

India's Fifth-Generation Warfare against Pakistan and the Role of Indian Media in Shaping Public Perceptions of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

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Abstract: *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has become a catalyst for South Asian geopolitics, particularly in the information war between India and Pakistan. In this context, this study critically analyses how Indian and Pakistani media shape public perceptions of CPEC by creating different narratives that serve their national interests. The Pakistani media portrays CPEC as a transformative economic initiative that promotes development and regional connectivity, while the Indian media frames it as a geopolitical threat that raises sovereignty concerns and increases China's economic and strategic influence in the Indian Ocean. In addition, this study analyses news items, TV shows, talk shows, social media trends, and hashtags. This study highlights how traditional and social media impact public opinion. According to the study, state-sponsored narratives, misinformation campaigns, and strategic media framing polarise discourse, emphasizing nationalistic sentiments that align with India's national interest against CPEC, the Belt and Road Initiative's flagship project. Additionally, social media's revolutionary role strengthens these narratives, entrenching popular perceptions diplomatic escalations, and harsh words. This study emphasizes the media's influence on geopolitical discourse and information warfare's effects on regional stability. Finally, the study urges both sides to improve media literacy and journalism to combat misinformation and better grasp CPEC's economic and strategic aspects.*

Keywords: 5GW, CPEC, Media, Public Opinion, Geopolitics, Warfare

Introduction

The 21st century has been observing the cumulative pace of economic development and unveiling of innovative projects aimed at connecting the regions, and ensuing regional integration in economic and strategic facets. In the contemporary era, the geopolitics of South Asia has been rotating around the flagship project of the One Belt and One Road Initiative (BRI) namely the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). India ostensibly sees the CPEC as a security and strategic liability as the CPEC crosses through Pakistan-administered Independent Azad Kashmir, on the other hand, Pakistan perceives it as a game changer for its economy and global posture. In this respect, the role of media, both traditional and modern, has achieved vigorous importance in propagating the narratives that align the national interests of rival states. The sensational Indian media is momentous in influencing how the public views the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). To spread the national agenda, the Indian media craft stories that reinforce diplomatic postures, economic apprehensions, and national security interests. This study analyses how the CPEC is outlined in public discourse by Indian media, including social media and traditional media i.e., print, television, and digital news. Indian media recurrently illustrates the CPEC as a geopolitical challenge, expressing anxieties about Chinese economic expansionism, sovereignty desecrations, and security threats, with the helpful aid of selective reporting, expert opinions, and strategic framing in media. Through political deliberations, disinformation, and propaganda, social media further coagulates these narratives, distressing public opinion and policy deliberations. This study also attempts to evaluate how much Indian media shapes national discourse on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), it's possible effects on India-Pakistan relations, and the greater geopolitical setting of South Asia.

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Research Objectives

- This study aims to examine how Indian media outlets construct perceptions and narratives around CPEC by highlighting the economic, political, and security concerns.
- Secondly, the study investigates how Indian media, both traditional and social media, influences public perceptions, shapes national discourse aligns it with national interests, and recommends the policy attitudes toward CPEC.
- Lastly, this research study also identifies some instances of propaganda, the spread of misinformation, and selective reporting in Indian media coverage of CPEC.

Hypothesis

"Indian media predominantly frames CPEC as a geopolitical and security threat to India as well as a region by shaping the public perception against the flagship economic project aimed at spreading regional connectivity"

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative content analysis methodology to investigate how the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is perceived by the general public in India. The methodology's goal is to examine public discourse, framing tactics, and media narratives about CPEC on various platforms. Utilizing a mixed-methods qualitative approach, the study combines discourse analysis and content analysis to comprehend media representations and how they affect public perceptions.

The subsequent sources of data have been utilized for this study:

First, electronic media examines coverage, discussions, and professional viewpoints on CPEC, including news broadcasts from main Indian television networks like Times Now, Republic TV, NDTV, and Zee News. Secondly, to assess written discourse on CPEC, print, and digital media, including editorials and articles from newspapers like The Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Hindu, and The Indian Express, as well as online resources like Scroll. in and The Wire, are used. Finally, data and content from social media sites: Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) that focus on user engagement, viral posts, and trending hashtags (like #StopCPEC and #ChinaDebtTrap) to comprehend trends in misinformation and digital discourse, has also been used in this study. Moreover, media coverage of important events, policy announcements, and diplomatic exchanges between China, India, and Pakistan relating to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have been preferred using a purposive sampling technique from 2015 to 2024. Framing analysis is another data analysis technique that novelties frequent themes in media coverage, including geopolitical rivalry, economic apprehensions, and security threats. The language, tone, and rhetorical devices employed to generate public narratives about CPEC are also studied through discourse analysis. Moreover, by classifying content as neutral, negative, or positive, the sentiment analysis assesses public views on social media platforms about CPEC. The study adheres to ethical research practices, which guarantee truthful data representation, openness in analysis, and the avoidance of media interpretation biases.

Literature Review

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), an important geoeconomic project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has become a critical geopolitical and economic project in South Asia, fascinating the wide attention of the regional and global leaders due to converging and contrasting interests. Not only has the project gained much significance in the ongoing geo-economics but also it has become a novel front of competition where it has set the stage for the information warfare between India and Pakistan. In this ongoing gambling, the role of media is pivotal in shaping public perceptions and opinions. This portion discusses the existing knowledge about the role of CPEC in the geopolitics of South Asia and what kind of role the Media, from both sides, have been playing in shaping the perception of the people. Moreover, the study explores how media on both sides of the India-Pakistan divide has framed CPEC, the strategies employed to influence public opinion, and the broader implications for regional dynamics.

Media Framing of CPEC: A Comparative Analysis

1. Indian Media's Strategic and Conflict-Oriented Framing

India's media is chiefly building a narrative that the CPEC is a threat to their strategic and economic interests in the South Asian region owing to its crossing from a disputed territory namely Gilgit Baltistan. The media has been involved in unceasing efforts to label the project as a "debt trap", and "New East India Company" because it passes through the alleged disputed territories, according to Indian claims. India is mainly using conflicting interests, narratives, geopolitical rivalries, territorial conflicts, and security issues are the main issues of this narrative-building process. Indian newspapers such as "The Hindu" and "The Indian Express," for instance, have been discoursing how the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) could improve Pakistan's military and economic capacities and challenge India's hegemonic designs in the South Asian region (Aslam et al., 2020). The Indian media, furthermore, mounts Chinese investment as a strategy to gain control of the Gwadar Port in Pakistan and provokes the locals to rebel and riot against the state. Furthermore, the Indian media has continuously expressed fears that the CPEC would violate Indian sovereignty by passing through Gilgit Baltistan, a territory that India claims is part of Jammu and Kashmir (Akhtar, 2023).

2. Pakistani Media's Development and Connectivity Focus

The Indian media has been putting all efforts to halt the CPEC projects by using rhetoric that widens the existing gaps between the center and provinces. The reporting and storymaking of the locals, who have been marginalized due to discriminatory policies of the governments, depict how Indian media has been exploiting the fault lines ingrained in governance issues. On the other hand, Pakistani media has been striving to portray the positive impacts of the CPEC as a project of economic development, regional connectivity, and mutual benefits for both China and Pakistan. Newspapers like "The Dawn" and "The News" coupled with social media activists have focused on the potential of CPEC which could lead to addressing Pakistan's deep-rooted infrastructure gaps, create jobs, and stimulate economic growth to avoid the debt trap imposed by the International Monetary Fund (Shah et al., 2020). Furthermore, the Pakistani media has also highlighted the strategic significance of CPEC in enhancing Pakistan's geopolitical posture at regional as well as global levels. Indian strategic community also believes that India's aggressive campaign against the CPEC can also result in the consolidation of closer China-Pakistan relations (Eriksson, 2016).

3. Chinese Media's Broader Contextualization

Similarly, Chinese media outlets including "China Daily" and "Global Times," have presented CPEC as a constituent project of the larger Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), highlighting its recompenses for global connectivity, interconnectedness, and development. China believes that the BRI and the CPEC are the signs of the Chinese perceived world order which includes cooperation, connectivity, and spillover peace instead of competition, exclusiveness, and confrontation. Moreover, Chinese media portrays that the BRI and the CPEC projects are in the benefit of both Pakistan and China in the South Asian region (Eriksson, 2016).

4. The Information Battlefield: Media as a Tool of Influence

- a) **India's Media Information Warfare against Pakistan:** India has aggressively used media and information warfare as a tool to discredit and oppose the CPEC. Indian 5th Generation-warfare against Pakistan especially against the CPEC includes disinformation, propaganda, and cyber warfare which is involved in presenting the CPEC as a danger to regional stability has been chiefly shaped by Indian media. Indian narratives against the CPEC include: the available feasibility of the project, lack of security, and legality of the project (Gichki, 2022). Furthermore, disinformation campaigns targeting the international community, especially in Western capitals, have been carried out by Indian media (Shafeeq, 2024).
- b) **Pakistan's Counter-Narrative and Media Strategy:** Pakistan has promoted a positive narrative about CPEC in order to counter India's information warfare. Increased trade volumes, job creation, and infrastructure development are just a few of the economic advantages of CPEC that have been

highlighted by Pakistani media. Additionally, Pakistani media has emphasized the strategic significance of CPEC in fostering peace in South Asia and enhancing regional connectivity. However countering Indian disinformation campaigns has also been difficult for Pakistani media, especially online (Qusien, 2022).

- c) **The Role of Social Media in Shaping Perceptions:** The advent of the internet has paved way for the modern ways of communication, sharing news, and receiving information. Social media, due to rapid penetration of the internet and smartphones, has emerged as a critical battleground in the information war particularly over CPEC projects. The double-edged sword of social media has been used by both Indian and Pakistani media and officials in order to shape public perceptions about national events, and national-level projects. The use of social media for the projection of positive aspects of CPEC by Pakistani social media users aims to aware the common people in order to confront the propaganda war launched by the traditional rival, India. On the other hand, Indian media is no longer lagging behind in spreading false misinformation about the CPEC projects to construct the anti-CPEC narrative and perception in the minds of local people. For instance, Indian media has used social media to spread disinformation about CPEC, such as false claims about the project's economic viability and security challenges. Contrary to this, Pakistani media has used social media to promote a positive narrative about CPEC, emphasizing its potential to transform Pakistan's economy and foster regional cooperation (Eriksson, 2016; Shafeeq, 2024).

Table 1
Content Analysis of Electronic and Social Media on "The Role of Indian Media in Shaping Public Perceptions of the CPEC

Media Type	Platform/Source	Narrative Theme	Framing Strategy	Perception
Electronic Media (TV News)	Republic TV, Times New, NDTV, Zee News	CPEC as a threat to sovereignty and security	Sensationalism, expert debates, security concerns	Reinforces anti-CPEC sentiments and nationalistic views
Print & Digital News	The Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Hindu, Indian Express	Economic and geopolitical implications	Opinion pieces, investigative reports	Shapes intellectual discourse and policy debates
Government Channels	Press Information Bureau, Doordarshan	India's official stance on CPEC	Diplomatic statements, policy analysis	Influences public trust in government perspectives
Social Media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube)	Verified news accounts, political influencers, independent bloggers	Mixed narratives: anti-CPEC rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and strategic concerns	Hashtags, viral trends, memes, misinformation	Amplifies polarized opinions, spreads propaganda
Alternative & Independent Media	The Wire, Scroll.in, The Print	Balanced and critical perspectives	Fact-checking, investigative journalism	Offers counter. Narratives and alternative viewpoints

Public Perceptions and the Impact of Media Framing

1. Indian Public Perception: CPEC as a Strategic Threat

India's media has been portraying CPEC as a threat to its security and sovereignty. Therefore, the Indian media's framing of CPEC as a strategic threat has influenced public perception in both Pakistan and India. Many Indians view CPEC as a project that strengthens Pakistan's economic and military capabilities. The

strong economic and military muscles thereby could challenge so-called India's regional dominance and threaten its ambitions. Moreover, the Indian media's emphasis on the security challenges faced by CPEC has reinforced the perception that the project is unstable and vulnerable to terrorist attacks (Murtaza et al., 2022). The recent coverage of BLA attacks on Chinese convoys by Indian media has exposed the agenda of India to malign the CPEC projects.

2. Pakistani Public Perception: CPEC as a Development Opportunity

People in Pakistan have a favorable opinion of CPEC because of the way the media has presented it as a chance for growth. According to many Pakistanis, CPEC will fill in the nation's infrastructure deficiencies, generate employment, and boost the economy. The idea that CPEC will encourage closer ties with China and regional stability has also been strengthened by Pakistani media's emphasis on the project's strategic significance (Freedman, 2021).

3. The Role of Media in Influencing Policy-Making

Media framing of CPEC has also influenced policy-making in both India and Pakistan. In India, the negative framing of CPEC has stressed the government's opposition to the project and its decision to not participate in BRI. In Pakistan, the positive framing of CPEC has supported the government's decision to prioritize the project as a key component of its economic and foreign policy (Qusien, 2022).

Table 2
India, Pakistani, and Chinese Media Key Themes Regarding the CPEC

Sr#	Media Outlet	Framing of CPEC	Key Themes
1	Indian Media	Strategic and Conflict-Oriented	Geopolitical rivalry, security concerns, territorial disputes
2	Pakistani Media	Development and Connectivity Focus	Economic benefits, regional integration, job creation
3	Chinese Media	Broader Contextualization	Global connectivity, win-win project, economic prosperity

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory

According to framing theory, the media picks out specific elements of a complicated topic and presents them in a way that supports a specific interpretation. Indian media shapes audiences' perceptions of the initiative by strategically framing the security, economic, and geopolitical risks associated with CPEC (Bateson, 2000). The following are the main tenets of this theory:

1. **Diagnostic Framing:** The Indian Media identifies CPEC as a problem and disturbing project for their regional ambitions, and portrays it as a security and economic threat to India.
2. **Prognostic Framing:** Moving forward, after identifying problems, the Indian media and Pakistani media suggest solutions, such as India's opposition to CPEC and counter-strategies like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Pakistani media suggests raising the positive impacts and improvements brought by the CPEC in Pakistan.
3. **Motivational Framing:** The Indian media adds sensation and appeals to nationalist sentiments, urging public and policy opposition to CPEC. As a result of this, most Indians consider CPEC as a security threat to construct India's regional hegemony.

Propaganda Model

According to Edward S. Herman (2010), the propaganda model describes how media content aligns with elite interests, especially those of governments and corporate stakeholders. The way that CPEC is portrayed in Indian media frequently reflects the strategic priorities of the Indian government, emphasizing narratives that relate to geopolitical and national security strategies.

1. **Ownership Influence:** Media outlets are mostly private and follow business models. As a result of this, ethical reporting and journalism are compromised. For instance, in order to gain the rights of

government-sponsored advertisement, Media corporations in India may prioritize government-aligned narratives. Furthermore, political pressure and supervisory policies of the government affect the media to shape public opinion which favors the national interests of rival states.

2. **Advertising and Political Influence:** Indian official strategic and financial support to Indian media outlets aims at propagating and building anti-CPEC disinformation, propaganda, and narratives aligned with predominant nationalist narratives of India.

Analysis and Discussion

India perceives Sino-Pakistan alliance generally and the CPEC especially as a threat to her hegemonic designs in the South Asian region. In order to contain both, India is working on its both kinetic and non-kinetic domains. Kinetic means include building an army, the sophistication of the air force, and modernizing naval power with cutting-edge technologies. Similarly, non-kinetic means include fifth-generation warfare techniques i.e., cyber warfare, propaganda, disinformation and false narrative buildings, etc.

Media Framing and Narrative Construction

India's 5GW strategies against Pakistan generally and the CPEC especially include the following themes in media narratives;

1. **Security Concerns:** The implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on India's sovereignty are often emphasized in reports, particularly because the project passes through Pakistan-administered Kashmir, which India claims as its territory.
2. **Economic and Strategic Risks:** Numerous reports highlight China's economic expansionism through the CPEC, raising doubts about Pakistan getting trapped in a "debt trap."
3. **Geopolitical Rivalry:** Indian media often links debates about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to more general Sino-China tensions, portraying the project as a means for China to enhance its power projection in South Asia at India's expense. The framing strategies touch on narratives that acclimatize national security interests and include sensationalized headlines, expert analysis, and selective reporting.

The Role of Electronic and Social Media

1. **Television and Digital News:** Indian electronic and print media are equally involved in portraying this project negatively. Indian electronic media carries this through dramatic language, such as calling CPEC a "trojan horse" or a "Chinese neocolonial project," and "East India Company" affect public opinion and upsurges skepticism about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Moreover, the Indian film industry, Bollywood, is also engaged in making anti-Pakistan films in which Pakistan is shown as a politically unstable and security-wise vulnerable state in the region.
2. **Social Media Influence:** Social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) are battlegrounds for opposing viewpoints. To spread doubts, hashtags like #StopCPEC, #ChinaDebtTrap, and #EastIndiaCompany are frequently used. Moreover, through propaganda, politically driven content, and disinformation campaigns are spread extensively, consolidating preexisting cognitive biases.

Impact on Public Perception and Policy Discourse

Having swaying public opinion, Indian media also has an impact on strategic policies and diplomatic postures. India's governmental antagonism to the CPEC project has been reinforced by media discourse that views the project as a threat and has contributed to public skepticism. The significance of strategic communication in international relations is emphasized by the interaction between media narratives and policymaking.

Counter-Narratives and Alternative Perspectives

Some independent media outlets and analysts provide alternative perspectives, emphasizing the economic advantages of regional connectivity, despite the prevalent negative framing. But in the midst of the larger nationalistic discourse, such viewpoints frequently find it difficult to gain traction.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Addressing the Information Gap

Promoting a nuanced and balanced understanding of CPEC requires bridging the information gap caused by media framing. Promoting independent journalism and fact-based reporting that emphasizes the project's opportunities and difficulties will help achieve this.

Countering Disinformation Campaigns

To create accurate public perceptions of CPEC, it is essential to combat disinformation campaigns after closing the information gap. This calls for funding media literacy initiatives and supporting efforts to dispel myths through fact-checking. Digital literacy has become the need of the hour to counter the misinformation campaign launched by India to sabotage the CPEC projects in order to pacify their constructed security concerns. Moreover, the access to the real and authentic data should be made easier in order to counter misinformation.

Promoting Regional Dialogue

Following the fight against misinformation, the next step is to encourage regional dialogue, which is crucial to resolving the geopolitical tensions surrounding CPEC. By facilitating a forum for discussion and debate that unites stakeholders from China, India, and Pakistan, the media can contribute positively.

Conclusion

The contemporary international system is passing through a transformation in which the bipolar system, led by the USA, is changing into multipolarity with the emergence of many new powers including China, Russia, and the BRICS. The most significant feature of the modern-day system is the USA-China rivalry in which the USA is a status quo power that wants to retain its hegemonic power. On the other hand, China seems a rising power that is challenging the power of the USA. China's grand strategy to counter the USA includes the BRI and its flagship project is the CPEC. The CPEC is a geopolitical and geoeconomic project that provides China with strategic leverage in the South Asian region. In the same way, the USA considers it a threat and it is building an alliance with India in order to counter the CPEC in the South Asian region. Moreover, India also considers the CPEC and the rising Sino-Pakistan alliance as threats to its regional hegemonic designs with the advent of the CPEC. Therefore, in order to counter the CPEC and the China-Pakistan alliance, India is fostering its relations with the USA and strengthening its military buildup from army, air force, and naval domains. In the same way, India is also working on non-kinetic means to counter this project by taking 5GW to the next level which includes cyber warfare, disinformation, and false narrative building. India is strategically using media, both traditional and social media to discredit the CPEC. India's media campaigns against the CPEC include various narratives which include: the CPEC as a debt trap, the CPEC is a new Chinese East India company, the CPEC feasibility is impractical and it crosses from the disputed territory and the CPEC has security issues in Pakistan. Therefore, in order to improve a better understanding of the CPEC and its global and regional significance, it is important to imperative to support unbiased journalism, elevate media literacy, and combat disinformation.

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