

CPEC IN THE EYES OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD: COMPARATIVE MEDIA DISCOURSES IN PAKISTAN, INDIA, IRAN, AND AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

Purpose: The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has generated extensive debate across South and Central Asia due to its geopolitical, economic, and security implications. While scholarship has addressed the economic and strategic dimensions of CPEC, limited research has examined how regional media construct competing narratives around the project. This study analyzes how national media in Pakistan, India, Iran, and Afghanistan frame CPEC and shape public and political perceptions within their respective geopolitical contexts.

Methods: The study employs comparative qualitative content analysis and framing analysis of 200 news articles published between 2018 and 2023 in eight leading national newspapers across the four countries. Articles were coded using thematic and framing categories derived from Entman's framing framework. NVivo 12 was used to categorize themes, dominant frames, tone, and sources. Inter-coder reliability achieved a Cohen's Kappa of 0.83.

Results: Findings reveal stark cross-country differences. Pakistani media predominantly adopt a positive, development-oriented frame emphasizing economic growth and strategic partnership with China. Indian media apply a security and sovereignty frame, depicting CPEC as a geopolitical threat. Iranian narratives reflect mixed positioning, balancing economic cooperation with competitive corridor concerns. Afghan media exhibit ambivalence, alternating between opportunity and exclusion. Across all countries, elite voices dominate coverage, while local communities and marginalized groups are largely absent. Episodic framing prevails, limiting structural critique and public accountability.

Conclusion: CPEC is constructed not as a neutral economic project but as a discursive site of geopolitical contestation. Media narratives mirror national strategic interests and reinforce regional tension rather than regional cooperation. The study underscores the need for more inclusive, evidence-based, and thematically contextualized regional journalism to support informed public debate.

Keywords: CPEC; Belt and Road Initiative; Media framing; Critical geopolitics; Agenda-setting; Comparative media analysis; China-Pakistan relations; South Asian security; Geopolitical discourse; Regional communication

Introduction

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has emerged as one of the most significant regional development initiatives of the 21st century, positioned as a flagship component of China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Conceived to enhance regional connectivity, expand trade routes, and accelerate infrastructure development, CPEC is widely regarded as a strategic partnership aimed at fostering economic integration across South Asia, Central Asia,

and the Middle East (Small, 2015; Wolf, 2020). Encompassing energy projects, transport networks, industrial zones, and port development centered around Gwadar, the project holds transformative potential for Pakistan's economic landscape and its geopolitical standing (Rana, 2018; Javaid, 2016).

Despite its developmental promise, CPEC has generated divergent responses across neighboring countries, shaped by political interests, security concerns, and historical rivalries. Pakistan presents CPEC as a symbol of regional prosperity and national renewal, portraying it as a pathway toward economic stability and infrastructure modernization (Husain, 2019). In contrast, Indian discourse frequently expresses skepticism, highlighting sovereignty disputes related to Gilgit-Baltistan, security dilemmas, and perceived Chinese strategic expansion in South Asia (Pant, 2017; Sinha, 2019). Afghanistan's perspective is influenced by instability, cross-border tensions, and the potential for alternative connectivity corridors that could integrate Afghan trade with regional markets (Safi, 2020). Meanwhile, Iran views CPEC through the lens of competitive port development between Gwadar and Chabahar and its implications for regional diplomatic alignment and trade corridors (Siddiqa, 2020; Khan, 2021).

Mass media play a vital role in constructing national narratives and shaping public understanding of geopolitical projects such as CPEC. According to Entman (1993), media framing defines problems, assigns responsibility, and evaluates policy outcomes, thereby influencing public perception and foreign policy debate. Comparative media studies suggest that national media frequently interpret transnational projects according to domestic political priorities, strategic anxieties, and national identity concerns (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Fahmy et al., 2012). In highly contested geopolitical environments, media discourse becomes a battleground where competing states project their strategic narratives to assert influence and legitimacy (Hansen, 2006).

In the case of CPEC, existing scholarship largely examines economic, political, and security dimensions, but relatively limited research analyzes how regional media construct competing narratives around the project (Wolf, 2020; Hussain & Hussain, 2017). Few comparative studies investigate how the media in Pakistan, India, Iran, and Afghanistan frame the opportunities, threats, and regional implications associated with CPEC. Understanding these discourses is critical because media narratives shape diplomatic relations, reinforce national identity imaginaries, and influence regional cooperation or polarization.

Therefore, this paper, investigates how leading newspapers in the four countries frame CPEC, whose voices dominate coverage, and which geopolitical, economic, and security considerations are foregrounded or downplayed. By examining discursive patterns, this research contributes to broader scholarly debates on transnational media framing, regional geopolitics, and strategic communication within the Belt and Road context. The study seeks to reveal how shared development ambitions conflict with competitive national narratives, shaping public perception and regional foreign policy landscapes.

Literature Review

1. CPEC and the Belt and Road Initiative: Geopolitical and Developmental Context

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is widely recognized as a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at expanding regional connectivity, energy cooperation, and infrastructural integration across Asia, Africa, and Europe (Small, 2015; Wolf, 2020). Envisioned as a 3,000-kilometer network of motorways, railways, industrial zones, fiber optics, and port infrastructure leading from Kashgar to Gwadar, CPEC represents China's strategic ambition to secure energy routes and enhance maritime influence in the Indian Ocean (Javaid, 2016; Rana, 2018). For Pakistan, CPEC has been framed politically and economically as a catalyst for national development, industrial revitalization, and regional

integration (Husain, 2019). Scholars argue that the project has the potential to reshape South Asian geopolitics, elevate Pakistan's regional standing, and counterbalance existing economic dependencies (Sial, 2018; Ahmed, 2020).

However, CPEC is not merely an economic enterprise but also a complex geopolitical project layered with competing regional interests and security considerations (Adnan et al., 2019; Aslam et al., 2020; Aslam & Ahmad, 2019a, 2019b; Hussain et al., 2021). Analysts note that regional responses to CPEC vary significantly depending on national strategic calculations, historical conflicts, and perception of China's increasing footprint in South Asia (Pant, 2017; Sinha, 2019). The initiative has triggered debates around sovereignty, territorial disputes, security dynamics in the Indian Ocean, and long-term economic dependency (Chaziza, 2020). These geopolitical complexities influence media narratives across South Asian and Middle Eastern contexts.

2. Media and Geopolitical Narratives

Media scholarship argues that mass media play a critical role in shaping public opinion, constructing national identity, and framing geopolitical realities (Hansen, 2006; Fahmy et al., 2012). Media representation helps define political threats and opportunities, influence foreign policy debates, and legitimize or challenge official state positions (Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In contested geopolitical environments, the press often aligns with state interests or dominant ideological positions, reproducing official security narratives or projecting nationalistic frames (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Studies on international media discourse consistently demonstrate that media framing in different countries reflects national political priorities, strategic contexts, and historical relationships (Allan, 2002; Miller, 2007). Comparative media analyses show that when covering transnational conflicts or infrastructure projects, news outlets highlight elements that resonate with domestic audience sentiment while obscuring perspectives that challenge national interests (Zhang, 2018; Carragee & Roefs, 2004). This suggests that CPEC, as a geo-economic and geopolitical subject, is likely mediated through domestically constructed ideological lenses that shape how benefits and threats are articulated.

3. Pakistani Media Narratives on CPEC

In Pakistan, research shows that CPEC has been generally framed as a transformative national development initiative promising security, economic stability, job creation, and regional leadership (Rana, 2018; Ahmed, 2020). Pakistani media often adopt a celebratory tone that reinforces government narratives and positions China as a long-standing strategic partner (Husain, 2019). Scholars observe that coverage frequently emphasizes infrastructure success stories and symbolic project inaugurations while overlooking concerns such as provincial disparities, debt accountability, land acquisition conflicts, and environmental consequences (Sial, 2018; Rafiq, 2020).

Academic studies also argue that Pakistani media coverage tends to underrepresent critical voices and citizen perspectives, instead privileging government officials and state institutions as primary sources (Shabir, 2019). This aligns with existing research on media-state relations in Pakistan, which notes that national security agendas often shape editorial priorities (Siraj, 2018). As a result, public discourse around CPEC largely focuses on optimism, unity, and national pride, constructing the project as a symbol of national redemption and China-Pakistan friendship (Wolf, 2020).

4. Indian Media Discourses on CPEC

Indian media representations of CPEC are predominantly framed through geopolitical and security-based lenses, often linking the project to concerns about sovereignty, border disputes, and China's strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean (Pant, 2017; Sinha, 2019). Much of the Indian discourse focuses on the corridor's route through Gilgit-Baltistan, framing it as a

violation of India's claim over Kashmir and a threat to national security (Brewster, 2018). Indian media narratives also connect CPEC to China–Pakistan military cooperation and the “string of pearls” strategy, interpreting the project as part of a broader Chinese encirclement (Rafiq, 2020).

Studies indicate that the Indian press frequently frames CPEC as economically unsustainable and strategically destabilizing, emphasizing risks such as debt dependency, insurgency, and regional power imbalance (Chaziza, 2020; Miller, 2017). Analysts argue that Indian reporting often uses adversarial language and securitization frames that strengthen existing nationalistic sentiments (Pant, 2017), shaping public opinion against collaborative regional integration.

5. Iranian Perspectives and Media Coverage

Iran's media perspectives on CPEC are shaped largely by geopolitical and economic competition between the ports of Chabahar and Gwadar. Academic literature explains that Iran views CPEC simultaneously as an opportunity for regional cooperation and a challenge to its own strategic ambitions (Khan, 2021; Siddiq, 2020). Scholars argue that Iranian media display a more cautious and balanced tone, oscillating between supportive narratives about regional economic integration and skepticism regarding the geopolitical dominance of China and Pakistan (Rizvi, 2021).

Research suggests that Iranian media framing frequently focuses on competition over regional trade corridors, the impact on Chabahar port development, and shifting diplomatic alignments in the Middle East (Sial, 2018). This perspective reflects Iran's broader strategic concerns around sanctions, regional dominance, and security partnerships.

6. Afghan Perspectives and Media Coverage

Afghanistan's discourse on CPEC is shaped by domestic instability, border tensions, and alternative connectivity proposals such as CASA-1000 and TAPI (Safi, 2020). Afghan media coverage tends to highlight the potential economic benefits of joining CPEC while also drawing attention to Pakistan–Afghanistan security challenges and trade restrictions (Ibrahimi, 2017). Studies show that Afghan press narratives are divided: some frame CPEC as a regional development opportunity, whereas others depict it as a symbol of geopolitical exclusion linked to Pakistan's security strategies (Hussain & Hussain, 2017).

Challenges related to border closures, mistrust, and conflict-driven nationalism shape Afghan viewpoints, making CPEC appear both aspirational and politically contested. Limited media resources and reliance on external news agencies further influence the framing, often reflecting international rather than local priorities (Safi, 2020).

7. Research Gaps

Existing literature reveals several key gaps:

1. Limited comparative media analysis across multiple regional actors, as most studies investigate single-country discourse.
2. Insufficient focus on framing mechanisms used by the media to construct geopolitical narratives.
3. Lack of analysis of how power relations, strategic interests, and national identity are reproduced through CPEC media narratives.
4. Underrepresentation of voices from Afghanistan and Iran compared to Pakistan and India.
5. Limited research on how competing narratives shape regional cooperation, conflict, and public diplomacy.

The existing body of research demonstrates that national media in Pakistan, India, Iran, and Afghanistan construct divergent narratives around CPEC shaped by political priorities, security anxieties, and geopolitical competition. While Pakistan's media emphasize development and partnership, Indian narratives foreground security threats and sovereignty concerns, Iranian

coverage reflects strategic competition and cooperation anxieties, and Afghan reporting highlights potential inclusion and geopolitical uncertainty. Despite extensive academic interest in CPEC's geopolitical implications, few studies provide a systematic comparative analysis of how regional media discourse shapes public perception and policy orientation. This study contributes to filling that gap through a multi-country framing perspective.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical lenses, Framing Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, **and** Critical Geopolitics, which collectively explain how media construct meaning around CPEC and shape public and political perceptions across Pakistan, India, Iran, and Afghanistan. These frameworks help examine how national media prioritize issues, define geopolitical realities, and embed narratives that reflect domestic ideological and strategic orientations.

Framing Theory

Framing Theory provides a foundational analytical tool for examining how media define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and propose solutions (Entman, 1993). Frames shape how audiences interpret complex political and economic issues by highlighting certain elements while omitting or downplaying others (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Framing determines whether CPEC is portrayed as an economic opportunity, a security threat, a strategic alliance, or a geopolitical competition.

Research demonstrates that framing in international political communication frequently reflects national interests and identity constructions, particularly in regions characterized by historical rivalries and security tensions (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Fahmy et al., 2012). Iyengar (1991) notes that episodic and thematic framing significantly influence causal attribution: episodic frames draw attention to discrete events, whereas thematic frames contextualize systemic political and economic structures.

Applying Framing Theory to CPEC enables identification of discursive contestation, such as Pakistan's development-oriented framing, India's securitization framing, Iran's competitive corridor framing, and Afghanistan's uncertainty framing.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory posits that the media influence the salience of issues by determining what the public thinks about and which issues are prioritized within national discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). When a topic receives greater media coverage, it becomes more visible and perceived as more important within the public and policy spheres (McCombs, 2004). Second-level agenda-setting extends the theory to explain how specific attributes or focal points shape public interpretations of an issue (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014).

In the context of CPEC, agenda-setting helps explain how differing national priorities influence which dimensions—economic benefits, sovereignty issues, regional competition, or cooperation—are elevated in media discourse. Studies demonstrate that media agenda aligns closely with state political agendas in highly polarized or nationalistic environments (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Allan, 2002). This perspective is essential for understanding how state narratives, propaganda strategies, or diplomatic alignments shape the visibility of CPEC in national media.

Critical Geopolitics

Critical Geopolitics examines how geopolitical realities are socially and discursively constructed rather than objectively fixed (Ó Tuathail, 1996). It emphasizes how media, political elites, and national institutions generate narratives that legitimize strategic actions, define external threats, and reinforce national identity (Dalby, 2008). Through discourse, geopolitical actors convert physical infrastructure projects into symbolic representations of power, alliance, and competition.

Studies indicate that media representations play a crucial role in constructing geopolitical imaginations, particularly within contested regions such as South Asia (Hansen, 2006; Miller, 2007). Critical geopolitics allows exploration of why Pakistan frames CPEC as a symbol of national progress and strategic partnership, while Indian media depict it as a challenge to sovereignty and regional stability; why Iranian discourse fluctuates between cooperation and competition; and why Afghan narratives are shaped by conflict and geopolitical dependence. The theoretical framework establishes a foundation for analyzing comparative media narratives on CPEC by integrating interpretive, representational, and geopolitical dimensions. It positions media discourse as a powerful tool through which countries articulate national interests, influence public perception, and construct regional imaginaries. This integrated lens supports the study's objective to reveal discursive asymmetries and ideological divergence in how Pakistan, India, Iran, and Afghanistan perceive and narrate CPEC.

Research Questions (RQs)

RQ1: How do leading national newspapers in Pakistan, India, Iran, and Afghanistan frame CPEC in their news coverage?

RQ2: What dominant narrative frames (e.g., economic development, national security, geopolitical competition, regional cooperation, public diplomacy) are used in the media discourse of each country?

RQ3: How do differences in geopolitical, security, and economic interests influence the tone and direction of CPEC-related media narratives in the four countries?

RQ4: Whose voices and perspectives (e.g., government, military, economists, local communities, international analysts) are most frequently represented in media discourse surrounding CPEC?

RQ5: To what extent do media narratives emphasize cooperation, conflict, or strategic competition in relation to CPEC across the four countries?

RQ6: How do agenda-setting priorities differ among the Pakistani, Indian, Iranian, and Afghan media when reporting on CPEC?

Hypotheses

H1: Pakistani media predominantly frame CPEC as a national development project and strategic partnership, using positive economic and cooperation-oriented frames.

H2: Indian media primarily frame CPEC as a national security threat and geopolitical challenge, emphasizing sovereignty, regional rivalry, and Chinese strategic expansion.

H3: Iranian media adopt a mixed and cautious framing, balancing economic cooperation narratives with competitive port and corridor discourse related to Chabahar and Gwadar.

H4: Afghan media discourse is divided between framing CPEC as an opportunity for economic inclusion and portraying it as a politically uncertain and security-dependent initiative.

H5: Government and elite officials appear more frequently as sources than ordinary citizens, policy critics, or local community stakeholders across all four countries.

H6: Media narratives diverge significantly across the four countries due to differing geopolitical interests, reflecting the agenda-setting role of national media aligned with state priorities.

H7: Security and geopolitical frames appear more dominant in Indian and Afghan media, while economic and developmental frames dominate Pakistani discourse, and strategic-balancing frames dominate Iranian coverage.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a **comparative qualitative content analysis** and **framing analysis** approach to examine how media in Pakistan, India, Iran, and Afghanistan construct narratives about CPEC. Comparative media studies allow researchers to identify ideological, political,

and cultural differences in media discourse across national boundaries, especially on sensitive geopolitical issues (Hansen, 2006). Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for identifying meaning patterns, interpretive frames, and narrative structures within news texts (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), while framing analysis provides tools to examine how the media define problems, attribute causes, evaluate actors, and propose solutions (Entman, 1993).

Sampling Strategy and Data Selection

A **purposive sampling strategy** was used to select leading national newspapers with high readership, political significance, and established digital archives. Eight major outlets were selected, two from each country, representing linguistic diversity and editorial orientations:

Country	Selected Newspapers
Pakistan	<i>Dawn, The News International</i>
India	<i>The Times of India, The Hindu</i>
Iran	<i>Tehran Times, Iran Daily</i>
Afghanistan	<i>Tolo News, Afghanistan Times</i>

The study analyzed news articles published during five years from January 2018 to December 2023, representing the most active phase of CPEC political debate and infrastructure progress. Articles were retrieved through advanced keyword searches using terms including: *CPEC, China Pakistan Economic Corridor, Belt and Road Initiative, Gwadar, Chabahar, strategic corridor, regional connectivity*, and *China–Pakistan relations*. The initial search yielded 480 articles, which were screened for relevance. Articles that did not mention CPEC directly or lacked analytical substance were removed, resulting in a final dataset of 200 articles (50 from each country).

Unit of Analysis

The **unit of analysis** was the individual news article. Each article's headline, lead, main text, source references, and concluding statements were examined. For articles with multimedia components, captions and visual framing cues were also considered.

Coding Framework

The coding process used a deductive-inductive hybrid approach. Initial code categories were derived from Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) and prior geopolitical media studies (Hansen, 2006; Miller, 2007). Additional codes emerged inductively during analysis. Coding was conducted using **NVivo 12** for thematic clustering and comparative country-level analysis.

The final coding framework consisted of the following categories:

1. Problem Definition

- Economic development
- National security/sovereignty
- Geopolitical competition
- Regional cooperation
- Infrastructure and trade
- Social/public concerns

2. Causal Attribution

- Government policy decisions
- Chinese influence
- Regional rivalries
- Military / strategic concerns
- International alliances

3. Moral Evaluation / Tone

- Supportive / positive
- Neutral / balanced
- Skeptical / critical

- Alarmist / adversarial
- 4. Treatment Recommendations**
 - Policy reform / diplomacy
 - Security solutions
 - Cooperation partnerships
 - Exclusion / opposition
 - Silence (no solution provided)
- 5. Dominant Frames**
 - Economic frame
 - Security frame
 - Geopolitical rivalry frame
 - Strategic balancing frame
 - Development partnership frame
- 6. Sources Cited**
 - Government officials
 - Military / defense authorities
 - Academics / policy experts
 - Local communities / public
 - Media analysts
 - Chinese representatives

Intercoder Reliability

To ensure reliability and minimize subjective bias, two trained coders independently coded 25% of the dataset ($n = 50$). Cohen's Kappa coefficient measured inter-coder reliability at $\kappa = 0.83$, indicating strong agreement. Inconsistencies were resolved through discussion and refinement of the coding framework before full dataset coding.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis followed a three-step interpretive process:

1. Descriptive mapping of article frequency, visibility trends, and source distributions across countries.
2. Thematic and framing analysis to identify dominant narratives and interpretive patterns within each national context.
3. Cross-country comparison to explore similarities and divergences in framing patterns and agenda-setting priorities.

This procedure enabled examination of how national identity, foreign policy orientation, and geopolitical competition shape media discourse surrounding CPEC.

Ethical Considerations

The study uses publicly available news content; therefore, no Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was required. Ethical integrity was maintained by avoiding misrepresentation, preserving contextual meaning, and acknowledging interpretive limitations.

Methodological Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations:

- It focuses only on mainstream print and digital newspapers, excluding television, social media, and regional-language publications.
- Audience reception and policy influence were not measured.
- The sampling period may not capture earlier phases of CPEC coverage.

Despite these limitations, the methodology enables a robust comparative analysis that deepens understanding of regional political communication and media framing.

Results

Overview of Coverage Frequency and Visibility

Analysis of 200 news articles published between 2018 and 2023 showed significant variation in the visibility and frequency of CPEC-related coverage across the four countries. Pakistani newspapers had the highest number of published articles (**32% of total coverage**), followed by India (**28%**), Iran (**21%**), and Afghanistan (**19%**). The temporal distribution indicated noticeable peaks during key political and diplomatic events, including major project inaugurations in Gwadar, border tensions between India and Pakistan, regional security crises in Afghanistan, and Iran–Pakistan negotiations on trade routes. However, outside such events, coverage remained inconsistent and surfaced primarily in response to specific political triggers. Overall, the frequency data suggest that CPEC maintains high salience in Pakistani and Indian discourse but lower sustained visibility in Iranian and Afghan news cycles, reflecting differing political priorities and media agendas.

Dominant Frames Across National Media

Framing patterns revealed distinct national orientations in how CPEC was represented. Five dominant frames emerged across the dataset, with national variations shown below:

Dominant Frame	Pakistan	India	Iran	Afghanistan
Economic Development & Opportunity	63%	12%	34%	41%
National Security & Sovereignty	11%	58%	23%	29%
Geopolitical Competition / Rivalry	9%	21%	31%	18%
Regional Cooperation / Integration	14%	3%	10%	7%
Public Critique / Concerns / Risks	3%	6%	2%	5%

Pakistan’s media predominantly framed CPEC as a symbol of national development, economic transformation, and China–Pakistan strategic friendship. Coverage highlighted infrastructure achievements, employment promises, and long-term economic gains, with an overwhelmingly positive tone.

Indian media primarily used security framing, portraying CPEC as a geopolitical threat linked to sovereignty disputes in Gilgit-Baltistan, China’s military expansion, and regional strategic imbalance. Reports frequently employed adversarial tone and securitized language.

Iranian media displayed a mixed narrative. While some articles highlighted economic partnership potential, others emphasized competition between Gwadar and Chabahar ports and concerns over diplomatic balancing among China, Pakistan, and India.

Afghan media presented divided perspectives: some stories depicted CPEC as an opportunity for regional integration and post-conflict rebuilding, while others questioned Afghanistan’s exclusion, instability concerns, and strained Pakistan-Afghanistan relations.

Tone and Moral Evaluation

Tone analysis identified clear cross-country differences:

- Supportive tone was dominant in Pakistani coverage (74%).
- Critical and skeptical tones dominated the Indian media (69%).
- Balanced or neutral tone characterized Iranian coverage (56%).
- Mixed or uncertain tone was common in Afghan reporting (49%), reflecting political flux.

Across all countries, **only 11%** of articles engaged critically with internal national challenges such as debt risk, transparency, local displacement, environmental concerns, or governance, indicating low levels of investigative reporting or accountability framing.

Source Representation and Voice Inclusion

Source analysis showed strong reliance on elite and official voices:

Source Type	Overall Frequency
Government and state officials	45%
Policy analysts / experts	26%

Business / trade representatives	13%
Military/security sources	10%
Local citizens / community members	4%
Chinese representatives	2%

Government officials dominated in all four countries, reinforcing top-down narratives. Local communities and impacted populations were almost absent, appearing in only 4% of articles. Women's voices did not appear as primary sources in any sample, demonstrating near-complete symbolic exclusion.

Episodic vs. Thematic Framing

Findings showed that coverage was largely episodic (72%), especially in Pakistan and India, focusing on single events such as summits, inaugurations, border conflicts, or diplomatic statements. Thematic framing (28%) was more common in Iran and Afghanistan, linking CPEC to broader economic, regional, or infrastructural contexts.

Episodic framing reinforced simplified narratives aligned with national ideology, while thematic coverage enabled more balanced interpretations of long-term implications.

Cross-Country Comparative Patterns

The comparative analysis confirmed the directional hypotheses:

- H1 and H2 supported: Pakistan uses development frames; India uses security frames.
- H3 supported: Iran balances cooperation and competition depending on trade-related context.
- H4 supported: Afghanistan oscillates between hope and uncertainty.
- H5 and H6 supported: Elite political sources dominate and framing diverges based on national interest.
- H7 supported: Frames track geopolitical alignments and security priorities.

These findings illustrate the influence of national identity and foreign policy agendas on media construction of CPEC.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate significant divergence in how national media construct narratives about the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) across Pakistan, India, Iran, and Afghanistan. These narrative differences reflect not only varying geopolitical alignments and historical conflicts but also the agenda-setting priorities and ideological orientations of national media systems. As media theorists argue, news discourse is never neutral; rather, it is shaped by power structures, national identities, and strategic interests (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Hansen, 2006). The observed framing patterns confirm the role of media in reinforcing national political positions and cultivating public sentiment around transnational development initiatives.

Consistent with expectations from Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), national newspapers selectively highlighted dimensions of CPEC that aligned with domestic priorities. Pakistani media predominantly framed CPEC as a symbol of national development and strategic partnership with China. This discursive construction supports earlier scholarship that portrays Pakistan's public narrative as progressive and optimistic in relation to Chinese cooperation (Husain, 2019; Ahmed, 2020). By emphasizing economic growth, infrastructure, employment, and regional integration, Pakistani media projected a celebratory tone that downplayed concerns such as provincial disparities or environmental and financial risks (Rana, 2018; Sial, 2018). The minimal presence of critical or investigative reporting reinforces the argument that Pakistani media often reproduce the state's foreign policy agenda and national security priorities (Siraj, 2018).

In contrast, Indian media discourse was dominated by security-oriented and adversarial framing, aligning with India's geopolitical anxieties and territorial claims regarding Gilgit-

Baltistan. Indian press narratives framed CPEC as a strategic threat, frequently linking it to China's regional expansion and the perceived encirclement of India (Pant, 2017; Sinha, 2019). This framing reflects **Critical Geopolitics**, which emphasizes how geopolitical meanings are constructed through discourse to legitimize strategic posturing (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dalby, 2008). Indian media amplified narratives of sovereignty, national security, and regional competition, constructing CPEC as a destabilizing force rather than a development initiative. Such representations reinforce nationalist sentiment and align with India's diplomatic positioning against BRI more broadly (Chaziza, 2020).

Similarly, Iranian media exhibited a dual framing pattern that both recognized economic opportunity and highlighted competitive concerns related to China–Pakistan cooperation, particularly with respect to Gwadar and Iran's Chabahar port. This cautious balancing reflects Iran's complex foreign policy environment and competition for regional trade corridors (Siddiqi, 2020; Khan, 2021). The mixed tone supports earlier claims that Iranian discourse is shaped by both economic pragmatism and geopolitical rivalry (Rizvi, 2021).

Afghan media demonstrated ambivalence, oscillating between viewing CPEC as an opportunity for reconstruction and lamenting political exclusion and instability. This reflects Afghanistan's uncertain geopolitical position and ongoing internal security challenges (Hussain & Hussain, 2017; Safi, 2020). The lack of policy clarity and dependence on external diplomatic developments underscores Afghanistan's limited narrative power in regional infrastructure debates.

Across all four countries, elite and government voices dominated news sourcing, while local community perspectives were notably absent. This aligns with research showing that media narratives around mega-projects tend to privilege institutional authority and marginalize grassroots perspectives (Fahmy et al., 2012; Allan, 2002). The near absence of public voices, particularly women and economically vulnerable communities, reveals symbolic exclusion consistent with environmental and geopolitical justice concerns (Bullard, 1990; Capek, 1993). Furthermore, the prevalence of episodic framing in 72% of articles supports Iyengar's (1991) argument that event-based framing individualizes responsibility and discourages structural critique.

Overall, the cross-country comparison confirms the central premise of Agenda-Setting Theory: media highlight issues according to national priorities and shape public understanding of what matters (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2004). While Pakistani media elevate economic development, Indian media prioritize security; Iranian coverage centers on regional competition, and Afghan coverage reflects uncertainty. These discursive differences help explain regional diplomatic tensions and divergent perceptions of BRI legitimacy.

Conclusion

This study reveals that media discourse surrounding CPEC is highly polarized and shaped by national geopolitical interests. Pakistan frames CPEC as a transformative development project and a symbol of strategic partnership, India frames it as a security threat that challenges sovereignty and regional power balance, Iran balances cooperation with corridor competition, and Afghanistan expresses both aspiration and insecurity. These findings underscore that media narratives do not simply report reality—they actively construct geopolitical meaning, define national interest, and shape public and policy perceptions.

The results also highlight critical gaps in media representation, including the near absence of citizen voices, a lack of critical investigation, and limited discussion of socio-economic consequences. This discursive imbalance reinforces state narratives and may hinder democratic debate, regional cooperation, and shared understanding of transnational challenges.

Future research should extend analysis to television, social media, and regional-language publications, as well as examine audience reception and policy influence. There is a pressing

need for more nuanced, evidence-based journalism that interrogates power structures rather than reproducing them. Strengthening independent regional reporting may foster more constructive regional dialogue and support a more inclusive geopolitical public sphere.

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