

# The Research on The Impact of China-US "The Belt and Road" Reporting on The Perception of Indonesian Citizens

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**Abstract.** Indonesia is the largest economy in Southeast Asia and an important route country of the Belt and Road Initiative. In this study, we use a 3 (conflict frame, neutral frame, cooperation frame) x 2 (US source, Chinese source) controlled experiment to investigate how different framing choices of Chinese and US source affect Indonesian audiences' perceptions of Belt and Road-related reports. The results show that different news sources and frames affect Indonesian audiences' trust and favourable perceptions of Belt and Road reports, as well as their intention to take some measures (obtaining more the Belt and Road information, disseminating the Belt and Road information, and participating in the Belt and Road construction). Under the cooperation and conflict frames, the Indonesian public trusts and favors US sources more and has a higher level of intention to take a number of measures. In the neutral frame, Chinese sources can be trusted and favored, on the contrary US sources are distrusted and disliked. Among Chinese sources, the cooperation frame is the most popular and motivates the audience to take relevant actions.

**Keywords:** News Framing, The Belt and Road, Audience Perception, International Communication.

## 1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative, which stands for the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, is an international co-operation initiative proposed by China in 2013, aiming to establish and strengthen the connectivity partnership with countries along the route, and seek win-win results for all parties concerned. By the end of June 2023, China had signed more than 200 cooperation documents with 152 countries and 32 international organizations to build the Belt and Road [1].

Indonesia is the largest economy in Southeast Asia and an important country along the Belt and Road. In 2022, bilateral trade between China and Indonesia reached US\$149.09 billion, up 19.8 per cent year-on-year. Among them, China imported \$77.77 billion from Indonesia, up 21.7 per cent year-on-year, and exported \$71.32 billion to Indonesia, up 17.8 per cent year-on-year. Mainland China's direct investment in Indonesia reached US\$8.23 billion, up 18.0 per cent year-on-year [2].

Despite the deepening cooperation between China and the countries along the routes, the Belt and Road Initiative is still experiencing difficulties in terms of overseas dissemination, i.e., how to make more people in the countries along the routes aware of and understand the Belt and Road Initiative. This is mainly reflected in, first, the postmodern deconstruction of the international dissemination of the Belt and Road Initiative by strong international discourse. For example, a study found that when eight mainstream media in Germany reported on The Belt and Road Initiative during the period of 2013-2022, most of them highlighted negative frames (economic threats, debt traps, political ambitions, infiltration and division, etc.) [3]; Secondly, the communication subjectivity of the countries along the Belt and Road is weak, and they are more cautious in their understanding of the Initiative related information [4]. As the Belt and Road geographically spans Asia, Africa and Europe, countries along the route differ in various aspects such as politics, economy and culture, and the differentiated and classified content requirements further increase the difficulty of the Belt and Road's external communication.

The Belt and Road Initiative has also encountered communication dilemmas in Indonesia. According to Pan et al. 2017, on the one hand, the Indonesian media has paid little attention to the BRI and produced few reports; on the other hand, the content of the Belt and Road Initiative reports shows that the Indonesian media also has a vague understanding of the concept. On the audience side,

there is also a split in the perception and attitude of the Indonesian society towards the Belt and Road Initiative. For example, the government is supportive of the Belt and Road Initiative, but many scholars and think tanks have questioned the significance of the Belt and Road Initiative, and surveys have shown that the Belt and Road Initiative lacks a public opinion base in Indonesia [5]. Anang Masduki et al. argue that this is due to two factors: firstly, the promotion of the "China threat theory" by Western countries through NGO such as the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and secondly, the weak subjectivity of the Indonesian media, which is reliant on information from Western media [6].

## 2. Literature Review

The Belt and Road Initiative is one of the major issues in overseas communication, and many studies have been conducted in China to explore the frames presented by the media in their coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative, how these frames are constructed, and how different subjects perceive the Belt and Road Initiative. For example, Zou analyses the news content about "the Belt and Road" in eight German mainstream media, and finds that they generally present a thematic frame dominated by exclusion, a narrative frame dominated by criticism, and a symbolic frame dominated by conflict [3]; in terms of the construction of news frames, Zhao analyses "People's Daily Overseas Edition" against the background of the theory of framing, and found that it made full use of "media events" to focus on shaping the image of China's economy and the image of an active and responsible great power [7]; in terms of audience perception, Zhang analysed the impact of different news frames on university students in China and the UAE respectively through a controlled experiment [8]. However, on the whole, most of the studies focus on the first two areas, and there are fewer studies on audience perceptions.

The conflict framing is considered to be one of the most common generic news frames in different media systems, countries and regions, and its main definition can be simply summarized as a frame that emphasizes conflict between individuals, groups or institutions [9]. A number of studies have focused on the impact of conflict frames on audiences. For example, Forgette and Morris found that public approval of politicians declined after watching conflict-ridden television coverage [10]; Mutz and Reeves found that conflict frames in news coverage eroded public trust in politics [11]; Guus et al, on the other hand, argue that different types of conflict framing have different impacts on audiences, with some stories containing conflict framing instead making audiences aware of the importance of political decision-making, leading to greater support for certain policies [12]. In contrast, there is no strict academic definition of co-operative frames, so this study refers to the above definition of conflict frames to give it a simple concept, i.e., frames that emphasize co-operation between individuals, groups or institutions. However, few studies have explored how co-operative frames in news reports affect audiences.

In overseas reports related to the Belt and Road Initiative, the use of conflict frames can be thought of as taking a stance against the initiative, highlighting the risks and potential crises that the Belt and Road Initiative poses to countries along the route, for example, Zou found that eight German mainstream media outlets preferred to use protectionism, economic threats and debt traps in their coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative from 2013 to 2022. While on the political front, the political side prefers the four thematic frames of strategic expansion, political ambition, infiltration and division, concealment and delusion [3], all of which can be incorporated into the conflict frame because they essentially emphasize the conflict between China's economic and political interests and the interests of the countries along the route on a personal or social level. The cooperation frame emphasizes the Belt and Road as a means to promote the development of China's economic and social interests through political mutual trust, economic integration and cultural mutual trust. It is a win-win road of cooperation that promotes common development and achieves common prosperity, and a road of peace and friendship that enhances understanding and trust and strengthens exchanges on all fronts

[1]. The reports highlighting the neutral frame take a neutral stance, describing both the benefits and negative impacts of the Belt and Road on the development of countries along the route.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Experiment design

In terms of news text design, based on the framing theory and the definitions of conflict, neutrality, and co-operation frames, this study designed three sets of news texts, the first emphasizing the conflict frame with four sub-themes of "industrial impact", "job grabbing", "ecological damage", and "debt risk"; the second set emphasizes the co-operation frame, which focuses on the benefits that the Belt and Road has brought to Indonesia at the societal and individual levels, such as "economic development", "economic development", and "economic development". And the third set emphasizes the neutral frame, which is a balance between the first two sets, i.e., describing both "economic development" and potential "debt risks". "Debt risk". The above texts are based on media reports on the development of BRI in Indonesia from China and other countries in 2022-2023.

To test whether three news texts could be considered to highlight certain types of frames prior to the formal experiment, 15 journalism undergraduates participated in a pre-test of the news texts, where they were randomly assigned to three groups and asked to fill out a questionnaire containing the question, "Do you think that the frames or themes highlighted in this story are conflict/neutrality/cooperation?" (5-point scale, "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). All three questionnaires scored above 4, so the three news texts could be considered as highlighting the corresponding frames.

The news text that passed the pre-test was translated from Chinese to Indonesian by a professional Sino-Indonesian bilingual translator, and then the translated text was evaluated by two other Sino-Indonesian bilingual translators in terms of two dimensions: accuracy and consistency. The scores of the two dimensions were 5 and 4.5 respectively, so the Indonesian version of the news text could be used in this experiment.

For the measurement of perceptions, the study used a questionnaire containing the following five questions: (1) How credible do you think this report is? (5-point scale, "not at all credible" to "completely credible"); (2) What is your attitude towards this report? (5-point scale, "Not at all credible" to "Completely credible"); (3) I am interested in learning more about the Belt and Road; (4) I will introduce the relevant information to the people around me who do not know about the Belt and Road.; (5) I will participate in the construction of the Belt and Road in the future if I have the chance. (Questions (3) to (5) are on a five-point scale from "totally disagree" to "totally agree".)

#### 3.2. Sample selection and experimental procedure

In this study, the target population was Indonesian, and the recruitment information for the experiment was released to Indonesian employees working in several large-scale integrated industrial parks in Indonesia, because the occupational coverage of employees in such parks is broader, which makes the sample of the experiment representative. The recruitment information clearly stated that the experiment was only open to Indonesian employees who were "completely unaware", "very unaware" and "unaware" of the Belt and Road.

In September 2023, with the help of Chinese staff and local interpreters, the researcher randomly divided the recruited employees into six equal groups and administered six sets of questionnaires in the official language of Indonesia, and each group of participants was asked to read one of the six types of news texts, determined by the type of source and frame. After a brief introduction by the researcher, the participants will read the news text and fill out the questionnaire without interfering with each other, which is expected to take 10-15 minutes. After completing the questionnaire, it was collected by the researcher.

#### 4. Experiment Result

After reading the news text shown to be from Chinese source highlighting the cooperation framework, participants' mean ratings on all five dimensions were higher than those of the other two groups, suggesting that the same news from Chinese media with content highlighting the benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative to Indonesian society and individuals is more likely to be favorably perceived by the Indonesian public (M = 3.43, SD = 1.135) and trust (M=3.47, SD=0.86), and Indonesian people are also more interested in learning more after reading the news (M=3.23, SD=1.104), have the willingness to share the information to people around them (M=3.17, SD=1.053) and take action to participate in the construction of the Belt and Road project (M=3.5, SD=0.9). Although the ratings of basically all dimensions show a trend of cooperation frame > neutral frame > conflict frame, the ratings of the questions "I am interested in learning more about the Belt and Road" and "I will introduce the relevant information to the people around me who do not know about the Belt and Road" show that the neutral frame makes some Indonesian people lose interest in learning more about the content, and the tendency to share the information decreases as well (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Impact of different frames from Chinese source on cognitive perceptions

Dependent variable	Chinese source		
	Cooperation frame	Neutral frame	Conflict frame
How credible do you think this report is?	3.43 (1.135)	3.27 (1.081)	3.07 (.944)
What is your attitude towards this report?	3.47 (.86)	3.03 (.999)	3.00 (.91)
I am interested in learning more about the Belt and Road.	3.23 (1.104)	2.90 (1.155)	2.97 (1.033)
I will introduce the relevant information to the people around me who do not know about the Belt and Road.	3.17 (1.053)	2.97 (1.098)	3.00 (.947)
I will participate in the construction of the Belt and Road in the future if I have the chance.	3.5 (.90)	3.00 (1.114)	2.93 (1.112)

Of the three groups who were told that the news they read was from the US media, participants in the group who read the news that highlighted the neutral frame gave the lowest ratings on the five dimensions and the standard deviation of each dimension was less than 1, representing consistency in the ratings given by participants within the group. (See Table 2-1) A paired samples t-test shows that participants in the other two groups who read the corresponding news gave close ratings on the five dimensions without any significant difference ( $p > 0.05$ ), which indicates that news from the US media, whether it is news that highlights a cooperative frame or a conflict frame, has a similar impact on the perception of the Indonesian population. (See Table 2-2)

**Table 2-1.** Impact of different frames from US source on cognitive perceptions

Dependent variable	US source		
	Cooperation frame	Neutral frame	Conflict frame
How credible do you think this report is?	3.5 (1.135)	2.70 (.952)	3.53 (.973)
What is your attitude towards this report?	3.53 (.973)	2.40 (.938)	3.67 (.844)
I am interested in learning more about the Belt and Road.	3.27 (1.172)	2.43 (.935)	3.30 (1.149)
I will introduce the relevant information to the people around me who do not know about the Belt and Road.	3.37 (.964)	2.23 (.971)	3.43 (1.040)
I will participate in the construction of the Belt and Road in the future if I have the chance.	3.53 (1.042)	2.30 (915)	3.37 (.098)

**Table 2-2.** Differential Effects of Cooperative and Conflict Frames on Perceived Situations in U.S. Sources

Dependent variable	US source		
	Cooperation frame	Conflict frame	t value
How credible do you think this report is?	3.57 (1.135)	3.53 (.973)	.033
What is your attitude towards this report?	3.53 (.973)	3.67 (.844)	-.133
I am interested in learning more about the Belt and Road.	3.27 (1.172)	3.30 (1.149)	-.033
I will introduce the relevant information to the people around me who do not know about the Belt and Road.	3.37 (.964)	3.43 (1.040)	-.067
I will participate in the construction of the Belt and Road in the future if I have the chance.	3.53 (1.042)	3.37 (1.098)	.167

In order to test the effect of news from different source that highlight similar frames on the cognitive situation of the Indonesian population, this study also conducted the following comparisons.

The results showed that the effect of reading news with cooperative frames from Chinese source and US source on the participants' cognitive situation was also similar ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, in the cross-sectional comparisons of the dimensions, participants perceived the reports with positive views on the Belt and Road from U.S. source as more credible ( $M=3.57$ ) and favourable ( $M=3.53$ ) than the news on the cooperation framework from Chinese media, while such reports from the U.S. were more likely to stimulate participants to learn more about the relevant information ( $M=3.27$ ) and enhance their desire to share information ( $M=3.37$ ), and even motivated them to participate in the Belt and Road project ( $M=3.53$ ). (See Table 3.) This result is consistent with some scholars' studies and think tanks' reports that even though the substantive content of the news in this experiment still focuses on the positive image of the Belt and Road, many Indonesians are still cognitively more inclined to believe and feel more favourably about reports from the US, which is closely related to the longstanding dependence of the Indonesian society as a whole on the strong discourse power of the West.

**Table 3.** The Effect of Cooperation Frame on Perceived Situations in Different Sources

Dependent variable	Cooperation frame		
	Chinese source	US source	t value
How credible do you think this report is?	3.43 (1.135)	3.57 (1.135)	-.133
What is your attitude towards this report?	3.47 (.86)	3.53 (.973)	-.067
I am interested in learning more about the Belt and Road.	3.23 (1.104)	3.27 (1.172)	-.033
I will introduce the relevant information to the people around me who do not know about the Belt and Road.	3.17 (1.053)	3.37 (.964)	-.200
I will participate in the construction of the Belt and Road in the future if I have the chance.	3.5 (.90)	3.53 (1.042)	-.033

In terms of the neutrality frame, overall participants rated reports from Chinese source higher than those from U.S. source, and the ratings of the two groups were significantly different according to the results of the paired-samples t-test. In the three dimensions of credibility, goodwill and willingness to participate in the constructions, the ratings of news from Chinese source ranged from 3-4, with a positive bias, while the ratings of news from U.S. source ranged from 2-3, with a negative bias, indicating that participants preferred to see the U.S. media have a clear stance when reporting on the Belt and Road, and that reports with a neutral stance would lose the trust and goodwill of the participants. For reports from Chinese source, the neutral frame can gain participants' trust and goodwill to a certain extent and can stimulate some participants' willingness to participate in the Belt and Road project despite the low level of influence (M=3.00), which is the opposite of the influence brought by reading news from US source. However, it is also important to note that this type of framing can cause participants to lose their desire to share information (M=2.90) and acquire information (M=2.97). (See Table 4.)

**Table 4.** The Effect of Neutral Frame on Perceived Situations in Different Sources

Dependent variable	Neutral frame				
	Chinese source	US source	t value	df	Significance
How credible do you think this report is?	3.27 (1.081)	2.70 (.952)	.567	60	.032
What is your attitude towards this report?	3.03 (.999)	2.40 (.938)	.633	60	.006
I am interested in learning more about the Belt and Road.	2.90 (1.155)	2.43 (.935)	.467	60	.046
I will introduce the relevant information to the people around me who do not know about the Belt and Road.	2.97 (1.098)	2.23 (.971)	.733	60	.002
I will participate in the construction of the Belt and Road in the future if I have the chance.	3.00 (1.114)	2.30 (.915)	.700	60	.002

In terms of conflict framing, news that was told to be from U.S. sources received higher ratings on all five dimensions than the ratings given by participants after reading news from Chinese sources, especially on the dimensions of credibility and goodwill, which showed a significant difference, with more participants being willing to believe and like the U.S. media's negative coverage of the Belt and Road. In addition, despite the fact that the readings were mainly about the negative impacts of the Belt and Road, the U.S. media reports were still able to motivate participants to participate in the Belt

and Road projects ( $M=3.37$ ), whereas similar reports in the Chinese media may have had the opposite effect ( $M=2.93$ ).

**Table 5.** The Effect of Conflict Frame on Perceived Situations in Different Sources

Dependent variable	Neutral frame				
	Chinese source	US source	t value	df	Significance
How credible do you think this report is?	3.07 (.944)	3.53 (.973)	-.467	60	.028
What is your attitude towards this report?	3.00 (.91)	3.67 (.844)	-.667	60	.004
I am interested in learning more about the Belt and Road.	2.97 (1.033)	3.30 (1.149)	-.333	60	.224
I will introduce the relevant information to the people around me who do not know about the Belt and Road.	3.00 (.947)	3.43 (1.040)	-.433	60	.091
I will participate in the construction of the Belt and Road in the future if I have the chance.	2.93 (1.112)	3.37 (1.098)	-.433	60	.079

## 5. Discussion

The analysis of the experimental results reveals that under the Belt and Road topic, both the source and the frame of the news have an impact on the perception of the Indonesian public. Overall, when reading the conflict and cooperation frames, the audience tends to trust the reports from US source, which are more likely to motivate them to take relevant actions, such as obtaining more information about the Belt and Road, sharing information about the Belt and Road, and participating in the construction of the Belt and Road, whereas the audience is generally distrustful and averse to the neutral frames of the reports from US source. The Chinese source' cooperation frames are rated more favorably than those highlighting other types of frames, and the Chinese source are rated more favorably than the US source in all aspects, even though there is a certain loss of the desire to share information and to obtain more relevant information in the same neutral stance.

It is worth noting that regardless of the combination of source and frames, the Indonesian public rated each dimension between 2 and 4, mostly between 3 and 4. This means that Indonesian audiences mostly read Belt and Road-related news with an attitude of "not caring", which is reflected in the generally higher ratings for the cooperation frame, telling how the Belt and Road can improve individual interests, and the generally lower ratings for the neutral and conflict frames, which focus on the macro-narrative. Moreover, in the conflict frame dimension of the US source, even though the news content elaborated on the possible negative impacts of the Belt and Road for Indonesia, many Indonesian audiences still believed that they would actively participate in Belt and Road constructions if given the opportunity. This may be related to the different personal and national views of some Indonesian people, this also shows a flaw in this study, which does not take into account the impact of the use of personal and social frames in the news on audience perceptions. Further, it should be combined with the methodology of interviews, which can explore the mechanisms of impact generation.

The results of this study show the tendency of the Indonesian public in terms of news source and news frames; for the US media, having a clear stance in reporting on the Belt and Road in order to gain the trust of the audience, and a neutral frame will make the report less credible; and for the Chinese media, in order to be able to let more Indonesian people know about the Belt and Road, and motivate them to participate in the construction of the Belt and Road, it is necessary to maintain the output of a cooperative frame.

## 6. Conclusion

This study endeavors to answer two questions through a controlled experiment, "What is the effect of different news frames (conflict, cooperation, neutral) on the Belt and Road theme on the perception of the Indonesian population?" "What is the impact of different news sources (China, USA) on the Belt and Road theme on the Indonesian public perception?". By organizing a 3×2 controlled experiment in Indonesia (N=180) and analyzing the ratings given by the participants in each control group on five different dimensions after reading the news that consisted of a combination of different frames and sources, this study found that news from US sources with a non-neutral stance on reporting on the Belt and Road is more likely to gain the trust and popularity of the Indonesian public compared to the same type of reporting from Chinese media, the influence that motivates them to adopt relevant behaviors is also stronger. In contrast, the Belt and Road news from Chinese sources only has a comparative advantage over US sources on the dimensions of creditability and being liked when the neutral frame is highlighted. Cooperation frames are the only type of frames that inspire the Indonesian public to participate in the Belt and Road project regardless of whether they are combined with U.S. sources or Chinese sources, whereas conflict frames can only achieve a similar effect when they are combined with U.S. sources, and when they are combined with neutral frames and Chinese sources. In future research more types and levels of news frames can be included in the variables for comprehensive consideration, while in the experimental methodology interviews and other sessions can be added on the basis of controlled experiments, thus making the results more convincing.

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