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Unveiling Soft Power Manifestation: A Comparative Analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative News Framing in Indonesia and India

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Unveiling Soft Power Manifestation: A Comparative Analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative
News Framing in Indonesia and India

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Introduction

In the realm of global power dynamics, China has unveiled a remarkable display of its soft power prowess—a manifestation of its economic might. At the core of China’s soft power strategy lies the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an audacious initiative to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa through a network of infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, and ports, that will stimulate trade and development in participating countries (Arugay, 2017, pp. 669-673). However, the initiative has far-reaching implications beyond economic development, as China seeks to utilize the Belt and Road Initiative as a tool to enhance its soft power influence abroad (Andornino, 2017, p. 4). President Xi Jinping’s emphasis on enhancing China’s soft power, promoting a positive Chinese narrative, and improving the communication of China’s messages to the world underscores the importance of communicative soft power (Kim, 2019). President Xi Jinping’s emphasis on improving China’s communication strategies not only reflects the findings of existing studies but also underscores the importance of understanding how these strategies are received and how participation in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects can impact China’s soft power influence abroad.

Soft power influence defies easy categorization and measurement due to its complex nature. Therefore, this thesis will provide an argument that highlights the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an important case study for examining China’s potential soft power influence, primarily driven by its economic attractiveness. Furthermore, the impact of BRI involvement on China’s soft power influence is of significant importance, particularly in light of the limited existing research that explores this connection, especially between participating and non-participating countries. While effective communication strategies are crucial, it is equally important to assess their reception by international audiences. This can be done by investigating how the BRI is being framed in national news media abroad. In this regard, countries like Indonesia and India present compelling cases for investigation.

As a participating country in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Indonesia currently has over 70 ongoing projects, whereas India has not signed any agreements under the BRI. Despite this, both countries have their foreign policy concerns and considerations. Therefore, this thesis will explore the differences in the news framing of the BRI between the national media of Indonesia and India. By doing so, this paper aims to investigate the following research question:

How does the news framing of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) differ between Indonesia and India?

To address this research question, I will be conducting a qualitative content analysis based on the framing of the Belt and Road Initiative in Indonesia and India. Therefore, the focus of soft power would be on how the BRI is being perceived by other countries. It is a critical aspect that plays a significant role in increasing China's soft power as China is an image-conscious nation (Rabinovitch, 2008, p. 33). The way in which the BRI is publicized and branded is of utmost importance as it directly influences China's ability to attract and influence other countries (Zhang, 2010; Courmont, 2013).

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a comprehensive Chinese development strategy, seeks to enhance regional connectivity and cooperation through five key areas: policy coordination, connectivity, unobstructed trade, financial integration, and cultural exchange (Arugay, 2017, pp. 669-673). Since 2012, China has employed the term “peripheral diplomacy” to describe its foreign policy approach, which prioritizes the cultivation of strong relationships with neighbouring countries as a fundamental foundation for its global influence and power dynamics (Reeves, 2018, pp. 977-978). This approach has become increasingly relevant, as China's relations with other major powers have become more complex. Chinese narratives of the Belt and Road Initiative have been framed as an instrument to integrate neighbouring countries into a China-led economic sphere through “win-win” opportunities, which generally refer to mutually beneficial agreements (Silvius, 2020; Zhao, 2015). These win-win agreements usually consist of infrastructure development received by participating countries and new economic opportunities for both China and the participating country (Silvius, 2020, p. 314) This aspect of the BRI is significant in the context of soft power, as it underscores the economic appeal and attractiveness of the initiative. Additionally, the BRI has also been recognized as a means to tackle economic concerns like China's slow GDP growth, surplus foreign reserves, and overcapacity in heavy sectors (Wang, 2016; Wuttke, 2017).

The BRI has therefore been portrayed to be an “effective strategy to promote trade, infrastructural building, FDI flows and therefore GDP growth” (Voon & Xu, 2019, p. 121).

Despite the portrayal of the BRI’s economic benefits, it is also important to acknowledge its negative portrayal in media abroad (Voon & Xu, 2019, p. 121). The framing and perception of the BRI have also been influenced by the concerns from “the recent debate about whether the BRI will lead to a so-called debt trap” (Brautigam, 2019, as cited in Voon & Xu, 2019). The Belt and Road Initiative has also been linked to widespread reports of human rights abuses, including forced labour and deceptive recruitment practices, in various countries (Jerabek, 2022, p. 357). Furthermore, considering that the BRI is largely focused on construction projects, environmental risks should not be overlooked (Ali, Faqir, Haider, Shahzad, & Nosheen, 2022, p. 1). Researchers have found that the Belt and Road Initiative is associated with environmental harm, particularly in terms of biodiversity loss and habitat disruption (Ali et al., 2022, Chiu, 2022). Lechner, Chan and Campos-Arceiz (2018, p. 408) also identified biodiversity hotspots in South Asia where BRI activities could cause harm to the region's biodiversity. Lechner et al. (2018, p. 409) also highlighted the potential for China to leverage its geopolitical influence in pursuing the environmental considerations of the BRI, emphasizing the importance of not relegating them to an afterthought.

Furthermore, projects that have little connection to the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) stated objectives have been associated with the BRI label (Hall & Krolkowski, 2022, p. 9). The retrospective application of the BRI label provides an interesting lens for examining the soft power element of the initiative. By retroactively associating existing projects with the BRI, it becomes apparent that the primary motivation behind such labelling might be the desire to leverage the BRI's economic appeal and international image. This practice allows countries and entities to align themselves with the BRI's overarching objectives, thereby benefiting from its perceived advantages, while potentially sidestepping the more contentious or controversial aspects associated with the hard power elements of the initiative. By attaching the BRI label to diverse projects, regardless of their direct relevance to the initiative’s stated goals, countries and entities seek to tap into the perceived economic benefits and positive international image associated with the BRI. This highlights the nuanced interplay between economics, politics, and soft power, and prompts further investigation into how the BRI's economic appeal and image projection contribute to China's soft power influence on the global stage.

China's soft power influence

Joseph Nye (2004) categorizes power into soft and hard power. Hard power influence refers to the ability of a country to achieve its foreign policy objectives through military or economic coercion (Nye, 2004, p. 5). This includes the use of military force, economic sanctions, or other forms of direct coercion that rely on material resources or force to achieve outcomes (Nye, 2004, p. 6). Unlike hard power, soft power lies in its ability to attract (Nye, 2004, p. 5). Additionally, authoritarian regimes like China and Russia often lack legitimacy and rely on tactics of propaganda, disinformation, and censorship to achieve their goals. Walker and Ludwig (2017) coined the term *sharp power* to describe these tactics, suggesting that authoritarian regimes do not fit neatly into Nye's categories of hard or soft power. Thus, while Nye's definition of soft power remains a useful framework, there is a need to broaden the scope of its definition, especially in the context of the BRI.

While Joseph Nye argues that the effectiveness of soft power goes beyond cultivating a favourable image and achieving desired outcomes, this definition is limited. Although I agree that soft power is not solely reliant on image projection, I contend that Nye overlooks the significance of attractiveness to other countries in realizing those outcomes. Furthermore, Nye (2004, p. 110) acknowledges the role of three dimensions of public diplomacy - political values, foreign policies, and culture - in creating a favourable/positive national image that enhances the prospects of achieving desired outcomes. I agree with Nye (2004, p. 129) that it is crucial to avoid reducing soft power to mere considerations of image, public relations, and temporary popularity. Instead, soft power should be acknowledged as a strategic form of power that encompasses the ability to influence outcomes. With that being said, this thesis will define soft power influence as China's ability to strategically shape narratives, perceptions, and preferences by cultivating a positive image.

To observe China's soft power influence, the concept of framing comes into play. Existing literature has implied the importance of framing and cultivating a favourable image to enhance China's soft power influence abroad (Zhang, 2010; Courmont, 2013). Framing, as a strategic communication tool, can contribute to building a positive and appealing image of a country (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing allows China to project its attractiveness by strategically shaping narratives to influence perceptions in other countries. Conversely, framing can also be employed as a tool to observe how China is being perceived abroad and to measure its soft power influence.

Through appealing and positive framing, China can enhance its soft power and shape how it is perceived abroad. One prominent manifestation of China's soft power influence is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The BRI as a manifestation of China's soft power

Existing literature has portrayed that China's soft power influence is highly dependent on its economic attractiveness, specifically on economic benefits (Breslin, 2011; d'Hooghe, 2014; Kurlantzick, 2010; Liang, 2012). China's positive image is driven by its economic attractiveness and the benefits derived from economic relations and cooperation, which holds true in both developed and developing countries (Liang, 2012, p. 667). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is primarily considered a manifestation of China's economic power and influence. Economic power can be seen as a form of hard power, as it involves leveraging economic resources, investments, and infrastructure development to exert influence and advance national interests. This view is supported by Breslin (2011, p. 13) who argues that soft power influence goes hand in hand with economic relations. Kurlantzick's (2007, p. 6) definition of soft power also includes BRI's economic appeal - like bilateral investments and trade agreements. However, the BRI also has elements of soft power embedded within it. While the BRI's primary focus is on economic cooperation, it also incorporates aspects of cultural exchanges, people-to-people connections, and media cooperation, which contribute to China's soft power objectives (Rahman, 2019, p. 305). Therefore, the BRI serves as a compelling case study challenging Nye's assertion by combining economic hard power with a strong emphasis on shaping a positive image. Consequently, the goals of the BRI align with Nye's categorization of soft power which includes culture, transfer of domestic values, and foreign policy (Rahman, 2019, p. 305).

Furthermore, The BRI stands out from other economic initiatives as it is primarily funded by China itself, making it an attractive win-win opportunity for participating countries. According to Rahman (2019, p. 317), the BRI's foreign policy component has also helped to increase China's soft power influence. Unlike other powers that often use conditional aid, China's non-coercive aid scheme is appealing to nations seeking alternative funding sources. Jerabek (2022, p. 345) supports the notion that BRI is favourable for countries due to its adaptable financial terms and less stringent environmental and human rights regulations compared to major Western lenders such as the IMF

and World Bank. This further underscores the economic appeal of BRI as a manifestation of China's soft power.

The BRI's overarching goal to address economic issues and bridge the development gap is a symbol of the "Chinese Dream" concept (Rahman, 2019, p. 313). This vision also aligns with the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to foster economic cooperation and cultural exchanges among participating countries (Turcsanyi & Kachlikova, 2020, p. 71). Nye (2004, p. 55) argues that the core of soft power lies in its legitimacy. Rahman (2019) stated that BRI's legitimacy depends on BRI's image perceived by other countries. If the BRI is seen as benefiting China at the expense of other participating nations, it could undermine China's legitimacy and make its promotion of the "Chinese Dream" values appear hypocritical to the international community (Nye, 2004, pp. 55-60, as cited in Rahman, 2019). Thus, positive framing and perceptions of the initiative's benefits by other countries are essential for maintaining China's legitimacy and positive image.

Through the BRI, China astutely showcases its economic strength and cultural heritage, thereby projecting an image of dynamic appeal that attracts the interest of other nations. Therefore, this thesis aims to explore China's soft power influence abroad by examining the framing of BRI in Indonesia and India's national news media. Considering that the BRI is a manifestation of China's soft power influence, my hypothesis suggests that *Indonesia will exhibit a more positive framing of the BRI compared to India*. This hypothesis is based on the substantial involvement of the BRI in Indonesia, which serves as a manifestation of China's soft power efforts.

Foreign Policy Considerations

Indonesia

Indonesia's initial participation in the BRI initiative was marked by the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway project (Yoshimatsu, 2022, p. 164). Indonesia also has 70 ongoing BRI projects, including "industrial parks, metallurgical and power plants, and tourism facilities in North Sumatra, North Kalimantan, North Sulawesi, and Bali" (Yee, 2023, p. 19). Indonesia's present emphasis on infrastructure development and industrial expansion coincides with the objectives of the BRI (Damuri, Perkasa, Atje & Hirawan, 2019, p.

3). President Joko Widodo's presence at the 2017 BRI Summit in Beijing signifies Indonesia's willingness to consider any initiatives that can assist in achieving the Nawa Cita, the nation's nine national priorities (Damuri et al., 2019, p. 4). These priorities emphasize the importance of “improving both domestic and international connectivity”, indicating Indonesia's willingness to consider any measures that can contribute to achieving these goals (Damuri et al., 2019, p. 3).

Indonesia's participation in BRI projects, although substantial, can be described as lukewarm due to the absence of a bilateral memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Indonesian and Chinese governments (Lalisang & Candra, 2020, pp. 8–9). Currently, the involvement has primarily been driven by Indonesian businesses rather than a formalized agreement between the two governments, due to concerns (Lalisang & Candra, 2020, pp. 8–9). These concerns stem from various factors, such as the trade deficit and fiscal burden between Indonesia and China, apprehension about a significant influx of Chinese workers, doubts about China's intentions due to its communist ideology and past relationship with Indonesia, and pressure from political elites. According to Damuri et al. (2019, p.1), Indonesia is mainly concerned that infrastructure financing under the BRI will exacerbate Indonesia and China’s current trade deficit as BRI projects will increase imports from China. In addition, the possible influx of Chinese workers is a significant concern for Indonesia’s current unemployment rate (Damuri et al., 2019, p. 13).

Despite this, there is also pressure coming from Indonesia's elite groups like “Islamic organizations, former high-ranking officials, and retired military generals” (Yoshimatsu, 2022, p. 164). They are critical of China and suspicious of its investment intentions, specifically also on the influx of foreign workers. Furthermore, Sukma (2009, p. 141) notes that China's support of Communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia has fueled Indonesia's suspicions and concerns about the BRI due to fears of China exporting communism and creating instability. Additionally, Indonesia's public opinion remains sensitive to the presence of Chinese workers at construction sites, with the government preferring the use of foreign labour only when domestic labour is unavailable (Damuri et al., 2019, p. 13). The traumatic events of 1965 have also impacted Indonesia's relationship with China, leading China to avoid interfering in Indonesia's political affairs. As a result, while Indonesia is open to the BRI, it remains cautious due to these concerns.

India

According to Sharma (2019), India's foreign policy towards the BRI can be characterized as being "pragmatic, cautious, and complex" (p. 136). With the absence of both bilateral MOUs and projects under the BRI, India's perception towards the BRI has remained consistent over the years (Sachdeva, 2018, p. 287). Similar to Indonesia, India's stance is primarily driven by its national priorities, which emphasize the importance of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity in any mega connectivity project (Bhuyan, 2018). India's participation in the SCO is driven by its commitment to regional connectivity that aligns with its national priorities, and its rejection of the BRI is based on the perception that it is incompatible with these priorities.

Understanding India's perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) requires a broader understanding of India-China relations, which is a key challenge for Indian policymakers. Sachdeva (2018) emphasized that India and China's source of tension stems from their "shared but disputed border" (p. 287). This fear and suspicion stem from concerns that China may have independent agendas that pose security risks for India. These border disputes date back to the late 1940s and involve the partition of Pakistan from India and the Chinese occupation of Tibet (Devonshire-Ellis, 2019). The concern over border disputes stems from four initiatives namely, the CPEC, BCIM Economic Corridor, Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor, and MSR (Sharma, 2019, p. 141). Therefore, India's approach towards the BRI remains cautious. It has never fully endorsed or rejected the initiative but has a strong opposition towards the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its operations.

The BRI's lack of transparency is another factor contributing to India's skepticism of the initiative. Additionally, India believes that China has provided Pakistan with nuclear and missile technology, which further diminishes India's regional influence (Sachdeva, 2018, p. 287). These intricate geopolitical dynamics demonstrate the need for India to manage its relations with China with great care to advance its strategic interests.

Research

This thesis will be conducting a comparative analysis to observe the difference between the framing of BRI in Indonesia and India, in means of investigating China's soft power influence. This study will be comparing the framing of the BRI in India and Indonesia. The perception of BRI by other countries has not been studied largely, and thus, this thesis aims to fill this gap. While

prior studies have suggested that the framing of the BRI can positively influence perceptions of China, this research aims to provide more nuanced insights into this relationship by comparing soft power influence with a country that is involved in the BRI and not. Furthermore, the framing of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in both Indonesia and India is influenced by their respective foreign policy considerations, which need to be taken into account to understand the extent of their impact. By doing so, this study is of utmost importance for policymakers and academics seeking to comprehend the complex dynamics of power in the contemporary world. As such, this research is timely and essential for a more comprehensive understanding of China's global influence.

In this research design, the independent variable (IV) is BRI involvement in a country. This will determine whether or not a country is involved with the initiative. Using the independent variable for case selection, the dependent variable will be coded by analyzing statements in the articles and looking at how the BRI is being framed. The recording unit will be articles that mention the BRI and how the BRI is being framed in those articles. This approach will enable a comparative analysis of the soft power influence of China in countries with different degrees of BRI involvement, namely India and Indonesia. By utilizing this small-N and two-case design, the analysis will provide a nuanced understanding of the role of the BRI in shaping China's soft power influence in different regions.

Data Selection

For this qualitative content analysis, the primary sources that will be utilized are national newspaper articles published between 2017 and 2019. The BRI was implemented in 2013 and during the initial years of the BRI's implementation, Chinese narratives dominated media coverage and journalists often relied on Chinese sources for information. This is exemplified in a study published by Turcsanyi and Kachlikova (2020, p. 58) as they discovered that the Chinese narrative on the BRI emphasized fantasies of economic opportunities and a nostalgic evocation of the old Silk Road, thus potentially leading to a more positive framing of the initiative. The starting point in 2017 was chosen, as it marked four years after the implementation of the initiative, providing a reasonable timeframe for journalists to gather information and develop informed opinions. The endpoint of 2019 was chosen as it precedes the onset of the pandemic, which could have potentially affected China's image in the world.

Using national news sources of a country abroad can provide a useful indication of China's soft power influence in that country, especially when personal experience with the country is lacking (Wang, Shoemaker, Han & Storm, 2008). By analyzing news articles from a range of media outlets in a particular country, it is possible to gain insights into how China is viewed by the public, policymakers, and the media in that country. Therefore, I will be using a diverse range of national newspaper articles from each country. As there is a lack of English-language newspaper publishers in Indonesia, I will be using Indonesian national news media and translating the statements into English. For India, a broad range of the English newspaper publishers was being used.

Method of analysis

To further investigate the research question, I will be looking at the framing of the BRI between Indonesia and India. According to Entman (1993), “framing essentially involves selection and salience” (p. 52). This suggests that news media outlets have the ability to choose and emphasize specific aspects of an issue or situation to target their audience. Framing entails a purposeful process of curating and accentuating certain elements while potentially downplaying or excluding others. While Indonesia received BRI involvement and India did not, both countries have had significant economic ties with China and have been targets of China's soft power initiatives, making them suitable for a small-N case design. The use of the MSSD method can help to identify similarities and differences in the way the BRI is perceived and portrayed in the national news media of these two countries. Both countries are also situated in strategically important regions, with Indonesia being the largest archipelagic country in the world and India being the second-most populous country in the world.

I will be using a qualitative content analysis (QCA) as it provides useful insights into how China's soft power influence differs in two different countries with variations of BRI involvement. Qualitative content analysis is the most suitable for this research question as it is “sensitive to the context in which texts are produced, and better able to tell us about meanings, norms, values, motives, and purposes,” thus allowing us to observe the effectiveness of BRI as a soft power tool (Halperin & Heath, 2020 p. 376). Furthermore, QCA has the ability to establish explicit criteria for coding and categorizing qualitative data (Halperin & Heath, 2020 p. 380). These criteria serve as a framework that can be replicated by other researchers, ensuring consistency in the study's

methodology (Halperin & Heath, 2020 p. 385). Replication allows for an examination of inter-coder reliability, whereby multiple coders independently analyze the same data to assess the consistency of coding decisions (Halperin & Heath, 2020 p. 385). This process helps validate the robustness of the analysis and enhances the reliability of the findings (Halperin & Heath, 2020 p. 385).

Case selection

Before conducting the analyses, it is important to define the variables involved and the cases that are used. As not all countries have a memorandum of understanding of a bilateral agreement of the BRI, BRI involvement will therefore be measured under the number of projects that are signed under the BRI. Indonesia is the third-largest recipient country in BRI investment (Wang & Ziyang, 2023). Indonesia also has 70 ongoing BRI projects, including the Jakarta-Bandung railway which was signed in 2015, whereas India hasn't signed any projects involving BRI (Wang & Ziyang, 2023).

Using India and Indonesia's national news media to conduct a small comparative analysis could provide useful insights into how China's soft power influence differs in two different countries with different histories and cultures. Furthermore, India and Indonesia have similarities in terms of their large populations, diverse cultures, and developing economies. Even though Indonesia is actively involved in the BRI while India is not, both countries still have foreign policy concerns regarding the initiative. Both countries are also situated in strategically important regions, with Indonesia being the largest archipelagic country in the world and India being the second-most populous country in the world. While Indonesia received BRI involvement and India did not, both countries have had significant economic ties with China and have been targets of China's soft power initiatives, making them suitable for a small-N case design. The use of the MSSD method can help to identify similarities and differences in the way that China is perceived and portrayed in the national news media of these two countries. Overall, the similarities between India and Indonesia provide a basis for comparison, and their differences in terms of BRI involvement can provide insights into how China's soft power initiatives have been received in two different contexts.

Table 1: Coding Frame

Framing/Indicators	Description	Code	Category
Economic and Infrastructure	Statements that portray economic and infrastructure aspects of the BRI. This usually highlights Economic projects in the BRI, including land and maritime infrastructure building.	EG	PFR-EG
			NFR-EG
			NEU-EG
Geopolitical Considerations	Statements that indicate geopolitical Considerations of the BRI. This usually includes bilateral relations, cooperation and conflict.	GP	PFR-GP
			NFR-GP
			NEU-GP
Culture	Statements that indicate BRI's cultural diplomacy efforts. This includes Confucius Institutes, cultural exposure, language, film	CLT	PFR-CLT
			NFR-CLT
			NEU-CLT

The coding frame was created based on a review of previous literature on BRI and foreign policy considerations from Indonesia and India. In this qualitative content analysis (QCA), I will employ a concept-driven approach based on the above literature review. The selected data will consist of articles that discuss the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the analysis will focus on the tone exhibited within these articles. The tone will be categorized as Positive (PFR), Negative (NFR), or Neutral (NEU), providing insights into the framing of the BRI.

To guide the article selection process, I will consider three categories namely economics and infrastructure (EG), geopolitical considerations (GP), and culture (CLT). By using these categories, I aim to identify articles by looking at statements that mention the BRI.

Economics and infrastructure (EG)

Within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework, economic and infrastructure factors, long intertwined in academic discourse, are extensively studied together by scholars, specifically the “win-win” agreements and the lack of clarity how investments of infrastructure will influence regional economic performance (Chen & Li, 2021; Silvius, 2020). This category will be highlighting economic benefits like win-win opportunities, foreign investments, employment, and debt sustainability. Negative framing of economic aspects of the BRI would include debt-trap diplomacy, trade deficit, unemployment, and investment risks. Infrastructure connectivity also falls under this category, it will mainly highlight roads and railway constructions and maritime operations.

Geopolitical Considerations (GP)

The geopolitical considerations category focuses more on highlighting the BRI in the context of China’s relationships with other countries by looking at conflicts, cooperation, and each country’s considerations towards the initiative. Positive framing tends to highlight more cooperation and include keywords like regional stability, multilateral cooperation, and mutual respect. Negative framing will emphasize more on border disputes, sovereignty, security risks, and suspicion towards the initiative’s goal. The suspicion surrounding the goals of the initiative often stems from concerns over China's lack of transparency and accountability in BRI projects. Environmental considerations are also included in this category as Lechner et al. (2018) highlight the importance of integrating environmental considerations with geopolitical considerations as they suggest that China “could use its geopolitical weight to pursue the conservation agenda in the BRI landscapes” (p. 408). This sentence emphasizes that environmental concerns should not be treated as secondary or an afterthought in the context of geopolitical decision-making.

Culture (CLT)

Culture will mainly concern the framing of cultural initiatives that supports the goals of the BRI. This includes Confucius Institutes, the Chinese language, movies, people-to-people exchange, and tourism. Alternatively, culture could be negatively framed as a potential threat, such as through the lens of anti-Chinese sentiment or other forms of cultural bias.

Tone

Articles listed as having Positive framing (PFR) adopt a supportive tone towards the BRI, emphasizing its potential benefits, opportunities, and positive impacts across the aforementioned categories. Conversely, Negative framing (NFR) involves a more critical or sceptical tone, highlighting concerns and negative impacts of the BRI within the specified categories. Neutral framing (NEU) of each category is also possible, it describes articles that take a balanced approach, presenting the BRI without significant favouritism or criticism. Neutral framing may present both positive and negative aspects of the initiative and allow readers or viewers to form their own opinions. It is important to note that an article may possess overlapping codes, as it may simultaneously address the positive framing of economics and infrastructure due to their inherent interconnectedness and the common discussion of both aspects in the literature.

Results and Analysis

The study implemented stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria to carefully select articles that were in line with the research objectives. These criteria include factors like publication date, source credibility, relevance to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the availability of full-text articles. The publication date was from 1st of Feb 2017 to 21st November 2019. Source credibility was evaluated by prioritizing reputable news publishers and recognized sources. The sources are determined through the Digital News Report published by the Reuters Institute and the University of Oxford in 2022 (Reuters Institute, 2022, pp. 134-136). The national news publishers used were the top 20 online national news articles in Indonesia and India that are prominent and have the greatest reach. Relevance was determined by assessing the depth of coverage on BRI-related aspects, through the keywords reviewed by the literature review. The inclusion of articles with full-text availability facilitated comprehensive analysis, allowing for a thorough examination of contextual information, arguments, and perspectives presented. The systematic application of these rigorous criteria aimed to ensure the selection of high-quality articles, reducing potential bias and strengthening the validity and reliability of the study.

The analysis of news articles in this study encompassed a total of 70 articles, evenly distributed between Indonesia and India with 35 articles from each country. The selected articles were chosen by looking at each national news publisher's website and including the publication

date and articles that mention the BRI. The selected articles spanned a multi-year period, covering the years 2017 to 2019 a period chosen to capture the pre-pandemic context.

In the case of Indonesia, 35 articles were coded, consisting of 9 articles from 2017, 14 articles from 2018, and 12 articles from 2019. Among these articles, a subset required translation to ensure a thorough analysis. Specifically, 15 articles had statements that were being translated; 7 articles from 2017, 5 articles from 2018, and 3 articles from 2019. Similarly, for India, 35 articles were included in the analysis, distributed as follows: 8 articles from 2017, 13 articles from 2018, and 14 articles from 2019. It is worth noting that all the articles from India were in English, reflecting the country's English proficiency level.

To incorporate diverse perspectives, articles from a variety of news publishers were utilized. In the case of Indonesia, articles were sourced from 8 different publishers, including some in the Indonesian language that required translation. For India, articles from 9 distinct news publishers, all in English, were included in the analysis. The decision to include articles from multiple publishers aimed to ensure a breadth of opinions and viewpoints in the analysis. The coding process focused on statements referencing or mentioning the BRI, allowing for the assessment of their framing (positive, negative, or neutral) and determining the overall tone of the articles based on these statements.

The analysis will now be broken down per case, based on the coding identified in the articles. This breakdown will provide a detailed examination of each case, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the findings. By categorizing the articles based on their coding, patterns and trends can be identified, providing valuable insights into the portrayal of the BRI across different cases.

Table 2: Overall results

Framing	Indonesia	India
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Economic and Infrastructure (EG)	<p>Economics and infrastructure projects are being framed positively. Benefits and success stories were highlighted throughout the articles.</p> <p>PFR EG: 70% (14/20 articles) NFR EG: 15% (3/20 articles) NEU EG: 15% (3/20 articles)</p>	<p>Economics and infrastructure projects are being framed negatively. Concerns about the feasibility of projects, investment risks, and debt trap were being articulated throughout the articles.</p> <p>NFR EG: 60% (9/15 articles) PFR EG: 20% (3/15 articles) NEU EG: 20% (3/15 articles)</p>
Geopolitical Consideration (GP)	<p>Geopolitical activities and considerations are being framed positively. Bilateral meetings and their implications were framed positively, articles highlight the cooperation aspect of BRI.</p> <p>PFR GP: 58% (8/14 articles) NFR GP: 22% (3/14 articles) NEU GP: 22% (3/14 articles)</p>	<p>Geopolitical activities are being framed negatively. India is mainly concerned about territorial integrity and sovereignty. There were also other considerations like environmental degradation and distrust towards China.</p> <p>NFR GP: 67% (14/21 articles) PFR GP: 5% (1/21 articles) NEU GP: 29% (6/21 articles)</p>
Culture (CLT)	<p>Cultural activities were positively framed.</p> <p>PFR CLT: 100% (4/4 articles) NFR CLT: - NEU: CLT: -</p>	<p>Cultural activities were negatively framed.</p> <p>NFR CLT 100% (2/2 articles). PFR CLT: - NEU CLT: -</p>

Indonesia

Within the economic and infrastructure category (EG), 70% of the articles emphasize the positive impact of BRI projects, particularly the economic benefits derived from the Jakarta-Bandung railway projects. Additionally, the positive framings also emphasized individual success stories, framing The BRI as an initiative that “aims to improve people’s livelihoods, enabling ordinary

families and people to realize their dream” (Qian, 2019). This statement highly aligns with the Chinese dream - the transfer of China’s domestic values is also evident here, thus strengthening the argument that BRI is a manifestation of China’s soft power. Indonesian journalists have also highlighted China as the leading power and its legacy - “There is a company that deserves applause for the breathtaking speed with which it has built infrastructure in China: China Railway and its legacy will undoubtedly be the high-speed rail network” (Bhargava, 2018).

Out of all the articles, there are 15% each for both negative and neutral framings. Negative framings primarily emphasize the economic risks and obstacles associated with the BRI. One prominent concern raised in these framings is that “trade infrastructure projects, which are part of China's Belt and Road policy, face significant obstacles as several countries have started to voice complaints about debt bondage to China” (CNN Indonesia, 2018). As for neutral framings, a two-sided argument was presented highlighting both concerns and opportunities. A representative example can be derived from the article published by Jakarta Post which highlights how China “tends to employ workers from its own country” (Suropati, 2018). The same article concluded by highlighting BRI’s opportunity: “With it, the opportunities for Indonesia and China to establish cooperation remain plentiful. For Indonesia, cooperation with China will enable the former to realize its ambition in establishing the Global Maritime Axis doctrine and becoming one of the most prominent actors in the region.” (Suropati, 2018). While negative and neutral framings exist, the overall dominance of positive framing showcases the BRI's favourable perception in this category.

For geopolitical considerations (GP), 58% of the articles are framed positively. Although this is the dominant framing, it is crucial to address the presence of two other framings: negative, accounting for 22%, and neutral, also comprising 22% of the articles. For positive framing, the articles mainly highlight multilateral cooperation and mutual respect - “China said the initiative would not interfere in a country’s domestic political affairs” (Galih, 2017). This statement signals China’s intention to respect the sovereignty and autonomy of other nations.

Negative framing of Indonesia’s geopolitical considerations mainly criticizes China and the flaws of the BRI. In an article published by The Jakarta Post, China’s announcement of modifications to the BRI was criticized and framed as a “reaction to recent backlashes against the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)” (Mueller, 2019). Whereas neutral framings mainly presented information regarding the content of Indonesia and China’s diplomatic relations and bilateral

meetings. Overall, Indonesia's geopolitical considerations are being framed positively in this category.

Regarding cultural aspects (CLT), all of the articles were positively framed. These articles shed light on the BRI's positive influence through film, people-to-people exchange, Confucius Institutes, and exchange programmes. One of the articles highlighted the growth of student exchanges between Indonesia and China - "Sino-Indonesian academic cooperation reached new heights in 2014, with 13,689 Indonesian students coming to China" (Sun, 2018). Another notable example would be the Tsunami film *China* filmed in Indonesia where it was being utilized to "strengthen its relations with Indonesia within the framework of international cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative" (Dian, 2017).

Overall, the prevalence of positive framings across these categories underscores the favourable perception of the BRI, reflecting the belief in its potential economic, geopolitical, and cultural benefits.

India

The overall framing in this category in the economic and infrastructure category is negative, with 60% of articles adopting a negative framing, while 20% of the articles presented a positive framing, and 20% of articles remained neutral. The negative framing predominantly centred around concerns related to investment risks, potential debt traps, and India's cautious approach towards BRI projects. One of the articles that negatively framed the BRI portrayed it as a "new weapon" to assist China in acquiring land in countries surrounding India (The Economic Times, 2018). The debt-trap concept has also been referenced multiple times in discussions related to the BRI. Another notable example of a negative framing involves questioning the reader about the viability and potential risks associated with the Chinese infrastructure projects. For instance, an article poses questions such as: "Do you see the countries on the map that the Chinese infrastructure has to pass through, a chain that is only as strong as its weakest link?" and "Would you as an investor put money in that project?" (Eurasian Times, 2018). This negative framing reflects investment risks and scepticism regarding the economic feasibility and potential consequences of certain BRI initiatives.

On the other hand, the positive framing highlighted the benefits of the BRI and its positive impact on infrastructure development in India's neighbouring cities. Though there are limited

positive framings (20%), an article explicitly mentioned that “BRI is not a Chinese design to conquer other countries and conquer our neighbours” (The Indian Express, 2018). This positive framing aims to convince the reader that the BRI is driven by cooperation, mutual development, and shared benefits rather than any ulterior motives of dominance or control. Notably, neutral framing also highlighted the importance of “sustainable financial support” as a strategy to address potential debt trap risks (Chaudhury, 2019).

Moreover, for the framing of geopolitical considerations, 67% of the articles were being framed negatively (NFR-GP), 5% of the articles were being framed positively (PFR-GP), whereas 29% of the articles were being framed neutrally (NEU-GP). The articles mainly highlighted India's border disputes, environmental implications, and perceived lack of transparency and accountability in BRI projects. The stances taken in the articles are clear, with one article stating, “Indeed, India publicly portrayed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a non-transparent, neocolonial enterprise aimed at ensnaring smaller, cash-strapped states in a debt trap to help advance China's geopolitical agenda” (Chellaney, 2018). Additionally, a significant number of articles have highlighted the lack of transparency in BRI deals, stating that “the details of most BRI deals, negotiated between secretive governments, are murky” (Ganguly, 2017). These statements indicate a critical perspective on the BRI, raising concerns about its transparency and potential implications for smaller nations. Most of the articles also mentioned the border disputes surrounding Kashmir, framing the BRI as “a new kind of colonization” (Pasricha, 2017).

However, it is worth noting that some articles also provided a neutral framing, emphasizing the commitment of both China and India to overcome their differences and explore potential strategies for cooperation. One such article highlighted that “India and China have reached an understanding to move beyond their differences on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by taking forward both bilateral and regional connectivity projects” (Krishnan, 2018). This neutral framing acknowledges the ongoing dialogue and efforts between the two countries to find common ground and collaborate on connectivity initiatives, suggesting a potential path for cooperation despite previous concerns or differences.

Lastly, the cultural framing demonstrated a negative stance, with all articles addressing controversial cultural instances that are related to the BRI. An article highlighted Jackie Chan's movie Kung Fu Yoga, where an Indian character praised President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (The Indian Express, 2017). Film critics have also framed the BRI as a “brazen political

propaganda” (The Indian Express, 2017). By showcasing an Indian character praising the BRI, the movie may be seen as indirectly criticizing or questioning India's stance on the project.

Overall, this analysis highlights the prevalent negative framing of the BRI in India, particularly in the economic, geopolitical, and to a lesser extent, cultural domains. The findings highlight the dominant presence of negative framing, attributing detrimental economic effects, conflicts, and geopolitical concerns to the BRI in India. However, it is important to acknowledge the emergence of a growing neutral framing, indicative of a diverse range of opinions and perspectives surrounding the BRI. Conversely, the presence of positive framing appears relatively limited. To gain a more nuanced understanding of the framing dynamics, future research incorporating additional information and a broader timeframe would be essential, enabling a deeper exploration of the evolving narrative surrounding the BRI in India.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide support for the hypothesis, as it indicates that Indonesia portrays a more positive framing of the BRI compared to India, aligning with the soft power theory's emphasis on cultivating a positive image to shape narratives, perceptions, and preferences. The dominant positive framing of BRI in Indonesia indicates that China has successfully influenced the news framing, as evidenced by the positive emphasis on economic benefits and geopolitical impact. Conversely, the prevalent negative framing in India reflects a less successful cultivation of a positive image, where concerns and skepticism overshadow positive narratives. This divergence in news framing can be attributed to the distinct socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts of Indonesia and India. This disparity in news framing and public perception underscores the complex dynamics between China's soft power efforts and the reception of the BRI in different countries. Additionally, perceptions of the BRI in both Indonesia and India are influenced by their respective foreign policy considerations. While there are similarities in their cautious approaches, the differences lie in the specific foreign policy priorities driving their perceptions.

Although the findings align with the hypothesis, they do not fully align with the comprehensive theory of soft power. While the transfer of domestic values and foreign policy aspects is evident, the cultural dimension is lacking. Despite notable articles, the lack of supporting sources makes it difficult to ascertain the role of cultural aspects in China's soft power influence

in both countries, with only a total of six articles for Indonesia (4) and India (2). This raises an important question regarding the extent to which the BRI can be considered a complete manifestation of soft power. The findings indicate that the BRI's influence primarily derives from its economic attractiveness, while the cultural aspects associated with the initiative are scarcely mentioned. As a result, there is a need to reassess the inclusion of culture as a significant component of the BRI's manifestation of soft power.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis highlights the differences in news framing between Indonesia and India. While Indonesia portrays a more positive perception of the BRI, India's framing leans predominantly negative. These findings indicate that China's soft power influence manifests differently in each country. Despite the lack of evidence of cultural factors, the findings align with the soft power theory, as it encompasses the strategic shaping of narratives and perceptions, which is evident in the contrasting framing of the BRI. The trends observed in the framing of the BRI in Indonesia and India highlight some key aspects. While India's framing emphasizes geopolitical considerations and concerns about accountability, the economic appeal of the BRI is still present. Indonesia's data predominantly highlights the economic benefits of the initiative, indicating its positive reception in terms of economic cooperation and development. This analysis highlights the significance of contextual factors when analyzing the manifestations of soft power in news framing. The contrasting results underscore the role of economic and geopolitical interests, historical context, and perceptions of China's motives in shaping these framing differences. By considering these contextual factors, a more comprehensive understanding of how soft power operates in different countries can be achieved.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations in this study. The conflicts between Indonesia and China in the South China Sea and between India and China in the Himalayan region have distinct characteristics and scales, which may have influenced the results. Indonesia's conflict with China has been less intense, centred around territorial claims within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (Darmayadi & Purnamasari, 2022). On the other hand, India's conflicts with China in the Himalayas have witnessed significant escalations and geopolitical implications (Malhotra, 2013). The past conflicts may have contributed to India's increased tension and caution towards China. However, it is important to note that despite these limitations, the

overall criticism is minor, and addressing their influence allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between the countries.

While the framing of the BRI provides insights into the influence of soft power, it is just one aspect of China's broader soft power strategy. Soft power involves a wide range of cultural, economic, and diplomatic tools that extend beyond specific initiatives like the BRI. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of China's soft power influence would require studying multiple dimensions and initiatives. Another limitation is source selection. Newspaper articles might not have shown the complete picture of how China's soft power influence abroad in Indonesia and India. Therefore, conducting a more extensive, large-scale study involving a broader range of sources would enhance the generalizability of the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of China's soft power influence. This would allow for a more robust analysis and a deeper exploration of the complex dynamics between soft power, foreign policy considerations, and the framing of China's initiatives.

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