants involved but there certain limitations remain. The analysis does not claim to represent all media narratives globally, nor does it capture audience reception. Additionally, interpretation is inherently subjective in qualitative research. However, systematic coding and theoretical grounding mitigate this limitation.

Future research could be built on the impact of these narratives on the people, as well as how these strategic narrative discourses are planted for the benefit of the interests, ideologies, power dynamics of various actors, built on the thought of moral, ethical superiority of the European states during conflicts. This study calls for a more reflective and inclusive understanding of war in international relations.



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