

Unravelling Perceptions: Reviewing the Media Depictions of India-China Relations

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ABSTRACT

India and China, as major Asian powers, share a complex relationship shaped by border disputes, regional competition, and diplomatic tensions. Anti-China sentiment in India, rooted in colonial history, has been intensified by incidents such as the Doklam and Galwan clashes. The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, influenced by nationalism, territorial issues, and geopolitical dynamics. This article employs agenda-setting theory to examine information control, propaganda, and content filtering within the media landscapes of both countries, and compares narratives across Indian, Chinese, and Western media outlets.

INTRODUCTION

India-China relations are often considered as one of the most complicated and happening ties in the Asian Continent. According to renowned American political scientist Robert Jervis, perception must be deemed vital when assessing world politics and international relations. He contends that it is through a dynamic psychosocial process based on perception that a state categorises other states as allies, rivals, and adversaries (Jervis, 2017). Due to their mounting border conflicts and a desire to surpass one another in the quest for greatness over time, two of Asia's most influential powers, China and India, have developed a complicated relationship marked by mistrust and disagreements. A complex interplay of historical, geographical, cultural, and strategic factors has influenced the perceptions of these nations towards one another.

Referred to as the fourth pillar of democracy, the media wields immense influence, permeating all aspects of society, including international affairs and global politics. Historically, the media has often exacerbated bilateral conflicts by distorting and camouflaging the truth, thereby adversely impacting diplomatic relations. Media perceptions and discussions immensely drives the trajectory of bilateral relationships. Moreover, the perceptions created by media influences public opinion and people-to-people contacts. Notably, these public perceptions limit the freedom of government to take necessary initiatives to strengthen the relationship, especially in troubled times. The political parties are hence compelled to go by the public perceptions carefully calibrated by the media. This is partially proven in the case of India-China relationship, where media reporting is influenced by nationalistic rhetorics from both sides. This happened during the Galwan clash where both confronted each other for two years which further aggravated due to nationalistic media coverage. The sections that follow will go into greater detail about this. Therefore, media closes the avenues for improvement of relationship by inducing sensational and heavily biased reportage.

Given its profound effect on public perception and international relations, a thorough analysis of how two nations represent each other in their media is both pertinent and crucial. The media acts as both a mirror and a lens, reflecting and refracting the image of "the other" through its national perspective. This involves various dimensions, from political and economic portrayals to cultural exchanges and cooperation. Coverage of the Sino-Indian relationship in both Indian and Chinese media is rife with biases, agendas, and narratives that serve state and elite interests. Examining how this relationship is depicted in media and official reports is essential to understand how these perceptions align with the reality of India-China relations. Contrasting and negative perceptions created by the media, some driven predominantly by agendas, derail the Sino-Indian relationship. With the clashes flaring up, border disputes mounting, tensions getting stoked between these countries, and Anti-India sentiments in China and Anti-Chinese sentiments in India on the rise, a foray into causes of such image creation will open new doors to the study of India-China relations. With the media aspect of this bilateral relation being less

traversed, this study goes on to hold relevance. This article embarks on a comprehensive exploration, tracing historical contexts, examining media ecosystems in India and China, and uncovering factors that influence media coverage.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The literature relevant to this thesis falls into two distinct categories; one that explores bilateral relations between India and China, aiding in giving an overview of challenges; and secondly, books and articles stressing the theory of agenda setting and media's role in generating India and China's perception of each other will be reviewed. Guruswamy & Singh (2009) perform a signal service by explaining in a simple, lucid style the origins of and perceptions of the boundary dispute between India and China. The work delves into history and contextualizes the dispute today in a world where both China and India are rising powers. Chowdhury (2015) offers a quantitative and qualitative content study of the China coverage in the English-Language Press of India. It recognises several frame types used in reporting about China and categorises them based on how frequently they occur. However, it has not investigated how news on India is covered in China. Jeffrey (2015) gives an in-depth analysis of Indian and Chinese media by tracing the evolution of media and has successfully managed to provide a vivid portrait of an Indian and Chinese journalist.

This paper attempts to advance our understanding of the PRC's views of India and the Indian view of China, both in detail, through analysing media reports. The literature on China's and India's foreign relations has mostly ignored China's connection with India through the lens of media, leaving a sizable gap in what has otherwise developed into a broad and active field of research. The complete analysis of long-term patterns and transitions in media representations of India-China relations, spanning multiple media sources, and geopolitical situations, is a considerable research deficit. By undertaking systematic and in-depth research of media representations of both countries over the last decade, this thesis aims to close this gap by revealing subtle patterns, shifts and influences that have changed the perception dynamics between these two countries.

METHODOLOGY

The article uses a qualitative methodology, including content analysis of news articles, editorials, and opinion pieces from reputable Chinese and Indian media sources. The content analysis is limited to the time span between August 2022 to July 2023. Media items on India in two leading Chinese dailies and two official websites, China Daily and Global Times will be analysed. Similarly, media items on China in three Indian dailies- The Hindu, Times of India, Hindustan Times and a few broadcast channels like Firstpost and India Today will also be surveyed. In addition, surveys and interviews with media professionals, decision-makers, and specialists are analysed, highlighting the underlying elements that influence media narratives. The variables employed

are: 1) subjects involved in India-China media coverage such as border tensions, trade, water disputes, BRI etc and its level of importance or Salience of Issues, 2) tone of coverage which can be positive, negative or neutral, 3) Public Perception and 4) Nationalistic sentiments. The study undertakes a comparison of how issues related to India is covered in Chinese dailies and vice-a-versa, tone of coverage which assesses the sentiment expressed in media articles, its impact on public opinion and the role of nationalist narratives.

The analysis is placed under the framework of the agenda-setting theory. Agenda-setting refers to the ability of the mass media to signal to the public what is essential. According to the Agenda Setting Theory, a potent communication theory, the media significantly impacts the public agenda by deciding which subjects receive attention and which are ignored. The crux of agenda-setting theory is how the media can shape individuals' perceptions. This theory, first put out by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, emphasises how the media shapes and how the public perceives events, eventually influencing what people find meaningful and deserving attention. The theory is placed in the context of the growing rivalry between India and China, and realist political considerations also become part of the conceptual framework, in addition to the agenda-setting theory. Both the Chinese and the Indian media are not devoid of agendas. Chinese media account for one of the world's largest propaganda and agenda-driven media. In a nutshell, the core assumptions of this theory are that rather than merely relaying stories to the audience, the media filters and modifies what we see and that the public tends to believe some topics and 12 concerns to be more significant than others when the media focuses on a small number of them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indian and Chinese Perception of Each Other: An Overview

India and China are nations characterised by their deep-rooted historical backgrounds and culturally diverse heritages, which have developed over time through internal growth and external influences. Ancient Indian scriptures, such as the tales of the Chinese traveller Xuan Zang, frequently portrayed a spirit of respect between the two civilisations (Saran,2020). Although there were few interactions, both China and India had a positive perception of each other initially. The ties began to deteriorate during India's colonial period. India was seen as being crucial to the British opium trade, the Opium Wars, and the 1905 Young Husband mission, which led to negative feelings from China, and modern China began to see India as an agent of British imperialism. Following their independence, their self-perception as natural great powers and centres of culture sparked positional rivalry for regional and global influence (Luo, 2015). The Sino-Indian War of 1962 that followed marked a significant milestone in this relationship. China's view of India has undoubtedly fluctuated throughout time due to changes in the geopolitical environment, but a fundamental undercurrent of strategic distrust has lasted for longer, deepening further with the Galwan Clash. The lack of proper demarcation of the Line of Actual Control remains the crux of the dispute.

Several interrelated historical, political, economic, cultural, and security considerations impact how India views China. Both countries perceive each other's actions, including military developments and alliances, as potential threats to their respective national security. This leads to a cycle of distrust and insecurity, wherein defensive measures taken by one country are interpreted as offensive by the other, escalating tensions and exacerbating the security dilemma. China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean is an essential part of China's maritime strategy and is essential "a fait accompli from a purely geographical sense" (Panda, 2020). China's trading routes stretch through the Indian Ocean, which serves as its essential economic and energy lifeblood (Baruah et al., 2023). Although China increased its naval presence in the Indian Ocean to preserve its legitimate interests (Panneerselvam, 2022), it became a significant tension between India and China since India historically regards the Indian Ocean as "India's Ocean" and the country's primary interest. India focused on strengthening its naval might and military relationships with the U.S. and Japan to check, balance, and limit China. It also expanded its partnerships with other countries in the region through regional structures. India's apprehensions about BRI and contempt for China's debt trap policy also loom large. India views BRI as a Chinese initiative to assert their influence in the Indian Ocean. The fact that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passes through PoK does not sit well with India (Malik, 2019). China has ports in Sri Lanka and has invested in infrastructure in Myanmar, Maldives, and Malaysia. India deems that the string of pearls will endanger India's maritime security. The string of pearls, which would lead to China surrounding India, poses a threat before India (Radhakrishnan, 2024). The recent expansion of docks around India in Hambantota is a testament to their strategy. According to this Pew Research Survey, India is the only middle-income nation where most of the population has an unfavourable view of China (Greenwood, 2023). In India, 62% of respondents indicated that they believe China contributes "not at all or too much" to world peace; moreover, 53% claimed that the US is the world's economic superpower, while just 14% said China; and almost 40% said that China's position as the top economic power is unfavourable. Chinese media gives India much less weightage when Indian media reports extensively on China's smallest gestures. The opinion survey conducted by the Global Times and China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations in August 2020 during the border standoff at Ladakh showed that more than 70 percent of participants believe India is too hostile to China. Only 25 percent of the participants are optimistic about bilateral relations, as they think "China-India ties will be improved in the long term." About 30 percent of the participants pointed out that the border issue was the biggest obstacle in normalizing relations between the two countries, while 24.5 percent of them noted "interference from the U.S." as a critical factor, and 10.7 percent chose "competition between the two countries" (Joshi, 2022). While overall state control media generally project a positive attitude in line with the government's position that India is a partner and friend, the coverage during bilateral tensions and Indo-US coverage is highly damaging; some unfavourable media coverage is a tit-for-tat strategy used by Chinese media in response to

unfavourable stories about China in Indian media. India typically does not constitute a danger on its own to Chinese media. Worries of India encircling China with Western Powers are present, nevertheless, simultaneously. Another research asserted that Chinese netizens saw India less as an ally or partner and more as a competition through content analysis of debate posts from the Qiangguo Forum, a Chinese online platform. According to the survey, the majority of internet news articles on India were unfavourable (47 per cent), followed by neutral (30 percent) and positive (23 percent) (Brar, 2023). India was viewed, in general, as a competitive neighbour with a political or geopolitical goal and now has come to share the label of an adversary.

India in Chinese Media: Analysing the Positive and Adversarial Frames

Chinese media account for one of the world's most propaganda and agenda-driven media. The majority of the topics covered by the Chinese online media during the study period included India-China relations, military development (some with territory/border issues), and anomalies in Indian society. According to Walter Lippmann, agenda-setting refers to the basic correspondence between media coverage of the world outside and the pictures in our heads (Lippmann, 1922). Coined by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in a seminal article (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), "agenda-setting" resonates conceptually with ideas raised by others in earlier years. Cohen (1963) wrote about how "the press may not be successful all the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p. 13). Lang described how "most of what people know about political life comes to them second-hand—or even thirdhand—through the mass media. Certain subjects gain prominence through gatekeeping, while others are marginalized. Issue prominence is dictated by the frequency, repetition, and placement of news items, shaping public perception and priorities. Agenda-setting theory underscores the roles of filtering and framing in shaping perceptions. For instance, the December 2022 Tawang clash in Arunachal Pradesh, which should have been covered by People's Daily, one of China's leading newspapers, went unreported (Chatterjee, 2024). This selective omission exemplifies their agenda-setting process. Framing involves how media outlets present news, emphasizing some elements while downplaying others, thus shaping public perception. Media can influence emotional responses by selecting frames that align with specific viewpoints, affecting how audiences understand issues. Policymakers must consider this influence on public opinion and agendas. Post-Galwan Valley conflict, mutual perceptions between India and China worsened (Scott, 2021). Global Times, the mouthpiece of CCP, wrote in an article, "It is clear that India is to blame for the Galwan Valley Conflict" (Global Times editorial, 2021). The Global Times, reflecting the CCP's stance, blamed India for the clash, citing India's superiority complex and "chaser mentality," and accused India of playing the victim. Indian media advocated pushback, while Chinese media downplayed the conflict and presented a biased narrative. In China's one-party autocracy, the media often acts as an instrument of state control, akin to Orwell's Big Brother.

In the Chinese view, India has employed many tricks up its sleeve to keep the border dispute as a focal point in India-China relations, which has played up during Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India in September 2014. Also, before he visited China, Modi's visit to Arunachal Pradesh in February 2015 was a solid political motive for centralizing the boundary issue to bilateral relations (Guru & Deshmukh, 2022). Such a perspective of India holding up tricks to make border issues a pertinent problem in the relations is widely covered across various media outlets in China, testifying the intermedia form of agenda setting. News organizations monitor competitors and adjust their coverage to align with prevailing narratives. Steven Livingston notes that this influence revolves around the ideological aspects of political conflicts and how key players shape public perception. Depending on their power, actors may either minimize or amplify conflicts. Weaker actors seek to "socialize" the conflict, rallying support and emphasizing suffering, while dominant actors aim to "privatize" it, reducing awareness (Boas, 2019). Australian research revealed that Chinese casualties in the Galwan Clash were significantly higher than the Chinese media reported. Hu Xijin, while referring to the mounting territorial disputes in an interview with the WIRE, opined,

The Chinese side also doesn't intrude into the region. It is disputed territory and both sides have a different understanding. The Indian media extrapolates it and prints it but the Chinese media understands the confusion and abstains from reporting. We understand the line (LOC) differently. We in the Chinese media merely report what the Indian media has reported. So, we feel the Indian media is more nationalistic than us (Varadarajan, 2015).

Abstaining from reporting on a crucial aspect does not make anyone less nationalistic, but is looked at more as serving the agendas. Global Times, known for its strong nationalist and sometimes anti-Indian stance, contrasts with the hawkish Indian press, shaping mutual perceptions. A June 2020 Global Times article titled "BRI in line with India's long-term development" is widely regarded as false, as the BRI has not benefited China or recipient countries, often causing political unrest. China Daily dismisses the Quad's impact on China's rise, noting divergent interests among member countries and claiming India lacks strong motivation to contain China, thereby fostering a weak perception of India in Chinese minds (Xiaoqiang, 2023).

Chinese media's portrayal of India-China relations often reflects a strong nationalistic tone, emphasizing China's historical claims over disputed territories and projecting itself as a responsible global power. The majority of the standoff stories wrenched in nationalism adopt an adversarial frame. The media also underscores China's economic growth and technological advancements, positioning it as a dominant player on the world stage. "For Four decades, the pioneering and trailblazing spirit of China's special economic zones has been passed on, and fuelled the country's drive toward economic prosperity by becoming the world's best factory", writes People's daily ("Having lagged far behind China for decades, Can India replicate China's success in GDP ranking any time soon", 2022). Chinese media also portrays India as a weaker neighbour that seeks to undermine China's rise. Chinese media plays a role in reinforcing

territorial claims and asserting China's historical narratives. This includes the South China Sea disputes, Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. Chinese media often portrays these territorial disputes and historical events in a way that asserts China's sovereignty and justifies its action.

Nationalism has always played a significant role in the Chinese media and has been essential to the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda efforts. When reporting on India, Global Times downplays or disparages India's actions, policies, and competencies while highlighting China's strengths, accomplishments, and dominance. Nationalist sentiments are stoked by emphasising historical grievances and portraying China as a victim of past imperialism. Chinese media mostly exhibits anti-Western sentiment, particularly regarding issues such as criticism of China's human rights record, democracy or interference in internal affairs. An article published in the Global Times in September, 2022, read "War-addicted West must stop dreaming of global domination by force". Another opinion session saw an article titled "As US-led Western neoliberal imperialism fails, the Chinese model provides a sustainable path to modernization", occupying a page. The media often frames such criticisms as attempts to undermine China's rise and to restrain its influence. This fosters a narrative of China standing up against external pressures and strengthens nationalistic fervour among the Chinese perception. Facts are distorted to health the narrative, and minorities are portrayed as burdening the large. Talks on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Defence Ministers Meeting in New Delhi in May 2023 saw both sides reiterate their respective stands on the border issue but have yet to meet of minds. Disdaining India's call to make the summit virtual the Global Times Opinion session includes Long Xingchun's article, "India cannot prevent cooperation between China and other SCO members. Even if India is cold toward the SCO or acts as an obstacle on certain issues, China can exclude India from cooperation." This scathing tone reeks of the nationalistic fervor in the Chinese media.

Another article of March 2023 in Global Times is a perfect testament to the high nationalism wrought by Chinese media articles. The article reads like this:

China has always maintained an attitude of seeking truth from facts-not avoiding problems and pressures, but at the same time, with a positive and promising attitude. It does not fear difficulties and obstacles and dares to confront the challenges. This manner of seeking truth from facts comes from the special nature of the CPC and once again demonstrates the superiority of the Chinese System.

They often go on to portray territorial disputes as matters of national pride and present China as resolute in defending its interests. In a Global Times article titled "Ultra-nationalism leads India's relations with neighboring countries astray,

"It is written that when hard-line right-wing nationalists butt in, they conveniently blame all domestic crises on their neighbours – and all of India is victimized to pay the price. China is not the only example of a neighbour that is being blackmailed by such fanatic public sentiments in India"

Though the rising right-wing nationalistic account is true, the claim of China being blackmailed by fanatic public sentiments in India is baffling. However, a peculiarly abrasive brand of nationalism has come to be associated with China and, more importantly, with the persona of Chinese President Xi

Jinping. While Beijing's recourse to nationalistic aggression as a foreign policy stratagem has recently gained the euphemism of 'wolf warrior diplomacy', it has been a work in progress for much longer. It involves a more vigorous state-sponsored and systemic indoctrination campaign than India and gets intertwined in their media. One of the most apparent indications of improving India-China relations has been the remarkable growth in bilateral trade. Despite ongoing challenges such as territorial disputes and strategic differences, Chinese perspectives have maintained that economic linkages between the two nations are crucial for stable relations. However, optimism began to wane with the emergence of new issues like the rising economic imbalance, India's expanding trade deficit, and trade disputes. Chinese media contested India's claim that the trade imbalance was due to market restrictions. A piece by two Chinese journalists, published in a bimonthly journal of Sichuan University, argued that India would face significant economic consequences as it struggles to balance development goals with national security concerns. They suggested that Prime Minister Modi's economic policies might fail, warning that India's strategy of "comprehensive decoupling from China" would hinder its global ambitions, as Chinese imports remain crucial for India's economic growth, especially after the Galwan Valley clashes.

Media coverage of India-China economic ties in both countries remains manageable, with fewer instances of biased reporting. Notably, both the People's Daily and the Global Times often adopt a positive tone, suggesting further collaboration and growth. For instance, a People's Daily article titled "Having lagged far behind China for decades, can India replicate China's success in GDP ranking any time soon?" acknowledges India's progress as the world's fifth-largest economy, highlighting its strengths in information reform and its large English-speaking population. While the article balances positive and negative aspects, it avoids outright dismissing India's economic growth, adopting a non-adversarial stance. Similarly, a Global Times article responding to a TOI piece on India's success in the water gun market during Holi noted, "Even if India finally trumps China in water guns, it's nothing to be proud of. Instead, India should investigate why it relied on imported water guns for so long." Nonetheless, the article emphasized that both China and India play crucial roles in the Asian supply chain, advocating for stronger industrial collaboration amid global economic challenges. This adds a positive dimension to the narrative, underscoring the need for cooperation in managing rapidly changing risks and weak global demand. To consider the media coverage relating to the issue development plan on the lower reach of the Yarlung Tsangpo River, Global Times often launches scathing attacks against the ones attempting to retype China's hydro-hegemony theory. Due to the use of water infrastructure investment for territorial control and demarcation, the Brahmaputra has been and will remain closely linked to Sino-Indian conflicts. Global Times in an article writes, "India must give up zero-sum mentality and accept China's hydropower project". This in itself is an adversarial framing of the news; advocating their extremist nationalist agenda. While these water-related issues have been discussed at various bilateral forums between India-China Expert Level

mechanisms on transboundary rivers, they have received less attention in public discourse or media coverage than other contentious aspects of their relations, such as border disputes or trade imbalances.

China in the Indian Media

Framing involves how media organisations present news and information, which can influence how the audience perceives and interprets those issues. Different frames can lead to different public reactions and understandings of the topic. In the context of agenda-setting theory, a positive frame refers to how the media or other influential sources present issues or topics in a positive and favourable light.

Sastri Ramachandran of THE WIRE opines:

Media reports in India invariably tend to give the impression that China is up to some trick every day, that someone, somewhere in China, is forever busy doing something to needle, belittle, encircle, overawe, dismember, intimidate, or deceive India; that aggressive designs are at work to step up military pressures.

These statements hold if rummaging through the articles published in Indian media is done. During the onset of border clashes, whether in the Doklam standoff or the Galwan clash, Indian TV media like Republic TV, Times Now, and Zee News were replete with discussions sensationalising the issue and predicting a looming war. A FirstPost article of December 2022 was titled "India should be prepared for war with China"(Kumar, 2022). Meanwhile National Herald, in their opinion session, wrote, " Is India ready for a bigger war with China? India can dominate the skies and the seas". It is acceptable for Indian media to write about how they should always be prepared to tackle security threats; however, mentioning an impending war whenever China is mentioned, adds to the fear and hatred in the Indian minds for China, negatively affecting the ties. Meanwhile, though Chinese media bash and ridicule India, their reports are not always centred around an imminent war. Unlike the TV news channels, the print media of India covers both the positive and adverse frames encircling India-China relations. In a 2020 article titled "Disorder at the border: On India-China face" (2020), The Hindu argued that the first step the government must take is to inform the nation of precisely what has happened since late April along the LAC, including incidents in Ladakh and Sikkim. The Hindu, a leading English-language newspaper in India known for its comprehensive coverage of national and international issues, was not quick enough to draw conclusions without succinct data and did not appear fastidious in serving an agenda.

When Chinese newspapers rarely remember the anniversary of the India-China 1962 war, Indian media has, over the years, consistently published articles and forever remembered the days, giving a comprehensive analysis of what had transpired in a nationalistic attempt to imprint the devastating event on the minds of its people. In an India Today article of October 2022, titled "60 years of 1962 Indo-China War: Can India ever forgive or trust China?" Sutanu Guru, by focusing on the trust deficit, asserts that some historical wounds never heal. Priming forms an essential aspect of the agenda-setting theory. It suggests that the media's coverage of particular issues can prime the public's thinking and influence their subsequent judgments. The India-China War of 1962 and its

damages can never be forgotten; however, clinging to those emotions and failing to see beyond that derails India's equation with China. Chinese media often portrays these territorial disputes and historical events in a way that asserts China's sovereignty and justifies its action. Crowds demanded boycotts of Chinese businesses, destroyed Chinese phones, and burn the PRC flag and effigies of Xi Jinping. The tragedy and its aftermath received nonstop media coverage, and opinion leaders gathered to call for justice for the deaths of the 20 Indian soldiers. However, the Indian government remained mum for days until the media started covering it in a frenzy, even before any official statement came up. Concerning the territorial issue, Chinese media predicted that India will be keen to press for a comprehensive settlement to the border dispute without making any significant concessions.

Yang Siling of the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences argued that famous Indian nationalism had contributed to an 'increased threat of large-scale confrontation or even war'. Yang opines:

Indian officials, media, and scholars' discussion of China's 'invasion' and distorted reports and propaganda inevitably results in a surge of domestic anti-China sentiments, which in turn force the Indian government and military to maintain a hard-line stance and even take things to the brink. Anti-Chinese sentiments provoked by these kinds of words could force the Indian Government into a dead end of military confrontation with China (Chubb, 2020).

The anti-China sentiments in Indian media do not originate as widely as from a state-controlled media outlet, but the BJP, who has criticized the UPA's soft take on China, has also had a significant role during their 10-year rule in surmounting the negative perception, however, it did not start of nowhere. Unlike the Chinese media view that blames the rising nationalism in India as the source of all problems in India-China relations, the unresolved boundary issue poses a significant problem. Growing Hindu nationalism has had a more adverse impact on the domestic realm than its relations with India and China. In its October 2021 editorial titled "India sleepwalks on the border issue" (2021), Global Times, clearing their side, wrote that "China has made tremendous efforts to ease and calm the border situation, while India insisted on unreasonable and unrealistic demands, adding difficulties to the negotiation". The claim remains far from being authentic and is a testament to the adversarial frame created by the Chinese media on India. The editorial further offers allegations that India is using the worsening in China-US ties to win crucial strategic bargaining chips and affirms that this technique will fail, degrading India's standing in world affairs.



Figure 1. Breakdown of China-related articles in TOI.

Source: Own work

The breakdown of articles in TOI about China is shown in the above graph. The bulk of the news was about border tensions, with economic rivalry, partnerships, and Tibet factor coming in second and third. Over the years, the Indian media has widely covered on BRI, mirroring the government's stance and highlighting it as a significant threat to India's security. A Times of India article on February 18, 2023, stressed how China's BRI has become a road to nowhere. Hindustan Times wrote widely about how India's Belt-Road initiative turned prophetic. India hopes a partnership like QUAD can prevent Chinese aggressiveness in Southeast Asia. To project power across the Indian Ocean, India is also looking to invest in and develop its strategic assets, such as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It also wants to continue its bilateral cooperation with nations like Russia and Japan and engage in regional organisations like BIMSTEC and the Bay of Bengal community, where China is not a member.

Nationalism and mass media are often intertwined. In India-China relations, both Indian and Chinese media tend to exhibit nationalist sentiments, especially when covering contentious issues like border disputes or geopolitical tensions (Kumar, 2023). Indian media emphasize concerns about China's assertiveness and perceived territorial encroachments, while Chinese media highlight India's alignment with other powers that challenge China's interests. The strong nationalist sentiments in both India and China fuel tensions and heighten the risk of conflict. Public opinion, driven by historical grievances and territorial claims, creates a volatile environment. According to Graham Gallen in "The Thucydides Trap," such nationalistic fervour significantly contributes to the competitive and confrontational stance between the two countries.

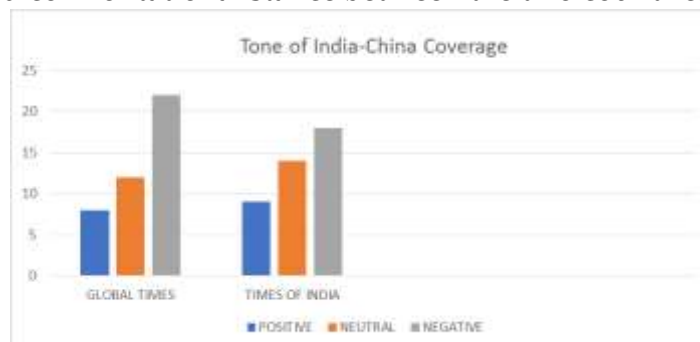


Figure 2. Tone of India-China Coverage

Source: Own work

The above graph denotes the tone of India-China coverage in their Times of India and Global Times, respectively. The negative coverage of India in Chinese media has grown faster compared to that of Indian media. Conversely, the positive coverage of China in Indian media is slightly higher than the latter. Coming to Indian media, it is important to note that the diversity of perspectives and opinions within Indian media is vast. While nationalism is a prevalent theme, media outlets in India encompass various viewpoints, from pro-government and patriotic to critical and dissenting voices. The role of nationalism in Indian media can shape public discourse, but it is influenced by various factors, including political, cultural and social dynamics. For instance, channels like Republic TV and Times Now are often seen as aligned with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and propagate a form of nationalist discourse associated with the party. Though India has come down in the World Press Freedom Index, a multitude of independent, distinct online news channels survive in India.

The Hindu covers many topics and does not exaggerate or take a brazenly biased position, including international affairs, trade, geopolitics, and cross-cultural interactions. Viewers of India would be accustomed to the structure of a section that aired final month on India's Republic News Service, remarking on a current documentary on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's alleged involvement in a slaughter of Muslims years ago: Arnab Goswami, who used to be dapper in a go well with and stylish glasses, used to be surrounded through speaking heads in Zoom-like containers as he criticized Modi's detractors for attempting to unfold misinformation with the aid of wilfully spreading falsehoods. The Republic is now not the only agency that helps Modi and his policies by taking a Hindu nationalist stance. Facts are distorted to health the narrative, and minorities are portrayed as burdening the large in many news media.

Salience Transfer, which forms an integral component of the agenda-setting framework, suggests that the importance and prominence of issues in the media agenda can transfer to the public agenda, leading to the public attaching more significance to those issues. The water disputes between India and China have received relatively less media coverage in their respective media compared to other contentious issues in the bilateral relationship. This phenomenon can be attributed to several factors influencing both countries' media coverage and reporting priorities. Media outlets in India and China often prioritise reporting on issues with direct geopolitical implications, such as border disputes, territorial claims, and regional security concerns. These topics tend to garner more attention as they directly impact national sovereignty and territorial integrity, considered vital national interests.

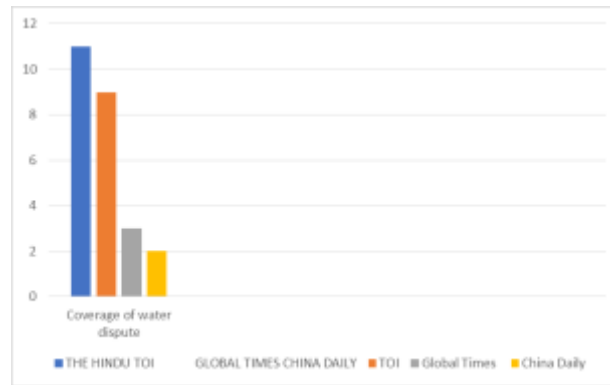


Figure 3. Coverage of Water disputes

Source: Own work

The figure given above is a depiction of water dispute coverage in various Indian and Chinese media. It clearly indicates a lack of importance accrued by the Chinese media, compared to the latter. The water dispute is a crucial yet relatively underexplored aspect of India-China relations. The primary area of contention is the Brahmaputra River. Tensions abound due to several reasons, chiefly because China controls over 50% of the river basin, giving its actions significant implications. The Brahmaputra is vital for both countries, supplying freshwater to India and accounting for over forty percent of its hydropower potential. Additionally, the territory west of the Brahmaputra is disputed, with both nations staking claims. From 2020 to 2023, the issue received limited coverage in Indian media. In January 2023, satellite images of China constructing a new dam in Tibet near the border garnered some attention. China views water as a strategic tool for exerting influence over lower riparian states. India and Nepal are particularly concerned about China's new dam on the Mabja Zangbo river in Tibet. Despite limited media coverage, the water dispute remains a significant issue with implications for water security, environmental sustainability, and regional stability. This situation highlights the reciprocal effect of salience transfer, where the focus on border disputes overshadows the crucial water dispute.

India-China Relations in the Western Media

Western media depict India and China as major global players with diverse views on international affairs and multilateral cooperation. The influence of Western media on the global perception of India-China relations is substantial due to its extensive reach and impact. Coverage is shaped by various agendas, including geopolitical interests, human rights issues, economic factors, and the portrayal of both nations as global influencers. Although Western media aim for objectivity, it is crucial to acknowledge that biases and agendas can affect their reporting. Western media highlight India-China's geopolitical competition, framing it as a rivalry between two emerging powers for influence in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. When comparing May, 2023 article of The Hindu, which was headlined "Impasse continues as India hosts first China border talks in four years" with a recent Economist article on India-China relations, the difference in the Western narrative becomes palpable. A recent article published in The Economist, a leading British weekly, had the headline "What the China-

India detente means for the West". This headline is misleading because China and India's tensions have not eased. The whole article is centred around what-ifs. It says that the US is making a bad bet on India because India and China are resolving their issues and are friends again. They hold the view that India will not help the US, not with Taiwan, not with supply chains, and not even with climate change. There is little evidence provided to back this up. The argument mainly holds just two parameters; one is that of growing bilateral trade. It reached 136 billion dollars last year, which means India and China are friends again, and for the military disengagement, India and China have held 18 rounds of talks. These points are presented as evidence proof of the Himalayan thaw. If the same logic is applied for US-China relations, the bilateral trade has reached around 690 billion dollars last year, it's a new record for trade and is rising despite political tensions and a trade war. Engagement in talks has also happened with three top US officials visiting China in less than one month: Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Treasury Chief Janet Yellen and climate envoy John Kerry. Henry Kissinger also made the trip to Beijing. However, this is not deemed or referred to as "détente". India is not the only country talking to China, others, including the U.S., are doing the same. In fact, India has more reasons to do so, for in 2020 there were deadly clashes between India and China, the Galwan Valley clashes. Since then, both sides have built up their military presence, more soldiers, more weapons, more controls and this was never going to be a long-term solution. You can't have two nuclear powers facing off constantly. So, the de-escalation is not some symbolic event; it was bound to happen, but the article completely misses that point, and India and China are still on two different pages. China often takes the stance that India must forget the border and increase trade and cooperation. While India holds the view of settling the border first and then prioritising other things. The Economist is not often alone in their stance or agenda that only prioritizes the West's interests. Multiple western media outlets and think tanks have done the same look at it.

A Foreign Policy article titled "Is America making a bad bet on India"? opines New Delhi will never side with Washington against Beijing, which brings to light the second problem with such articles: Western thinkers have to recognise that Indian foreign policies serve Indian interests, not American, not Chinese. It should not come as surprising to anyone that the Cold War mentality of bloc politics of one side adhering to a bloc has not been of interest to India, as history suggests. Western media and leaders must not hide the truth that there is yet no thaw or detente between India and China; things are still frosty. Often, the Western media's narrative is centered around only their interests; they fail to see beyond that, and factors like India's credentials and emerging market with a robust industrial base are overlooked. Chinese voices have frequently been intentionally mistranslated to exaggerate a tale. One such instance was a very ordinary opinion post written by Shen Dingli, a professor at Shanghai's Fudan University and a Chinese strategic specialist, in 2010. Shen commented on an ongoing argument among Chinese strategic scholars on whether China should consider establishing a military post abroad. Shen stated that "establishing overseas military bases is not an idea we have to shun" and that "it is our right" in

a general sense. The Times of India's main page carried an item headed "China mulls setting up military base in Pakistan" the day after Shen's article was published. According to the first phrase, "China has signalled that it wants to follow the US model and establish military bases abroad, possibly in Pakistan," The obvious goal, according to the paper, would be to put pressure on India and balance off US dominance in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Coverage of the Doklam standoff in 2017 often reflected the intensifying strategic competition between India and China in their disputed border regions. Most of the speculations of the Indian media on the possible moves of the Chinese are centered around Western reports and media sources. The Times of India recently published an article titled "China may be looking at setting up a military base in Pakistan's Gwadar" based on Pentagon reports. Coverages often highlight the Doklam standoff, military build-up in border regions, and India's alignment with the Quad (the US, Japan, Australia, and India) as indicators of India's growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. Chinese media portray India's efforts to deepen ties with the US and other Quad members as attempts to contain China's rise and hinder its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. It also emphasizes India's stance on the One China policy concerning Tibet and Taiwan as challenges to China's core interests. Indian media covers economic cooperation but also highlights the need for greater market access for Indian businesses in China, issues related to intellectual property rights, and concerns over China's investments in sensitive sectors in India. Chinese media emphasise the growth of bilateral trade, investment, and India's increasing reliance on Chinese goods. It mostly portrays China as a responsible trading partner and promoter of globalisation. Western media also widely covers human rights concerns in both India and China.

Some Western media sources strive for fairness and balance in their reporting, offering many viewpoints on intricate bilateral matters. An attempt to provide numerous views can be seen in opinion pieces that present various points of view on hot-button issues like Tibet or the border clashes. For instance, the New York Times article titled "Scattered Among the Himalayas, Glimpses of a Changing Tibet", offered diverse viewpoints on Tibet, focusing on the challenges of the Tibetans. As it reaches a large audience and frequently sets the standard for international reporting, Western media coverage of India-China relations significantly impacts how the world perceives them.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The differences in how Indian, Chinese and Western media portray the India-China relationship reflect each nation's viewpoints, interests, and sensitivities. Media framing of border disputes, military standoffs, and territorial claims significantly influences regional stability and conflict management. Sensational reporting on these issues often escalates internal tensions, raises concerns among neighboring countries and international actors about potential risks, and worsens existing relations. For instance, the sensationalised coverage of the Galwan Clash in the India media, ensued anti-China protests in different parts of the country, with people burning the Chinese flag, China-made products and effigies of President Xi Jinping. Meanwhile, Chinese media widely covered

the Galwan, putting the entire blame on India; their coverage of the issue was also deeply entrenched in nationalism and resulted in China posthumously awarding gallantry titles to four soldiers. Hence, the intertwined nature of nationalism and mass media has a larger impact on all aspects of India-China relations, permeating across border tensions to geopolitical contestations. On the other hand, balanced and nuanced reporting can contribute to better understanding and encourage peaceful resolution mechanisms. The media portrayal of diplomatic engagements and responses by India and China to various issues impacts the effectiveness of their crisis management efforts. How media outlets present official statements, negotiations, and dialogues shapes international perceptions of the willingness of both countries to resolve disputes peacefully and cooperatively. Often, official statements of the government are rebuffed by the media outlets. It is often when they are kept in the shadows that they begin speculating, in July 28, 2023 'The Hindu' article titled "Elusive Consensus: On transparency and the state of India-China ties", the author opined, "Opacity and defensiveness have marked the government's responses since tensions began in April 2020 to any questions about the border or its broader approach to China.....Relations with India's biggest neighbour are far too important to be conducted in the shadows." Positive and constructive coverage can enhance confidence in diplomatic efforts, while negative or divisive framing can hinder conflict resolution as in the case of economic ties between these two Asian powers.

News framing on human rights issues and international norms in India-China relations often influence global responses and actions. Media coverage can draw attention to specific cases, influencing how the international community perceives India and China's adherence to global norms and values. In China, the media's function must be distinct from think tanks. Certain media, like the Chinese news agency Xinhua, are far more than just media outlets or think tanks. As a state-run organization, Xinhua is almost a separate entity from the Chinese state and has great sway over both the rest of the massive media and the government.

Removing the last Indian journalist from Beijing further strains India-China diplomatic ties. Media plays a crucial role in international conflicts, with the power to either ease or exacerbate them. While media often has an "agenda-setting effect," it is far preferable to no media at all. Improving Indian reporting on China is challenging, as it reflects broader issues within Indian media, where sensationalism undermines credibility. The lack of on-the-ground perspective hinders discussions and perpetuates misconceptions in China reporting. To address this, Indian media must invest in foreign correspondents who can provide context and fact-check often flawed assumptions. Additionally, funds should be allocated for Mandarin language training for reporters. Most Indian media relies on official Chinese outlets like China Daily, Global Times, and Xinhua. Consequently, Global Times' strong nationalist views dominate Indian media, distorting discourse further. Enhanced public diplomacy from both Beijing and New Delhi is essential for informed interaction. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs often delays addressing misinformation, exacerbating the

issue. Ananth Krishnan of *The Hindu* writes in one of the articles included in the book *Media at Work in China and India*:

It must also be stressed that public diplomacy efforts from both New Delhi and Beijing need to be improved in helping to lay the foundation of informed engagement. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs is often slow to respond to wrong reports-if it at all responds and has only recently begun to attempt to come to terms with the fast-changing 24-hour new cycle media environment. On the other hand, China remains reluctant to engage with foreign journalists with spokespersons beyond the official script when responding to queries from reporters (p. 133). On the other hand, China continues to be reticent to interact with international media, with spokespeople seldom deviating from the official line when replying to questions from reporters. The continued absence of involvement from Chinese authorities remains a barrier to understanding Chinese perspectives, even though Chinese strategic specialists and think tanks have started communicating with international media. In conclusion, the complex web of media narratives surrounding India-China ties, emphasises the inescapable influence of perceptions in forming global viewpoints. Whether they portray cooperation or conflict, the stories reflect the larger social prejudices and attitudes that shape how people and countries view this intricate bilateral interaction.

Compared to previously published works on India-China media portrayals, our study is crucial as it attempts to bring new findings along with strengthening the existing arguments. It strengthens the argument that media is essential player in determining the India-China relationship because of their capacity to inflame or defuse tensions through their reporting of events. Media significantly shapes public discourse, democratic involvement, and public opinion through news dissemination. On the other hand, the study sheds light on newer understandings on how media reportage with rather high nationalist rhetorics impacts India-China relations. Unlike the early years of independence, both countries have become more nationalistic and also embodies great power visions. Therefore, the nature, tone and subjects of media coverage not only has bilateral impacts, but larger geopolitical overtones. Understanding that these narratives are active agents in creating and reinforcing perceptions that foster understanding and cooperation or perpetuate misinterpretation and mistrust is crucial as the media continues to wield its mighty pen. A thorough examination of the role played by media in inciting the fuel of the security dilemma, thereby keeping India-China relations confrontational, is a matter of great concern. Banyan (2012) opines that the media of both countries need to be cautious and critical toward their counterparts. The article's findings testify that the media impacts how the governments and people of China and India see one another. While negative or biased news exacerbates tensions and adds to misconceptions, positive reporting can promote mutual understanding and collaboration. Responsible and impartial reporting is crucial in fostering healthy debate and improving bilateral ties.

FURTHER STUDY

Future research should explore how media narratives during key events shape public perception over time, and the role of digital media in fueling nationalism in India-China relations. Studies could also examine the impact of misinformation on diplomacy and assess the effectiveness of public diplomacy efforts in countering media bias. Longitudinal and interdisciplinary approaches would help better understand how media continues to influence bilateral tensions or cooperation.

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