

Media Narratives on China's Belt and Road Initiative in Nepal: Impact on Nepal-China Relations

Lok Bahadur BK¹, Yonghong Dai², Ashok Poudel¹, Dipak Devkota¹

¹School of Media and Communication, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen 3688, China

²College of International Studies, Institute of Area and International Communication Studies, and Centre for China's Overseas Interests, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen 3688, China

Correspondence: Yonghong Dai, Distinguished Professor and PhD Advisor at Shenzhen University, Dean of the College of International Studies, and Director of the Institute of Area and International Communication Studies, the Institute for China's Overseas Interests, and the Institute of Bay of Bengal Studies, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen 3688, China.

Received: July 26, 2024

Accepted: September 29, 2024

Online Published: October 8, 2024

doi:10.11114/smc.v12i4.7253

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v12i4.7253>

Abstract

China and Nepal have signed a number of bilateral agreements aimed at expanding mutual cooperation in infrastructure, trade, investment, and cultural exchange. With Nepal currently involved in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, China's BRI has provided a foundation for future economic collaboration in the region. This paper utilizes framing theory and qualitative content analysis to explore the media narratives on China's BRI projects in Nepal by three prominent Nepalese newspapers: My Republica, The Himalayan Times, and The Kathmandu Post. Analyzing news articles, the study examines how these newspapers frame BRI projects in Nepal across economic, geopolitical, and sociocultural dimensions. The analysis contributes to a comprehensive understanding of Nepal's participation in the BRI framework by highlighting the complexities and considerations across economic, geopolitical, and sociocultural domains using framing theory and qualitative content analysis methodology. The study reflects various media narratives on Chinese BRI projects in Nepal and its impacts on public opinions in understanding about BRI.

Keywords: BRI, media narrative, framing, China, Nepal

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project, which was proposed and established by the Chinese government under the President Xi Jinping, is a popular topic in many developed countries. BRI was firstly introduced in 2013 during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan, which is Central Asian country. Later, he brought the concept to Indonesia in Southeast Asia where the initiative of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st century Maritime Silk Road. At the time, China was planning and initiating the BRI projects in about 152 countries from various parts of the world. Many south Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Maldives, have cooperated with China by signing the Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) on BRI projects (Ranjan, 2019). The Chinese president, Xi Jinping said in the inaugural speech of the BRI forum in 2017:

The pursuit of the Belt and Road Initiative requires a peaceful and stable environment. We should foster a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation; and we should forge partnerships of dialogue with no confrontation and of friendship rather than alliance. All countries should respect each other's sovereignty, dignity and territorial integrity, each other's development paths and social systems, and each other's core interests and major concerns.

(Xinhua, 14th May, 2017)

By building roads, bridges, and railroads to connect the nations along the route and establishing unique economic and trade corridors, the BRI seeks to retrace the old Silk Road, a vital trading route that connected China with other regions of the world. The BRI encompasses 900 projects in no less than 65 nations, with an estimated \$850 billion in investment. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is the home of a \$100 billion startup that is funding the majority of the project (Anunne et al., 2019). Chen and Zhang (2016) defined the BRI as an effort to more effectively integrate global

resources and money, not as an attempt by China to economically control partner nations, but rather as a strategic thinking of 'all serve me, I serve all' (Chen & Zhang, 2016). According to Sarker et al. (2018), BRI might promote global peace by fostering the economic growth of its member nations.

However, BRI is criticized in certain places. According to Peter (2017), the primary goal of the BRI is to economically tie China's neighbors closer to Beijing in order to assist Beijing in attaining its geopolitical objectives. According to Ivan (2015), China has to be more open in promoting the BRI agenda in order to persuade other nations that the initiative is a positive program. Seesaghur (2016) expressed optimism that the program will support China's attempts to enhance people-to-people connectedness, promote trade liberalization, offer financial integration, and facilitate coordination with foreign countries, despite noted critiques, particularly with Nepal.

China-Nepal ties have remained robust across historical and cultural events. Presumably, there is a long history of religious and cultural interchange between China and Nepal, which began with Buddhist traditions. Beginning with the expansion of Buddhism from India to Tibet and Nepal, there have been close religious relations. Furthermore, Nepal's advantageous location between China and India offers opportunities to engage in regional geopolitics (Liu & Dunford, 2016). Nepal has always pursued a non-alignment strategy in an effort to strike a balance in its ties with both of the nearby countries. But Nepal has been looking more and more to China as a potential rival to India in terms of economic cooperation and infrastructural development in recent years.

As a result, China is becoming one of Nepal's main development partners and investors. Chinese funding for infrastructure projects has increased significantly in recent years, including telecommunications, hydropower, and roadways. Nepal views China's economic assistance as essential to achieving its development goals, particularly with enhancing connectivity and updating its infrastructure (Peter, 2017). A number of bilateral agreements have been signed between China and Nepal with the goal of strengthening their collaboration in infrastructure, commerce, investment, and cultural exchange. With Nepal already taking part in BRI projects, China's BRI has given the two nations a framework for further economic collaboration.

2. Literature Review

2.1 China – Nepal Relation on Global Stage

After the Chinese Communist Party seized control of Tibet in 1955, Nepal and China established diplomatic ties. Following the demarcation of their 1414 km Himalayan border, the two nations established a number of boundary treaties and protocols to foster international collaboration (Plachata, 2020). Many bilateral promises to infrastructure development were listed in these official agreements. One such deal was the 1961 China-Nepal Highway Construction deal, which was signed ten days after the historic China-Nepal Boundary Treaty. The National Planning Commission of the Nepali government produced annual five-year development plans throughout this Cold War era, mostly including models created by the Communist regimes of China and the Soviet Union (Giri, 2018).

Chinese foreign aid and investment have altered Nepal's complicated history with international growth. The development of infrastructure and the common goal of extending commerce and transport corridors between China and South Asia are key features of Sino-Nepali bilateral ties. Chinese largesse is promoted by the efforts of multinational contractors, which include both privately funded construction companies and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), in contrast to earlier methods of development in Nepal (Jiang, 2022).

China launched its biggest humanitarian endeavor to date in response to the 7.8 magnitude earthquake that devastated Nepal in April 2015 and the huge aftershock that hampered the already unstable nation a month later in May. The disaster claimed the lives of about 9,000 individuals, wounded over 25,000, and left an estimated 200,000 people homeless (Nepal, 2020). Beijing's response to the 2015 earthquakes was not only extraordinary, but Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also pledged RMB 4.7 billion (US \$766 million) for infrastructure development and repair during the International Conference on Nepal's Reconstruction in June of that same year.

"China's response to the earthquakes was also framed by a politics of reengagements, notably through providing grants, infrastructure development assistance, and alternative routes to supply construction materials," wrote Dinesh Paudel and Phillipe Le Billon in their analysis of the geopolitics of post-disaster aid in Nepal (Plachata, 2020). The 2015 earthquakes in Nepal changed the country's geopolitical and economic ties with China and other foreign donors and developers, most significantly with India (Chand, 2017).

In addition to economic cooperation, China and Nepal have also strengthened their military and security ties in recent years. Both nations have strengthened their border security and conducted joint military exercises, especially along the Nepal-China border in the Himalayas. China-Nepal relations are complicated and face obstacles despite increasing collaboration. Nepal's relationship with China frequently intersects with its historical links to India and corresponding

geopolitical concerns. It is still a difficult challenge for Nepal's officials to pursue both regional powers' interests and their own development objectives at the same time.

China-Nepal relations have global implications, especially within the context of China's expanding influence in South Asia and its broader geopolitical ambitions. The deepening ties between China and Nepal can potentially alter the regional power dynamics and influence the broader strategic landscape in South Asia (Murton & Lord, 2020). The relationship between China and Nepal has worldwide ramifications, particularly considering China's growing geopolitical aspirations and influence in South Asia. China and Nepal's growing relationship has the potential to change the balance of power in the area and subsequently impact South Asia's larger strategic environment (Giri, 2018). In particular, the BRI has made China a significant investor and economic partner for Nepal. As a result, significant infrastructure projects like highways, hydropower plants, and telecommunications networks have been built, modernizing and enhancing Nepal's infrastructure.

The geopolitical environment in South Asia and beyond is affected by the expanding ties between China and Nepal. It gives China more clout in the area and presents Nepal with chances to grow economically and improve its infrastructure. But Nepal's historical connections and geographic proximity to India combine with its interactions with China to create a complicated dynamic that Nepali politicians must carefully navigate. In conclusion, the relationship between China and Nepal on the international scene is a result of intricate interactions between geopolitical, strategic, and economic interests that have a large impact on both nations as well as the surrounding areas (Nye, 2004).

2.2 Framing, Public Perceptions and International Relation

Framing procedures can involve both independent and dependent variables. Media frames can be investigated as the dependent variable, or the output of the manufacturing process (Emami et al., 2020). Media frames may also be analyzed as independent variables, or the antecedents of audience perceptions. Framing is the process of selecting a reality or agenda and making it apparent in a mass communication text in such a manner that it validates a problem, provides moral assessment, interprets a social and political issue, and proposes a solution to a stated problem (Entman, 2007). Framing influences public opinion on national and international issues such as geopolitics, international laws, investment projects, conflict, security, and religion.

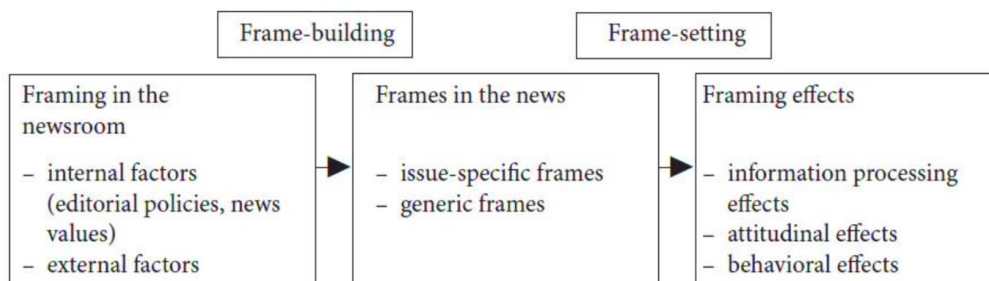


Figure 1. An integrated process model of framing (De Vreese, 2005)

Media narratives play a significant role in influencing public opinion, foreign policy decision-making, and the projection of soft power in the field of international relations. They also have a profound impact on how the public perceives international relations (Entman, 1993).

In the fields of political science and communication, the influence of media narratives on public opinion has been widely researched. According to Chong and Druckman (2007), framing theory explains how media frames can selectively emphasize some parts of global events while downplaying others. These frameworks affect the public's perceptions of foreign policy, diplomacy, and conflict resolution by influencing how they understand and assess global issues (Chong & Druckman, 2007).

Foreign policy decisions are greatly influenced by public views, which are frequently shaped by media narratives. Holsti (2004) highlighted the importance of public opinion in democracies, since popular perspectives on foreign affairs influence politicians. Public support or opposition to diplomatic efforts, military actions, and economic deals can be influenced by media portrayals of foreign players, including friends, rivals, and international organizations (Holsti, 2004). On the global scene, media narratives play a crucial role in public diplomacy and soft power projection. The significance of attraction and persuasion in forming preferences and swaying public opinion is highlighted by Nye's (2004) idea of soft power. In order to strengthen their soft power, advance their ideals, and foster constructive international relations, states and non-state entities should make use of media narratives, cultural exchanges, and internet outreach (Nacos et al., 2011).

There are still difficulties in navigating the digital media world, even if media narratives have the power to influence public opinion and international relations. The spread of false information on the internet, algorithmic prejudices, and echo chambers present problems for conventional media's agenda-setting and gatekeeping (Chadwick, 2017). Future studies should examine the effects of new media technologies, media effects comparisons across cultural boundaries, and digital-age public diplomacy methods. In summary, media narratives have a significant impact on how the general public views international relations, how foreign policy is decided, and how soft power is projected internationally (Snow, 2019). To promote understanding, collaboration, and peace among nations, it is crucial to comprehend the dynamics of public opinion, the media, and strategic communication (Melissen, 2005).

2.3 Studies on Media Narratives on BRI in Nepal

Critical links between bilateral security regimes and BRI development programs have also been formed by recent Sino-Nepali negotiations. Nepal has enthusiastically embraced Chinese infrastructure funding, but there are certain conditions. The support is based on agreements that were formalized during the Second Belt and Road Forum and reinforced by symbolic state visits. Specific monitoring methods are outlined, for instance, in the List of Instruments Signed and Exchanged between China and Nepal in October 2019. The Boundary Management System Agreement between the governments of Nepal and the PRC, the Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, and the Exchange of Letters for Border Security and Office Equipment are the most notable of these procedures (MoFA, 2020).

In border areas, where many ethnic and culturally Tibetan populations reside, this infrastructure security cooperation is particularly noticeable. The Chinese Communist Party has traditionally placed a high priority on maintaining control over these minority communities. All of these examples show that Chinese authorities are able to establish new monitoring systems and exert extraterritorial control over Tibetan people outside of their own borders that Beijing perceives as potentially restive, thanks to foreign investment and development in Nepal (Entman, 2007).

There is disagreement among the public concerning BRI development in Nepal. Many Nepali people are upbeat and believe that Chinese investment would provide previously unheard-of chances for economic expansion. The initiatives included in the BRI framework are thought to be a viable means of assisting Nepal in its efforts to grow as a nation and defend its independence from India. On the other hand, some people express worries over the possible excessive reliance on Chinese loans. Narratives of cautionary stories often revolve on land grabs and sovereign debt traps, as observed in Sri Lanka and other places. Although Xi Jinping is working to allay concerns about China's 'debt trap diplomacy,' concerns over the territorializing implications of Chinese investment and aid are particularly important for a small nation like Nepal that shares a border with China's sensitive Tibetan areas (Chen & Zhang, 2016).

Given the intricate role development initiatives played in 'taming' Tibet, there is trepidation in Nepal about China's expanding ideological sway (Yeh, 2013). For instance, the governing Nepal Communist Party hosted a symposium in Kathmandu on *Xi Jinping Thought* in advance of Xi Jinping's visit, with the assistance of a Chinese team, with the goal of educating political leaders and bureaucrats about the Communist principles of the Chinese state (Kaphle, 2019). The goal of the Nepalese government regarding future development and economic growth are extensive and ambitious. Development aims range from social and material development at the village and district levels to larger-scale operations. State officials hope to use Nepal's landlocked status to serve as a long-awaited land bridge between China and India's burgeoning economies and people (Liu & Dunford, 2016). Roads and trains must underpin such imagined futures, and infrastructure links are critical to achieving Nepal's national aspirations. Looking back over the last several years, it is clear that BRI development in Nepal is now seen as a credible alternative to previous international programs, with particular promise for the achievement of *bikas* and a contemporary, more integrated nation-state.

3. Methodology

The qualitative framing models help to determine the context of the news that the media presents to the audience. Media frames are a communication strategy that impacts human consciousness on social, political, and economic concerns (Entman, 1993). The media influences public opinion of national and worldwide events, projects, nations, and religions (Jonsson, 2011). This section describes the research approach used to perform the study, the research design, data gathering methods, sampling approach, and data analysis procedures. This study will use a qualitative content analysis approach. This method is adequate for examining media narratives and their influence on Nepal-China relations over the BRI. Qualitative content analysis enables a systematic assessment of textual data from news items, revealing insights into the framing of significant problems and themes in the country and its public's opinion.

The objectives of the research are to review media narratives on China's BRI projects in Nepal and examine the influence of these narratives on Nepal-China relations from the Nepalese perspectives in the media. To achieve these research objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research question, "How does Nepali media frame China's BRI projects, and what impact do these narratives have on the perception of Nepal-China relations?"

For the sampling, three Nepalese newspapers, *The Himalayan Times*, *My Republica*, and *The Kathmandu Post*, were selected for inclusion in the study based on the following criteria: readership and influence within Nepal, coverage of national and international news, including topics related to the BRI, and availability of archived articles from the period of interest which is between 2017 and 2023. The researcher did not choose all news articles from that period, but collected the most popular articles within that time range. This data was analyzed using media narratives and public opinions as guides.

The data gathering period ran from the signing of the BRI MoU between Nepal and China in 2017 until 2023. This time range was intended to capture media narratives, public opinions, and events connected to the BRI project in Nepal throughout a substantial period following the signing of the MoU. The study used archived news stories from selected Nepalese newspapers as its major data source. The articles were retrieved via digital archives, internet platforms, and library collections. A coding technique based on framing theory was created to separate media narratives about the BRI project in Nepal into positive and negative frames. The coding procedure entailed finding major themes and frames within news items, coding passages and snippets that reflected each frame using qualitative coding techniques, and assuring consistency and dependability through inter-coder checks and agreement. The coded data were arranged around the identified frames, allowing for a more systematic examination of positive and negative storylines in media material.

4. Analysis and Findings

Communication professionals' functions and reports rely on the BRI assumptions or traits listed in various perspectives. First, journalists communicate information they perceive to be correct. Second, they rely on official statements and interpretations. Third, China's political and economic connections to the rest of the globe shape news coverage. Finally, they share experiences from BRI member countries for additional discussion.

For data collection, the most popular and controversial news articles about BRI from three influential newspapers in Nepal published between 2017 and 2023 were analyzed for media narratives and the impact on public opinions. All three newspapers are respected and well-established English-language sources in Nepal, known for their trustworthiness, excellent journalism, and editorial standards, making them trustworthy sources for media analysis. *My Republica*, *The Himalayan Times*, and *The Kathmandu Post* have a diverse audience that includes lawmakers, academics, business experts, and laypeople. Their extensive coverage guarantees that someone has access to a comprehensive range of media narratives and opinions on the BRI projects in Nepal.

These publications cover a wide range of themes, including politics, the economy, society, culture, and international events. They also provide thorough reporting, in-depth analysis, and varied perspectives on the BRI and its influence on Nepal-China ties. All three newspapers have robust web platforms that enable digital access to their stories, reporting, and archives. By integrating these three newspapers in the research, the analysis can capture multiple perspectives, frames, and narratives regarding China's BRI in Nepal with varying editorial styles, columnists, and contributors, which creates a rich tapestry of media content that represents numerous ideas and discussions. These newspapers have tracked the history of the BRI projects throughout time, offering unique insights on how media narratives have changed and affected public discourse.

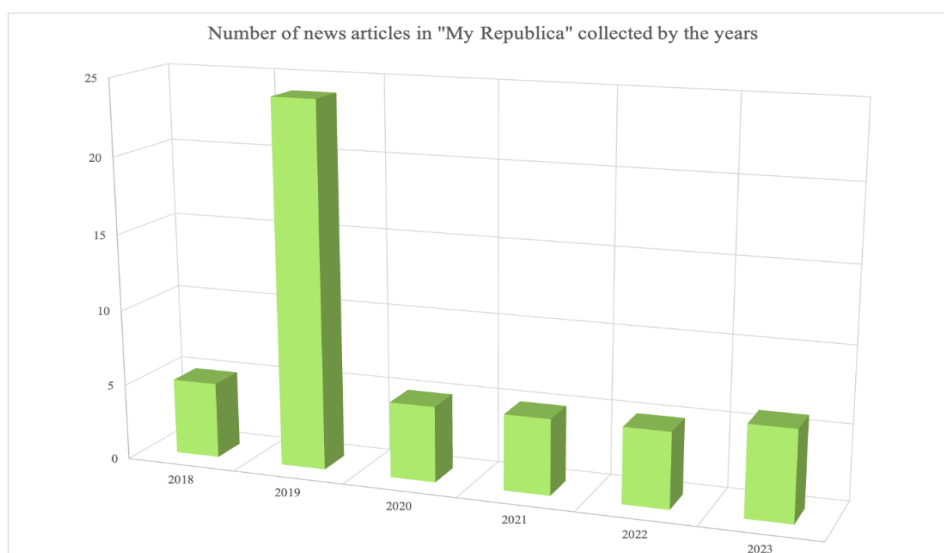


Figure 2. Number of news articles by years collected from My Republica

Note: content analysis from February, 2024.

My Republica is Nepal's major English-language daily newspaper. It covers a wide spectrum of national and international news topics, such as politics, the economy, society, culture, and sports. The publication is noted for its detailed coverage of current events and analytical essays on societal problems. *My Republica* has a digital portal as well, offering online access to its articles and reports. This newspaper caters to a diverse readership, including policymakers, business professionals, academics, and the general public interested in staying informed about Nepal and global affairs. Therefore, the researcher chose the paper for its wide coverage, popularity, and news articles, which are highly engaged with and have a significant impact on the public. In this study, 50 news articles were collected for data analysis, with the greatest number of news articles published in 2019 shortly before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic.

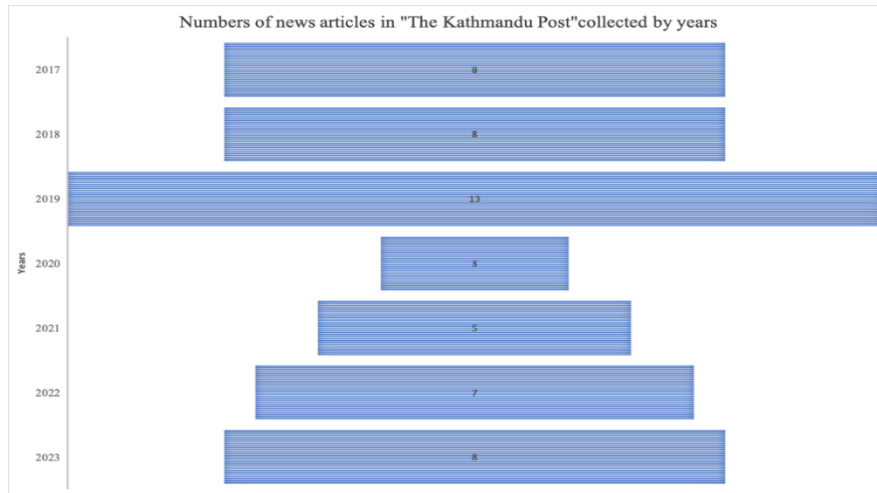


Figure 3. Number of news articles by years collected from The Himalayan Times

Note: content analysis from February, 2024.

The Himalayan Times is another well-known English-language daily newspaper in Nepal. It publishes news and stories on politics, business, travel, lifestyle, and entertainment. The newspaper focuses on delivering in-depth reporting, analysis, and opinion articles on major problems impacting Nepal and the region. *The Himalayan Times* has a strong online presence, providing digital editions and multimedia material to its readers. It is frequently read by both local and international audiences interested in news and events in Nepal and the Himalayan region. Fifty news articles were collected based on keywords concerning BRI and Nepal-China relations.

On the other hand, *The Kathmandu Post* is one of the oldest and most respected English-language newspapers in Nepal. This newspaper has a reputation for quality journalism, investigative reporting, and balanced coverage of news and events. The newspaper covers a wide range of topics, including politics, business, culture, the environment, health, and technology. *The Kathmandu Post* is known for its editorial integrity, thought-provoking opinion pieces, and in-depth features on socioeconomic issues. The newspaper has a strong online presence with a dedicated website and digital editions, making its content accessible to a global audience. A total of 65 news articles were selected from *The Kathmandu Post*. As shown in *Figure 3*, the greatest number of news articles about BRI projects in Nepal were published in 2019.

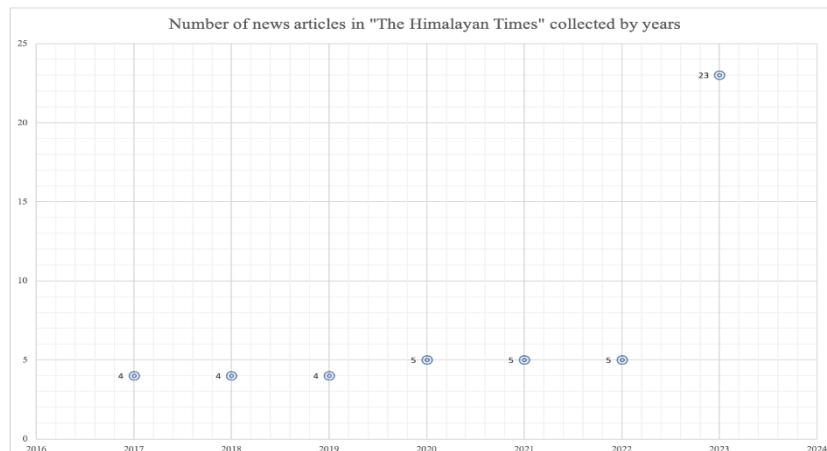


Figure 4. Number of news articles by years collected from The Kathmandu Post

Note: content analysis from February, 2024.

Analyzing media information about the BRI in Nepal using framing theory from both negative and positive perspectives offers a thorough picture of how the initiative is depicted in the media. Moreover, it can obtain significant insights into the intricacies of media narratives around the BRI in Nepal, contributing to a more sophisticated view of public conversation on the subject. Therefore, the study focuses on positive and negative frames related three main sectors: (1) BRI and economic development, (2) BRI and Asia from geopolitical perspectives, and (3) BRI and sociocultural factors, which are among the most important supporting factors to the country's development and people's wellbeing.

First, media information about the BRI project in Nepal, including news stories, opinion pieces, reports, and social media posts were gathered in three newspapers and then the researcher organized the data according to the specified keywords, ensuring that there is a varied sample reflecting various media outlets and opinions. To identifying positive and negative frames, codes or labels are assigned to segments of text that correspond to different frames or perspectives.



Figure 5. Keywords that are used for analyzing the frames in the study

Note: content analysis from February, 2024.

4.1 BRI and Economic Development

According to all three news sources, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the BRI in 2013. China argues that the BRI is a win-win collaboration that fosters shared growth, prosperity, and friendship while improving mutual trust and understanding among member countries. Furthermore, news headlines highlighted the potential economic benefits of BRI projects, such as development and prosperity, job creation, greater trade opportunities, and enhanced transportation networks, which can boost economic activity. Furthermore, the news articles highlighted Nepalese business opportunities to access Chinese markets and participate in regional trade through the BRI framework. The articles also illustrated the Chinese FDI inflow into Nepal, which support industries while also contributing to economic diversification and technological advancement. The articles discuss how BRI projects enhance regional connections, foster strategic partnerships, high-quality development, economic integration, and open up new prospects for cross-border trade and investment. The reports highlight Nepal's strategic location as a transit hub, as well as the potential economic benefits of enhanced connectivity with neighboring countries via BRI infrastructure.

From a negative aspect, news coverage focuses on Nepal's expanding debt burden as a result of Chinese investment for BRI projects, underlining the risks of debt dependency and financial vulnerability. News items discuss loan repayment concerns, as well as the long-term repercussions of debt servicing on Nepal's fiscal sustainability and economic autonomy. Negative framing emphasizes governance faults, a lack of transparency, and accountability gaps in the design and implementation of BRI projects, highlighting worries about project supervision and decision-making.

My Republica provides wide-ranging coverage about BRI projects in Nepal, including economic and infrastructure development. While *My Republica* may cover both positive and negative aspects of BRI projects, it gives more prominence to significant perspectives on development projects, economic and trade cooperation, financial integration, resource development, and economic prosperity. From a negative perspective, the newspaper mentions loans, financial challenges, debt repayment raise, trade deficit, and debt trap, but minimally. The newspaper's reporting includes expert opinions, policy analyses, and public discourse that raise concerns about the potential drawbacks and risks associated with Chinese investments under the BRI framework. Overall, the newspaper mainly reflects the economic and financial profits from BRI projects in Nepal.

The Himalayan Times takes a comprehensive and analytical approach to news reporting. *The Himalayan Times* gives considerable attention to development in Nepal and BRI mentioning sustainable development, human development,

economic development, and infrastructural development. Concerning economic and trade cooperation, the newspaper highlights on free trade, bilateral trade, poverty alleviation, win-win cooperation, foreign investment, and economic globalization in its news pieces. However, this media source negatively portrayed BRI projects in Nepal mentioning many issues, such as debt sustainability, trade deficit, loans, and debt trap. However, it is not too explicit and the cooperation and mutual benefits are frequently shown in the newspaper.

The Kathmandu Post is recognized for its investigative journalism and thought-provoking commentary. Within its coverage of BRI projects, *The Kathmandu Post* mostly places a significant emphasis on highlighting negative elements concerning Nepalese news, including debt dependency, loans, debt trap, excessive fear of debt, trade deficit, and governance deficiencies. The newspaper's critical reporting is predominantly negative, focusing on the potential risks and challenges of China's BRI projects in Nepal and the deficiencies and incapability of the Nepalese government in implementing BRI projects in the country. Moreover, this newspaper often mentions the slow process in implementation of BRI projects in Nepal and lack of government's transparency.

4.2 BRI and Asia from Geopolitical Perspectives

All three publications stress the strategic relationships and diplomatic contacts made possible by BRI projects, emphasizing Nepal's increased interconnectedness with neighboring nations and significant regional powers. Positive narratives explain how BRI infrastructure investments in Nepal can promote more regional collaboration, economic integration, and cross-border commerce. The newspapers cover diplomatic conversations, high-level visits, and strategic engagements inspired by BRI projects, with a focus on Nepal's diplomatic outreach and interactions with China, India, and other regional partners. Positive narratives may highlight Nepal's engagement in international efforts, regional conferences, and platforms that promote infrastructure cooperation and connectivity in South Asia. Critical coverage emphasizes worries about Nepal's future dependence on China, as well as the geopolitical ramifications of BRI investments, such as strategic autonomy and regional power dynamics.

Negative narratives frequently emphasize Nepal's difficulties in balancing its diplomatic relations with China, India, and other regional powers in the context of BRI projects, and how these projects impact regional geopolitics, which also includes the United States. Newspapers sometimes focus on regional conflicts, tensions, and geopolitical rivalry impacted by BRI projects, particularly those involving territorial sovereignty, border security, and strategic interests. Negative framing refers to the possibility of geopolitical frictions, competitiveness, and power conflicts among South Asian countries as a result of BRI-related activities. The media has highlighted critical storylines regarding governance issues, a lack of transparency, and governance shortcomings in BRI project management, raising worries about decision-making procedures and project monitoring.

My Republica examined BRI projects in Nepal from a geopolitical standpoint, emphasizing the strategic importance of infrastructure development, connectivity efforts, and economic collaborations in the larger geopolitical environment of South Asia and beyond. The newspaper also examined how BRI projects might improve regional connectivity and foster cross-border collaboration in South Asia, as well as the geopolitical ramifications of infrastructure development and connectivity efforts. Then this media focuses into Nepal's diplomatic contacts, strategic alliances, and regional efforts as impacted by BRI projects, including diplomatic discussions, bilateral agreements, and regional cooperation frameworks in the South Asian environment.

The Himalayan Times examined Nepal's participation in BRI projects in terms of geopolitical alignment, strategic goals, advantageous relationships, and regional dynamics. It sometimes investigated how BRI investments affect Nepal's ties with neighboring nations and key powers, such as India, China, and others. The publication underlines the importance of BRI projects in improving regional connectivity, territorial integrity, and increasing collaboration among South Asian countries. While the newspaper covers BRI projects in Nepal in the context of diplomatic relations, highlighting engagements with China, India, and other regional powers, the newspaper also discusses geopolitical challenges, political rivalry, and longstanding border disputes that are influenced by China-Nepal relations under the name of BRI in negative terms.

The Kathmandu Post examined the geopolitical ramifications of BRI projects in Nepal, including strategic collaborations, diplomatic engagements, and geopolitical alignments influenced by Chinese BRI initiatives. The publication mostly concerns Nepal's balancing act between regional powers and maintaining non-aligned foreign policy. The newspaper examined how BRI projects affect Nepal's diplomatic ties with South Asian nations, global powers, and international organizations. The journal often discusses Nepal's participation in regional forums and international platforms linked to infrastructure development and connectivity, including Chinese BRI projects and United States-backed Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) projects in the country.

4.3 BRI and Sociological Factors

My Republica featured positive tales of cultural exchange programs, educational exchanges, and people-to-people interactions made possible by BRI initiatives between Nepal and China. The periodical emphasized the value of cross-cultural encounters and reciprocal learning opportunities. Positive narratives focused on BRI-supported sustainable tourism efforts, such as responsible tourist practices, environmental protection, and community-based tourism models that benefit local communities. From a negative standpoint, critical coverage underlined the importance of strong environmental conservation measures and sustainability requirements in BRI projects in Nepal to reduce environmental impacts, maintain biodiversity, and preserve natural ecosystems. The publication also expressed worry over the absence of real community consultation, public involvement, and stakeholder engagement in decision-making procedures for BRI infrastructure projects. This publication also promoted more openness, accountability, and social protections in project execution.

The Himalayan Times emphasized the benefits of cultural interchange and collaboration promoted by BRI projects between Nepal and China. This coverage includes cultural events, exhibitions, and exchanges that foster mutual understanding and admiration for each other's history. Positive narratives addressed the possibility for enhanced tourist prospects in Nepal as a result of improved infrastructure and connectivity made possible by BRI investments. The publication included articles about new tourist locations, hospitality industry expansion, and cultural tourism efforts tied to BRI projects. *The Himalayan Times* featured success stories of community development and empowerment as a consequence of BRI projects, with a focus on activities that promote local livelihoods, skill development, and socioeconomic improvement. Unfavorable narrative expressed worry about the possible cultural and environmental consequences of BRI projects, including threats to cultural heritage sites, ecological deterioration, and disruptions to traditional ways of life in local communities. The journal also covered articles about relocation concerns, livelihood disruptions, and the need for social protections and mitigating measures in areas impacted by BRI infrastructure construction.

The Kathmandu Post focused on BRI-funded initiatives in Nepal that aim to protect and enhance cultural heritage places, traditions, and identities. Positive coverage may emphasize activities centered on cultural preservation, historical conservation, and community-driven tourism. Positive narratives emphasized the inclusive development models supported by BRI projects, highlighting examples of community participation, stakeholder engagement, and social inclusion in infrastructure development and socioeconomic activities. Negative narratives reflected worries about resolving cultural insensitivities and upholding local customs, traditions, and values in the context of BRI-related activities. The publication covered topics about cultural disputes, historical preservation issues, and the importance of cultural impact assessments. *The Kathmandu Post* highlighted the issues that communities confront in adjusting to changes brought about by BRI projects, including livelihood disruptions, income discrepancies, and socioeconomic inequities caused by fast infrastructure development.

All three newspapers do not cover sociocultural news as much as they do in other economic and political reporting about BRI projects in Nepal. There are only a few news pieces about BRI projects in Nepal and its sociocultural impacts on the Nepalese society in the country. This evidence shows that the media and news outlets give priority to economic development and geopolitical issues, which are trendier due to the current global climate.

5. Conclusion

Nepalese media provides a diverse representation of China's BRI projects in Nepal, addressing economic progress, geopolitical concerns, and culture implications. Newspapers emphasize the possibilities for infrastructure investment, trade opportunities, and regional connections that BRI projects may promote. Positive narratives highlight the potential for job creation, economic growth, and higher investment inflows, but critical analysis raises concerns about debt sustainability, financial risks, and project management transparency. From a geopolitical standpoint, newspapers investigated Nepal's strategic engagements, diplomatic connections, and regional dynamics driven by BRI investments. Positive media focused on strategic relationships, regional collaboration, and infrastructural connections, while unfavorable depictions raised concerns about geopolitical dependence, regional conflicts, and governance issues in BRI efforts.

In terms of social considerations, newspapers investigated the cultural interchange, tourist potential, and community development benefits provided by BRI initiatives. Positive narratives emphasized cultural collaboration, historical preservation, and inclusive development, whereas negative narratives focused on cultural and environmental consequences, social disruptions, and the need for social protections and sustainability strategies. Finally, Nepalese media provide a nuanced and complete view on China's BRI projects in Nepal, weighing the possible advantages and risks on economic, geopolitical, and sociocultural levels. Their coverage helps to influence public debate, policy deliberations, and critical analysis of BRI activities, while also pushing for responsible, inclusive, and sustainable development practices in Nepal's involvement with the BRI framework.

Acknowledgments

We wish to express our profound gratitude to Professor Dai Yonghong, Distinguished Professor and PhD Advisor at Shenzhen University, Dean of the College of International Studies, and Director of the Institute of Area and International Communication Studies, the Institute for China's Overseas Interests, and the Institute of Bay of Bengal Studies. His expert guidance, insightful feedback, and unwavering support were pivotal to the successful completion of this research.

Authors contributions

Lok Bahadur BK was responsible for the study design, data collection, and drafting of the manuscript. Ashok Poudel and Dipak Devkota assisted with data collection and contributed to the drafting of the manuscript. Professor Dai Yonghong provided critical revisions and proofreading of the manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by the major project entitled "Study on the Impact of the Situation in the Bay of Bengal Region on the Safety of China's East Data and West Computing Project" (Project No.22ZDA181), funded by the "National Social Science Foundation in 2022".

Competing interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Anunne, U. K., Thuy, P. P., Yan, J. T., & Yan, L. F. (2019). Framing analysis of Belt and Road Initiative coverage in major Nigerian, Malaysia, and Vietnamese Newspapers. *European Scientific Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2019.v15n29p1>
- Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190696726.001.0001>
- Chand, B. (2017). Disaster relief as a political tool: Analyzing Indian and Chinese responses after the Nepal earthquakes. *Strategic Analysis*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2017.1377893>
- Chen, L., & Zhang, W. (2016). China energy resources-oriented OBOR: Research on OBOR growthy strategy in China. *Basic Research Journal of Social and Political Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.103054>
- Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2007). Framing theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*.
- De Vreese, C. H. (2005). News framing: Theory and typology. *Information Design Journal & Document Design*. <https://doi.org/10.1075/idjdd.13.1.06vre>

- Emami, A., Welsh, D. H., Ramadani, V., & Davari, A. (2020). The impact of judgement and framing on entrepreneurs' decision-making. *Journal of Small Business & Entrepreneurship*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08276331.2018.1551461>
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Entman, R. M. (2007). Framing bias: Media in the distribution of power. *Journal of Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00336.x>
- Giri, A. (2018, September 8). China allows Nepal access to its ports, ending Indian monopoly. *The Kathmandu Post*.
- Holsti, O. R. (2004). Public opinion and foreign policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann consensus. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi, *The Blackwell companion to social movement*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Ivan, D. (2015). One belt & One road: Between cooperation and geopolitics in the Silk Road. *Contacto Global*.
- Jiang, Y. (2022). Framing the Belt and Road Initiative in Australian newspaper journalism from 2013 to 2020: From lukewarm acceptance to outright hostility. *American Communication Journal*.
- Jonsson, A. M. (2011). Framing environmental risks in the Baltic sea: A news media analysis. *Ambio*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-010-0124-2>
- Kaphle, A. (2019, September 2019). A blueprint for consolidating power: China exports Xi Jinping thought to Nepal. *The Kathmandu Post*. Retrieved from <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/09/24/a-blueprint-for-consolidating-power-china-exports-xi-jinping-thought-to-nepal>
- Liu, W., & Dunford, M. (2016). Inclusive globalization: Unpacking Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. Area development and policy. *Area Development and Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2016.1232598>
- Melissen, J. (2005). *The new public diplomacy: Soft power in international relations*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230554931>
- MoFA. (2020, March). *List of instruments signed and exchanged between Nepal and China*. Retrieved from <https://mofa.gov.np/list-of-instruments-signed-and-exchanged-between-nepal-and-china/>
- Murton, G., & Lord, A. (2020). Trans-Himalayan power corridors: Infrastructural politics and China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Political Geography*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102100>
- Nacos, B. L., Bloch-Elkon, Y., & Shapiro, R. Y. (2011). *Decision making in a glass house: Mass media, public opinion, and American and European foreign policy in the 21st century*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nepal, G. (2020, March). *Nepal disaster report 2015*. Retrieved from <http://drrportal.gov.np/uploads/document/329.pdf>.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft power: The means to success in world politics. *Public Affairs*.
- Peter, C. (2017). Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Lowy Institute for International Policy*. Retrieved from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/understanding-belt-and-road-initiative>
- Plachata, N. (2020). Narrating disasters: The complexities of citizenship and belonging in times of crisis. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.
- Ranjan, A. (2019). China's infrastructure projects in South Asia under BRI: An appraisal. *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*.
- Sarker, M. I., Hossain, M. A., Yin, X., & Sarker, M. K. (2018). One belt one road initiative of China: Implication for future of global development. *Modern Economy*. <https://doi.org/10.4236/me.2018.94040>
- Seesaghur, H. (2016). Corridors of Opportunities and Tensions: One Belt, One Road. *Wuhan University Center for Economic Diplomacy*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307164197_Corridors_of_Opportunities_And_Tensions_One_Belt_One_Road
- Snow, N. (2019). *Public diplomacy: Theoretical frameworks and case studies*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.518>
- Yeh, E. (2013). *Taming Tibet: Landscape transformation and the gift of Chinese development*. Cornell University Press. <http://doi.org/10.7591/9780801469787>