

Beyond the National Frame: Vernacular and English-Language Press Coverage of China's Belt and Road Initiative in India and Nepal

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Abstract

This study looks at how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is portrayed in Indian and Nepali print media, through a comparative content analysis of four leading newspapers: The Hindu and Dainik Jagran in India, and The Kathmandu Post and Kantipur Daily in Nepal. Based on structured coding of 200 news articles (2022-2024) across tone, theme, and narrative, the study asks how India's cautious, non-participant position and Nepal's more engaged, participant position towards the BRI shape the way their national media report on the same transnational initiative. The findings, confirmed through chi-square tests and Cramér's V, show that Indian coverage is considerably more critical and centred on strategic rivalry with China, often set against alternatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), while Nepali coverage is more evenly balanced between developmental optimism and governance-related caution over debt and implementation. The study's central and more original contribution is a language-level divergence that a country-only comparison would miss: within India, the Hindi-language press is markedly more negative and rivalry-focused than its English-language counterpart, while within Nepal the pattern reverses, the Nepali-language press is the most favourably disposed outlet towards the BRI in the entire sample. Drawing on Media Systems Theory, framing theory, and geopolitical communication perspectives, the study argues that national policy orientation and language market work together, rather than separately, to shape how a single global initiative is narrated to different domestic publics.

Keywords

Belt and road initiative, Media representation, Media framing, Geopolitical communication, India-Nepal comparison, Content analysis.

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1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by Xi Jinping in 2013, is one of the most ambitious transnational infrastructure and geopolitical projects of the twenty-first century. It has expanded rapidly across Asia, Europe, and Africa through investment in transport, energy, and digital connectivity. Chinese official discourse presents the BRI as cooperative and mutually beneficial, but its reception around the world has been far from uniform. It has generated different interpretations that reflect wider geopolitical tensions and competing visions of regional order (Rolland, 2017; Hillman, 2020).

These competing interpretations are not limited to diplomatic settings; they are built and debated within national media systems, which shape how domestic audiences make sense of large-scale global initiatives. Media systems do not simply transmit information in a neutral way. Instead, they select, frame, and interpret events in ways that favour certain narratives over others (Entman, 1993). In the case of the BRI, media narratives become important sites where geopolitical meanings are produced, negotiated, and contested.

In South Asia, India and Nepal offer a particularly useful comparative context for studying these dynamics. India has consistently expressed reservations about the BRI, pointing to concerns over sovereignty, territorial integrity, and regional security, especially in relation to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which runs through disputed territory. Indian policymakers and strategic analysts have described the initiative as a challenge to regional stability and national interests, reflecting broader geopolitical competition with China (Pant 2019). Nepal, by contrast, has largely welcomed the BRI as a chance to address long-standing infrastructure gaps, improve connectivity, and diversify its economic partnerships. Its engagement with the BRI is usually framed within a developmental narrative that emphasizes economic growth, modernization, and regional integration (Paudel, 2022).

These contrasting policy positions provide a starting point for examining how media narratives are shaped by, and in turn help reproduce, national geopolitical stances. A comparative analysis of coverage in these two countries gives insight into how media, politics, and international relations interact in the Global South. This study also reveals a dimension

that existing scholarship has largely overlooked: the difference between English-language and vernacular-language coverage within the same country. Although scholarship on BRI-related discourse continues to grow, most existing research focuses on single-country analyses or on Western media systems. Comparative studies within South Asia remain limited, especially studies that systematically examine how media narratives differ across national contexts with distinct geopolitical orientations (Thussu *et al.*, 2018; Wasserman, 2018). Few studies apply framing and agenda-setting concepts systematically across more than one national media system at a time, and even fewer break down coverage within a country by language market. This leaves open the question of whether framing differences attributed to national policy orientation are consistent across a country's press, or whether they vary according to the audience a given outlet serves.

To address these gaps, this study carries out a comparative content analysis of BRI coverage in India and Nepal, examining how competing narratives are built and given legitimacy within distinct national and linguistic media contexts. It treats media as active sites of meaning-making, shaped by political, economic, and institutional forces, rather than as neutral channels for information (Strömbäck and Esser, 2014; McChesney, 2008). By comparing four newspapers across two countries and two language markets, the study offers new empirical insight into how global development initiatives are localized, contested, and reinterpreted within specific socio-political contexts (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

1.1 Conceptual Framework

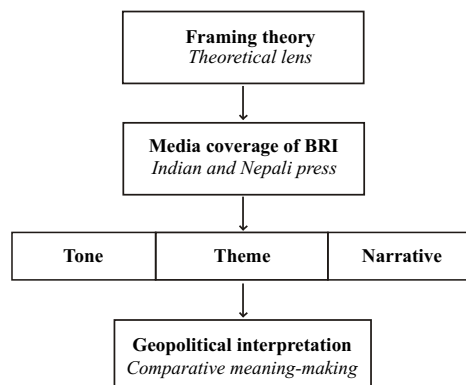


Figure-1: Conceptual framework of the study

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Belt and Road Initiative in Contemporary Global Scholarship

Since it was announced in 2013, the BRI has become one of the most widely discussed topics in international scholarship. Initially presented as a connectivity and infrastructure initiative, it has gradually grown into a

broader geopolitical and geoeconomic strategy that influences trade, diplomacy, regional integration, and global governance (Rolland 2017; Hillman 2020). Scholarship in international relations, political economy, and communication studies suggests that the BRI goes beyond economic cooperation and reflects China's expanding global influence and strategic ambitions (Mações, 2021).

Recent scholarship increasingly points to the BRI's communicative and symbolic dimensions, arguing that it works not only as a development framework but also as a strategic narrative that promotes China's vision of multipolarity and development-centred diplomacy (Hong and Wei 2022; Dellios and Ferguson, 2025). Interpretations vary depending on geopolitical alignment and economic dependency (Duggan *et al.*, 2024): several Asian and African states frame the initiative as a developmental opportunity, while critics in Western and strategically cautious states view it through the lens of geopolitical rivalry, strategic expansion, and debt dependency (Brautigam, 2020). Within South Asia, scholarly interest has grown considerably, with research on India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka addressing sovereignty, regional influence, infrastructure diplomacy, and strategic balancing (Tekir, 2025; Xavier, 2022). Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to how national media systems construct and circulate competing narratives. Media discourse around the BRI is strongly shaped by national political environments and geopolitical interests, which reinforces distinct understandings of development, security, and regional order (Shi and Zhang, 2025).

2.2 Media Framing and the Construction of Geopolitical Meaning

Framing theory offers a useful analytical lens for understanding how the BRI is represented across different political and cultural contexts. Framing scholarship argues that media institutions actively shape public understanding by selecting, emphasizing, and organizing certain aspects of reality while pushing others to the margins. This in turn influences how audiences interpret political actors, international initiatives, and geopolitical developments (Entman, 1993; Tuchman, 1978).

Research on BRI-related media discourse consistently finds polarized and competing representations across national media systems. Chinese state-affiliated media generally frame the initiative through narratives of regional connectivity, economic cooperation, and "win-win" development, whereas many Western media outlets portray the BRI as a geopolitical strategy linked to strategic expansion, debt dependency, and growing Chinese influence in global affairs (Repnikova and Fang, 2018; Hillman, 2020). Comparative framing studies suggest that these divergent narratives are shaped not only by ideological differences but also by institutional media structures, political interests, and geopolitical alignments (Thussu, 2020).

Recent scholarship has moved beyond China-West comparisons to look at regional framing dynamics within Asia and the Global South. Studies of South Asian media suggest that BRI narratives follow domestic political discourse and historical relations with China (Shi and Zhang, 2025). Indian coverage foregrounds sovereignty, strategic competition, and regional security, particularly regarding the CPEC, while Nepali coverage emphasizes infrastructure development, economic modernization, and regional connectivity (Tekir, 2025; Xavier, 2022). The data in this study confirm this pattern and extends it further.

2.3 Dominant Narratives: Development, Dependency, and Strategic Risk

A central theme in BRI scholarship is the coexistence of developmental and risk-oriented narratives. Supportive perspectives describe the initiative as transformative for infrastructure, regional integration, and growth in developing countries facing investment gaps (Mações, 2021; Rolland, 2017), while a substantial body of scholarship points to debt sustainability, governance transparency, and strategic dependency, often through the concept of “debt-trap diplomacy” (Hillman, 2020). Brautigam and Rithmire, (2021), however, question overly simplistic debt-trap narratives, arguing that media and policy debates often overstate Chinese control while underestimating the agency of recipient states.

Strategic risk narratives are strongest where sovereignty and regional-influence concerns carry political weight (Mokdad and Zreik, 2025), and within South Asia these tensions are sharpened by growing India-China rivalry. Indian discourse frequently presents the BRI as a strategic challenge to regional balance and sovereignty, particularly regarding the CPEC, which runs through territory disputed by India (Ghoshal, 2021; Xavier, 2022). Nepal and several smaller South Asian states, by contrast, tend to stress developmental opportunity and economic pragmatism; Nepali scholarship frames the BRI as a way of addressing infrastructure gaps and diversifying partnerships beyond India (S. Adhikari, 2024), even as supportive narratives sometimes register concerns about debt and implementation. Developmental and risk-oriented frames are therefore not mutually exclusive but coexist within complex national contexts, a coexistence that this study confirms quantitatively for Nepal (Section 5).

2.4 Geopolitical Communication and Strategic Narratives

Recent scholarship increasingly approaches the BRI through the framework of geopolitical communication, focusing on the role of narratives, media diplomacy, and strategic messaging in contemporary international politics. From this perspective, the BRI works not only as a physical infrastructure network but also as a communicative project through which

China seeks to shape global perceptions and expand its soft power (Thussu, 2020; Hong and Wei, 2022).

The concept of strategic narratives, politically constructed stories designed to shape domestic and international understandings of political reality (Miskimmon *et al.*, 2014) has been influential in explaining how states communicate geopolitical goals through media and public diplomacy (Neumann and Sending, 2021). Official Chinese discourse consistently promotes peaceful development and mutual benefit, but international reception varies considerably across political and media environments. Contemporary scholarship frames geopolitical competition as a struggle over narrative legitimacy (Castells, 2013), and studies of BRI communication in Asia and Europe show that media discourse often reflects broader geopolitical tensions rather than purely economic considerations (Repnikova and Fang, 2018).

Within South Asia, geopolitical communication around the BRI is especially important because media narratives intersect with nationalist discourse, regional security concerns, and debates over strategic autonomy. Indian media narratives frequently frame the BRI through strategic and security-oriented discourse that emphasizes competition and sovereignty (Tekir, 2025; Xavier, 2022; Price, 2002), while Nepali media discourse tends to emphasize development and connectivity reflecting the complexities of balancing relations between India and China.

2.5 Regional and Comparative Gaps in Existing Scholarship

Despite the rapid growth of BRI scholarship, important regional and comparative gaps remain. Existing research has focused mainly on China-West comparisons or on case studies in Africa, Europe, and Central Asia; comparative analyses within South Asia remain limited, particularly studies of how neighbouring countries with contrasting geopolitical orientations construct competing narratives (Li, 2020). South Asia remains understudied in communication and media research despite its strategic importance in China's regional diplomacy (McCargo, 2003; Acharya, 2023), and existing studies tend to prioritize economic diplomacy and foreign policy analysis over media discourse and framing (Bajpaee, 2023).

An important gap concerns comparative research involving both participating and non-participating South Asian states: India has consistently opposed the BRI on territorial grounds, while Nepal has taken a more supportive, development-oriented position. Yet few studies examine how these contrasting positions shape media narratives across neighbouring states (Singh, 2020). Nepali media scholarship on China-Nepal relations also remains underdeveloped, focusing more on economic cooperation and foreign policy than on media representation (Chand, 2024). A third gap, largely unaddressed and one this study address, is the near-absence of

research comparing English-language and vernacular-language coverage of the BRI within the same national media system, even though vernacular outlets have substantially larger domestic readerships in both countries.

2.6 Contribution of the Present Study

This study contributes to existing scholarship in three ways. First, it extends BRI research into the comparatively underexplored India-Nepal context, examining how contrasting national political orientations shape media narratives (Acharya, 2023; Li, 2020). Second, unlike most earlier framing studies, it adds a language dimension by comparing an English-language and a vernacular-language outlet within each country. This allows the analysis to separate framing differences driven by national context from those driven by audience and editorial orientation. Third, methodologically, it combines structured content-analytic coding of 200 articles with formal chi-square/Cramér's V significance testing (Jensen, 2002), providing a replicable, statistically grounded basis that much of the existing qualitative literature on BRI media framing lacks.

2.7 Research Questions

Building on the gaps identified above, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How does the overall tone of BRI coverage differ between Indian and Nepali newspapers, and between English-language and vernacular-language outlets within each country?

RQ2: What thematic emphases (Development, Geopolitics, Security, Governance) characterize BRI coverage in Indian versus Nepali media, and how, if at all, do these emphases vary by language market within each country?

RQ3: What dominant narratives (Risk, Opportunity, Strategy, Competition, Uncertainty) structure BRI coverage across the two countries and their respective English-language and vernacular-language outlets?

Taken together, RQ1-RQ3 allow the analysis to distinguish framing differences attributable to a country's policy orientation toward the BRI from those attributable to language market and audience orientation within a single country the central comparative aim of this study.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Media Systems Theory, as developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004), whose comparative framework helps explain the relationship between media institutions, political structures, and public communication. Rather than treating media as neutral or universally standardized. Media Systems Theory holds that media systems are historically and politically embedded in national contexts, so that news

production and discourse are shaped by broader political, economic, and ideological structures.

Hallin and Mancini identify several comparative dimensions, including political parallelism, state intervention, media market development, and journalistic professionalization. Political parallelism is the degree to which media organizations align with political actors or national interests. It is particularly relevant here: in highly politicized media environments, coverage often reflects dominant political narratives rather than following norms of neutrality alone (Waisbord, 2019).

Applying Media Systems Theory to this comparative context helps explain how differing political and media structures shape representations of the BRI in India and Nepal. India's media environment is marked by intense political competition, commercialized news markets, strong nationalist discourse, and growing geopolitical concern over China's regional influence (Ji *et al.*, 2016). Coverage of the BRI is therefore likely to foreground security, sovereignty, and strategic rivalry (Ibnat, 2024), which is consistent with research showing that Indian media discourse on China is increasingly shaped by nationalist framing and geopolitical anxiety (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022).

Nepal's media system operates within a different political-economic environment. As a smaller developing state positioned between India and China, Nepal's engagement with the BRI is often framed through developmental and economic perspectives, though such coverage can also reflect domestic political divisions and dependency concerns (D. Adhikari, 2016).

The theory also anticipates within-country variation, which this study is specifically designed to test: commercialized, internationally oriented English-language outlets and vernacular outlets serving mainly domestic, nationalistically inclined readerships may show different degrees of political parallelism even within the same national media system. As detailed in Section 5, this expectation holds clearly for India, where the Hindi-language *Dainik Jagran* is markedly more negative than the English-language *The Hindu*, but not for Nepal, where the vernacular *Kantipur Daily* is the more favourable outlet, a divergence discussed further in Section 6.

In addition to Media Systems Theory, this study draws on framing theory to examine how geopolitical meanings are constructed within media narratives, following Entman's (1993) account of framing as the selection and emphasis of particular aspects of reality. It also draws on geopolitical communication scholarship, which shows how media narratives give legitimacy to state interests and construct geopolitical identities (Surowiec and Manor, 2021). Together, these frameworks place media representations of the BRI within broader political and institutional structures, treating media as an active participant in the construction of geopolitical meaning rather than a simple channel of information.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study uses a structured content analysis combined with narrative interpretation to examine how the BRI is represented in Indian and Nepali print media. It contrasts coverage between the two countries and, within each country, between an English-language and a vernacular-language outlet. Systematic coding of tone, theme, and narrative provides a quantitative basis for comparison, while close reading of headlines and article content supports an interpretive analysis of how meaning is constructed.

4.2 Selection of Media Outlets

The study focuses on four leading newspapers recognized for their national influence and reach. From India: *The Hindu*, an English-language daily known for in-depth, policy-oriented reporting on international affairs; and *Dainik Jagran*, one of the most widely circulated Hindi-language newspapers, chosen to capture vernacular media discourse and broader public narratives. From Nepal: *The Kathmandu Post*, the country's leading English-language daily; and *Kantipur Daily*, Nepal's highest-circulation Nepali-language newspaper. Pairing English- and vernacular-language outlets helps distinguish policy-driven framing differences from those shaped by audiences, editorial stances, and language markets.

Table-1: Distribution of Newspaper Articles by Country and Outlet

Country	Newspaper	Language	Articles	Type
India	<i>The Hindu</i>	English	50	National daily
India	<i>Dainik Jagran</i>	Hindi	50	National daily
Nepal	<i>The Kathmandu Post</i>	English	50	National daily
Nepal	<i>Kantipur Daily</i>	Nepali	50	National daily
Total			200	

4.3 Time Frame

The study examines media coverage published between 2022 and 2024. This period reflects how discourse around the BRI evolved after its first decade of implementation, capturing a shift from earlier optimism to a more critical, evaluative phase marked by growing global scrutiny and debate over financial sustainability.

4.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through targeted keyword-based searches of online newspaper archives and search engines, using the primary terms "Belt and Road Initiative", "BRI", "China Nepal project", and the Nepali-language equivalent "बीआरआई". Because BRI-related developments are often folded into broader China-Nepal or China-India relations reporting without an explicit "BRI" label in vernacular media, additional context-based searches identified relevant articles on China-led infrastructure and connectivity

cooperation even where the label itself was missing. Articles were included if they explicitly mentioned the BRI or clearly referred to China-led infrastructure, investment, or connectivity projects linked to it; articles focused only on unrelated domestic or international issues were excluded. This approach produced a fully balanced final dataset of 200 articles, 50 from each outlet (Table-1), avoiding the outlet imbalance that has limited some earlier convenience-sample studies of vernacular BRI coverage.

4.5 Unit of Analysis

The primary unit of analysis is the individual news article. Headlines served as the main analytical entry point, since they capture the dominant framing and narrative emphasis of each article. Article summaries and key paragraphs were consulted where needed to ensure an accurate reading of tone and thematic content.

4.6 Coding Framework

A structured coding scheme was applied to each article across three dimensions: tone, theme, and narrative.

- ▶ **Tone:** This reflects the article's overall evaluative stance towards the BRI: Positive (emphasizes benefits, cooperation, or development outcomes); Negative (highlights risks, criticism, or concerns); Neutral (mainly descriptive or informational).
- ▶ **Theme:** The main issue emphasized in the article: Development (infrastructure, economic growth, investment); Geopolitics (strategic influence, diplomacy, power relations); Security (military concerns, threats, regional stability); Governance (debt, transparency, policy issues).
- ▶ **Narrative:** The dominant storyline structuring the article's meaning: Risk (debt dependency, economic or political concern); Opportunity (development benefits and cooperation); Strategy (China's expansion of influence); Competition (rivalry between China and other actors, e.g., India, the West); Uncertainty (ambiguity or mixed signals). Each article was assigned one primary category for each dimension to keep the analysis consistent. No article in the final dataset was coded as Uncertainty on the narrative dimension, an absence discussed in Section 5.4.

Table-2: Coding Dimensions and Categories

Variable	Categories	Description
Tone	Positive/Negative/Neutral	Overall orientation towards the BRI
Theme	Development/Geopolitics/ Security/Governance	Main issue emphasized
Narrative	Risk/Opportunity/Strategy /Competition/Uncertainty	Dominant storyline

4.7 Data Analysis

Coded data were analyzed in two stages. First, descriptive frequency and percentage distributions of tone, theme, and narrative were calculated overall and cross-tabulated by country and by outlet. Second, to test whether these distributions differ by more than chance, Pearson's chi-square (χ^2 test of independence) was applied to each cross-tabulation, with Cramér's V calculated as a standardized effect-size measure (V small, medium, .50 large, following Cohen's conventions for tables with more than two categories). Six tests were carried out: tone $\times$ country, tone $\times$ outlet, theme $\times$ country, theme $\times$ outlet, narrative $\times$ country, and narrative $\times$ outlet. All tests were evaluated at $\alpha = .05$. Because the Security theme category was sparse ($n = 8$ overall) and produced expected cell counts below the conventional threshold of 5 in some cells for the theme-based tests, Security was collapsed into Geopolitics for the two theme chi-square tests only, on the grounds that both categories concern strategic or regional-stability framing; the full four-category Theme breakdown is kept in all descriptive figures and tables. Quantitative patterns were then interpreted alongside close reading of representative headlines, to examine how meaning was constructed rather than relying on frequency counts alone.

4.8 Reliability and Validity

All 200 articles were initially coded by one researcher using the category definitions in Section 4.6. Ambiguous cases were resolved through full-article re-reading. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using an independent second coder who coded a random 10% subsample ($n = 20$), evenly distributed across the four outlets. Cohen's kappa indicated strong agreement for Tone ($\kappa = .828$, 90.0% agreement), Theme ($\kappa = .788$, 90.0%), and Narrative ($\kappa = .728$, 80.0%). Following Landis and Koch's (1977) benchmarks, these values indicate substantial to near-perfect agreement. Disagreements mainly occurred between conceptually adjacent categories, particularly Geopolitics-Security and Development themes, and Competition-Risk-Strategy narratives. Validity was further strengthened through a transparent coding scheme, coverage of four outlets across two countries and language markets, full-article contextual reading, and chi-square/Cramér's V tests of cross-tabulation differences.

4.9 Limitations

The methodology has three main limitations, discussed further in Section 7.1. *First*, the inter-coder reliability check reported in Section 4.8, while strong, covers only a 10% subsample rather than the full dataset. *Second*, the focus on four newspapers cannot represent the full South Asian media landscape; it notably excludes broadcast, digital-native, and social media coverage and the emerging affective, networked forms of political engagement found there (Papacharissi, 2015). *Third*, the headline-centred

coding approach, despite contextual verification, may not capture all the nuances of longer-form or opinion writing.

5. Findings

5.1 Overall Framing of the BRI

Across the full dataset (N = 200), media coverage of the BRI is mostly negative: 50.5% of articles (n = 101) were coded Negative, 34.0% (n = 68) Neutral, and 15.5% (n = 31) Positive (Figure-2). Neutral coverage mainly consists of event-based reporting- official visits, agreements, diplomatic meetings while positive coverage is concentrated in articles that emphasize infrastructure completion, expanded cooperation, or China's diplomatic outreach.

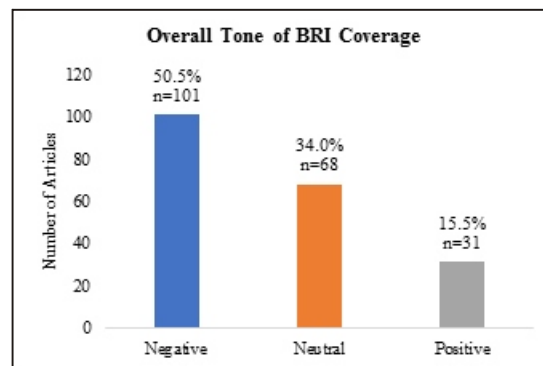


Figure-2: Overall Tone of BRI Coverage (N = 200)

5.2 Comparative Tone: Country and Outlet

The overall negative-leaning tone hides a substantial difference between the two countries. Indian coverage is markedly more critical than Nepali coverage: 66% of Indian articles were coded Negative, compared with 35% of Nepali articles. Conversely, only 7% of Indian articles were Positive, compared with 24% of Nepali articles. A chi-square test of independence confirmed that this association between country and tone is statistically significant and not simply due to chance, $\chi^2(2, N = 200) = 21.72$, with a medium-to-large effect size (Cramér's $V = .330$).

This divergence is even sharper at the outlet level (Figure-3). *Dainik Jagran*, the Hindi-language daily, is the most negative outlet in the entire sample—78% Negative, 20% Neutral, and just 2% Positive (1 of 50 articles) noticeably more critical than its English-language counterpart, *The Hindu* (54% Negative, 34% Neutral, 12% Positive). *Kantipur Daily*, Nepal's Nepali-language outlet, shows the opposite pattern: it is the least negative outlet in the sample (20%) and the most positive (34%), clearly more favourable than the English-language Kathmandu Post (50% Negative, 14% Positive). The association between outlet and tone is also statistically significant, $\chi^2(6, N = 200) = 39.27$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .313$ a medium-to-large effect, and in fact

the largest chi-square statistic of any test in this study. This indicates that outlet-level differences in tone are the single strongest patterned association in the dataset. In other words, the vernacular-English divide runs in opposite directions in the two countries: in India, the vernacular outlet is the more critical of the BRI, while in Nepal, the vernacular outlet is the more favourable one. This finding qualifies any simple assumption that vernacular media are uniformly more nationalistic or more appositional than English-language media, a point returned to in Section 6.3.

This contrast is visible in individual articles too. A representative *Dainik Jagran* headline frames China as a “Chinese threat in Indian Ocean”, calling for India to expand its naval capacity in response (*Dainik Jagran*, 19 May 2022) an example of the outlet’s recurring tendency to frame Chinese regional activity as a security concern that requires an Indian response. This is far removed from the tone of *Kantipur*’s more favourable coverage, where a Nepali government minister describes China’s development achievements as “a source of inspiration for Nepal” (*Kantipur Daily*, 24 July 2023). Table-3 lists these and two further illustrative headlines, one from each outlet, with the original URLs for verification.

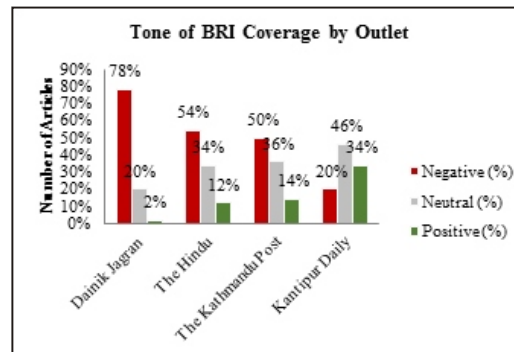


Figure-3: Tone Distribution Across Media Outlets (% , N = 200)

5.3 Thematic Distribution

Geopolitics is the dominant theme overall (50.0%, n = 100), followed by Governance (28.5%, n = 57), Development (18.0%, n = 36), and Security (3.5%, n = 7). This distribution also differs by country (Figure-4). Indian coverage is heavily centred on Geopolitics (60%), with Governance (21%) and Development (13%) comparatively minor, and Security present but small (6%, versus 1% in Nepal). Nepali coverage is more evenly split between Geopolitics (40%) and Governance (36%), with Development somewhat more prominent than in India (23% vs. 13%). To test this association, Security was collapsed into Geopolitics to satisfy the expected-cell-count assumption of the chi-square test (Section 4.7); the resulting three-category test confirmed a statistically significant association between country and theme, $\chi^2(2, N = 200) = 12.57$, $p = .002$, Cramér’s $V = .251$ (small-to-medium effect). This is a

real but comparatively modest association compared with the tone and narrative results below.

At the outlet level, *The Hindu* is the most geopolitics-focused outlet (64%), while *The Kathmandu Post* is the most governance-focused (46%). This suggests that Nepali English-language coverage foregrounds debt and transparency concerns, even as the country's Nepali-language coverage (Kantipur, 46% Geopolitics) leans more geopolitical while also being more positive in tone, a reminder that theme and tone are separate dimensions. The outlet-level association between outlet and theme (with Security collapsed into Geopolitics) is also significant, $\chi^2(6, N = 200) = 19.76$, $p = .003$, Cramér's $V = .222$, the smallest effect size among the six tests. This suggests theme is more consistent across outlets within a country than tone or narrative are.

The Kathmandu Post's Governance-heavy coverage is well illustrated by a recurring cluster of articles that question implementation progress and debt exposure, for instance, a piece headlined "Five years on, BRI projects are nowhere on the horizon" (*The Kathmandu Post*, 20 May 2022), one of several Kathmandu Post headlines that raise pointed, skeptical questions about project status and financing terms. This questioning tone contrasts with the more descriptive, opportunity-oriented tone found in Kantipur's coverage of the same broad China-Nepal relationship.

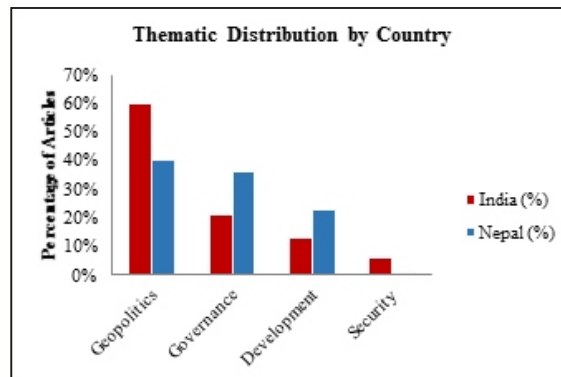


Figure-4: Thematic Distribution by Country (% , N = 200)

5.4 Dominant Narratives

Among the four narrative categories found in the dataset, Competition is the most frequent overall (27.0%, $n = 54$), followed closely by Risk (25.5%, $n = 51$), Strategy (24.0%, $n = 48$), and Opportunity (23.5%, $n = 47$) a far more even distribution than the tone results, showing that "negative tone" coverage is not narratively uniform. No article was assigned the pre-defined Uncertainty category; whatever its tone, BRI coverage in this sample was consistently built around one of the four defined storylines. This suggests that Indian and Nepali outlets alike resolve the initiative into a definite narrative position rather than presenting it as genuinely unsettled.

The country-level breakdown (Figure-5) shows the strongest association in the entire study. In India, Competition dominates (43%), far ahead of Risk (26%), Strategy (21%), and Opportunity, which is marginal (10%). This fits a media discourse that reads the BRI mainly through the lens of India's own strategic rivalry with China. In Nepal, by contrast, no single narrative dominates to the same degree: Opportunity (37%) and Strategy (27%) are the two leading categories, Risk is present but not dominant (25%), and Competition is comparatively marginal (11%). This reflects Nepal's position as a direct BRI participant, for whom the initiative is debated mainly in developmental and implementation terms rather than as a proxy for rivalry with a third country. This is both the largest effect size and the most significant result of any test carried out: $\chi^2(3, N = 200) = 35.24, p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .420$ a medium-to-large effect by conventional standards, and the largest Cramér's V among all six tests. This confirms narrative as the coding dimension on which India and Nepal diverge most sharply.

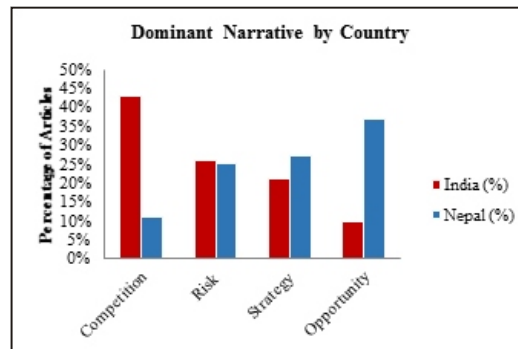


Figure-5: Dominant Narrative by Country (% , N = 200)

At the outlet level, *Dainik Jagran* again stands out: 46% of its articles carry a Competition narrative, the highest of any outlet, against just 6% Opportunity, the lowest. The outlet-level association is also significant, $\chi^2(9, N = 200) = 46.70, p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .279$ (small-to-medium effect), a somewhat smaller effect than the country-level test. This indicates that national context is a stronger driver of narrative choice than outlet identity, though outlet differences remain statistically reliable. Consistent with the qualitative literature (Section 2.3), a recurring pattern within the Indian Competition narrative, most visible in *The Hindu*, is the explicit framing of the BRI against alternative connectivity initiatives, particularly the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which positions Indian and Western-backed alternatives as direct counterweights to Chinese infrastructure diplomacy.

A representative Hindu headline, "What purpose does the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) serve? | Explained" (*The Hindu*, 16 September 2023), is a good example of this pattern of explaining the BRI in relation to India's own competing connectivity project, a pattern also visible

in *Dainik Jagran's* coverage, which questions the BRI's viability in India-linked strategic terms. By contrast, articles coded Opportunity in Kantipur typically report Nepali openness to Chinese investment in straightforward, welcoming terms, new cooperation agreements, feasibility studies, investor interest, with markedly little of the rivalry framing that dominates the Indian Competition narrative.

Table-3: Illustrative Headlines by Outlet

Outlet	Headline (as published)	Date	Narrative/ Theme	URL
<i>The Hindu</i>	"What purpose does the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) serve? Explained"	16 Sep 2023	Competition	https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/what-purpose-does-the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-imec-serve-explained/article67302606.ece
<i>Dainik Jagran</i>	"Chinese threat in Indian Ocean" (English lead-in; full headline continues in Hindi)	19 May 2022	Competition	https://www.jagran.com/world/china-india-should-increase-naval-capabilities-to-counter-chinese-threat-in-indian-ocean-says-expert-22725536.html
<i>The Kathmandu Post</i>	"Five years on, BRI projects are nowhere on the horizon"	20 May 2022	Governance	https://kathmandupost.com/national/2022/05/20/five-years-on-bri-projects-are-nowhere-on-the-horizon
<i>Kantipur Daily</i>	"China's achievement is a source of inspiration for Nepal: Acting PM Khadka" (translated from Nepali)	24 Jul 2023	Opportunity	https://ekantipur.com/news/2023/07/24/169017465893811732.html

Note: The *Dainik Jagran* and *Kantipur Daily* headlines were published in Hindi and Nepali respectively; the English text given here is a translation prepared for this article, not the outlet's own wording, and readers wishing to verify exact original phrasing should consult the linked source.

5.5 Summary of Comparative Patterns

Table-4 summarizes the principal divergence between the two countries across all three coding dimensions, and Table-5 reports the full set of chi-square and Cramér's V results.

Table-4: Summary of Tone, Theme, and Narrative by Country (%)

Dimension	Category	India (n = 100)	Nepal (n = 100)
Tone	Negative	66.0	35.0
	Neutral	27.0	41.0
	Positive	7.0	24.0
Theme	Geopolitics	60.0	40.0
	Governance	21.0	36.0
	Development	13.0	23.0
	Security	6.0	1.0
Narrative	Competition	43.0	11.0
	Risk	26.0	25.0
	Strategy	21.0	27.0
	Opportunity	10.0	37.0

Table-5: Chi-Square Tests of Independence and Cramér's V

Test	χ^2	df	N		Cramér's V	Effect size
Tone × Country	21.72	2	200	< .001	.330	Medium-large
Tone × Outlet	39.27	6	200	< .001	.313	Medium-large
Theme × Country ^a	12.57	2	200	.002	.251	Small-medium
Theme × Outlet ^a	19.76	6	200	.003	.222	Small-medium
Narrative × Country	35.24	3	200	< .001	.420	Medium-large
Narrative × Outlet	46.70	9	200	< .001	.279	Small-medium

^a Security (n = 7) collapsed into Geopolitics to satisfy the expected-cell-count assumption (Section 4.7); the four-category breakdown is retained in Figure-4 and Table-4.

All six associations are statistically significant at $p < .01$, confirming that the tone, theme, and narrative differences observed between India and Nepal, and between individual outlets, are unlikely to be due to sampling variation alone. The narrative × country comparison shows both the highest chi-square value relative to its degrees of freedom and the largest effect size ($V = .420$), making dominant narrative the coding dimension that most reliably distinguishes Indian from Nepali coverage. Theme, by contrast, shows the smallest effects at the outlet level ($V = .222-.279$), suggesting that the four outlets are comparatively more alike in what they write about than in how (tone) or through what storyline (narrative) they write about it.

Taken together, these results indicate that India's non-participant, strategically competitive relationship with the BRI produces media coverage centred on geopolitical rivalry, while Nepal's position as a participant state produces more evenly balanced coverage that weighs development

opportunity against governance risk. These associations are statistically confirmed rather than merely descriptive. Within each country, the vernacular-language outlet does not simply amplify the national pattern but can diverge from it, most strikingly in Nepal, where the vernacular *Kantipur Daily* is the single most favourably disposed outlet towards the BRI in the entire sample.

6. Discussion

6.1 Media as a Site of Geopolitical Contestation

One of the clearest outcomes of the analysis is that geopolitical and strategic narratives dominate over developmental ones, particularly in Indian coverage (Sections 5.3-5.4). Rather than being framed as an economic or infrastructure initiative, the BRI is often portrayed, especially in *The Hindu* and *Dainik Jagran* as a tool of China's expanding influence. The recurring comparison with alternatives such as IMEC shows how media narratives are shaped by national strategic priorities, consistent with a competition-centred logic in which development projects are read through the lens of power balancing rather than cooperation.

6.2 Risk, Competition, and the Limits of a Single "Negative" Category

The prominence of the Risk narrative overall supports the expectation from the risk-communication literature that media institutions amplify uncertainty around complex transnational initiatives, particularly regarding debt sustainability and project viability. However, the narrative-level results complicate a simple "negative coverage equals risk framing" reading of the tone data: in India, the dominant narrative behind negative tone is Competition, not Risk (Section 5.4). This means Indian negativity towards the BRI is driven more by strategic rivalry than by concern for the debt sustainability of other countries' BRI projects. This is the strongest association found anywhere in the study ($V = .420$), and the clearest statistical signature separating the two countries' coverage: Indian media negativity is largely a story about India's own geopolitical positioning rather than about the BRI's developmental merits or risks as such.

6.3 The Vernacular Divergence: A Finding That Cuts Against a Simple National-Frame Model

A key finding of this study is the divergent behaviour of vernacular-language outlets in the two countries. In India, the Hindi-language *Dainik Jagran* is markedly more negative (78%) and more competition-oriented (46%) than the English-language *Hindu* (54% negative, 40% competition). This fits the political-parallelism prediction that vernacular outlets serving domestic, nationally oriented readerships adopt more nationalist framing than English-language outlets oriented towards policy elites. In Nepal, the pattern reverses: the Nepali-language *Kantipur Daily* is markedly less negative (20%)

and more opportunity-oriented (44%) than the English-language Kathmandu Post (50% negative, 30% opportunity). A single “vernacular media are more nationalistic” hypothesis, which would predict similar patterns in both countries, is not supported here; the outlet-level tone association ($\chi^2 = 39.27$, $V = .313$) confirms this is a genuine difference rather than sampling noise.

One plausible interpretation, consistent with Nepal’s position as a BRI participant, is that Nepali vernacular coverage speaks more directly to a domestic public with concrete development expectations, while Nepali English-language coverage targets an internationally attentive readership focused on governance and debt-sustainability debates. In India’s non-participant context, vernacular coverage instead appears to channel nationalist and security-oriented sentiment more directly than English-language coverage aimed at an internationally engaged elite. This asymmetry suggests that the relationship between language of publication and BRI framing is mediated by a country’s own participation status a pattern that future work extending to a third or fourth country pairing could usefully test.

6.4 Divergent National Contexts and Media Framing

The comparative dimension of the study confirms that national policy positioning plays a substantial role in shaping media narratives, but the size and make-up of the effect differ meaningfully from a simple “India critical, Nepal supportive” binary. Nepali coverage is not uniformly favourable: Governance concerns are the single largest theme in *The Kathmandu Post* (46%), and Risk appears in almost exactly the same share of Nepali articles as Indian ones (Table-4). What differs is less the presence of risk-related concern than the narrative it sits within: in Nepal, risk coverage coexists with substantial Opportunity coverage, rather than being dominated, as in India, by a Competition frame centred on a third country’s rivalry with China. This is precisely why the theme association ($V = .251$) is markedly weaker than the narrative association ($V = .420$): India and Nepal write about broadly similar issues but resolve them into very different underlying storylines.

6.5 From Developmental Optimism to Critical Reassessment

Although this study’s cross-sectional design (2022-2024) cannot directly test change over time, the concentration of Governance and Risk coverage across both countries is consistent with the broader post-decade reassessment of the BRI documented in the literature (Section 2.1), in which initial optimism has given way to more evaluative coverage centred on financial sustainability and implementation outcomes. A longitudinal extension, discussed in Section 7.2, would be needed to confirm this trajectory empirically rather than simply infer it from the literature.

6.6 Implications for Understanding Media-Policy Linkages

Media framing does not operate in isolation; it both reflects and potentially informs policy debates. In India, the concentration of coverage on

Competition and Geopolitics is consistent with, and may reinforce, the country's cautious policy stance towards the BRI. In Nepal, coverage that balances Opportunity against Governance concern mirrors the government's own position of engaging with the BRI while negotiating debt safeguards. Media discourse can therefore serve as an indicator of, and potentially a contributor to, national policy positioning, though establishing a causal direction lies beyond the scope of this design.

6.7 Theoretical Contribution of the Study

By moving beyond a single tone or frequency measure to combine theme and narrative coding with formal significance testing and a cross-linguistic design, this study contributes to the literature in three ways. *First*, the narrative-level findings (Section 5.4) show that aggregate "negative" tone is not uniform, in India it is driven by a substantially different narrative (Competition) than the risk-dominant framing often assumed in the debt-trap literature. *Second*, the vernacular-language finding (Section 6.3) shows that national context alone is not enough to predict BRI framing; language market and audience orientation interact with a country's participation status in ways that a country-level comparison alone would miss. *Third*, the chi-square/Cramér's V results (Table-5) establish an effect-size hierarchy narrative × country strongest theme weakest offering a falsifiable, replicable benchmark for future comparative BRI framing studies, rather than the purely qualitative "coverage differs" claims common in the existing literature.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how the BRI is represented in Indian and Nepali media, through a comparative content analysis of four leading newspapers in India and Nepal. Overall framing is predominantly negative, with Geopolitics the dominant theme and Competition the leading narrative. These aggregate figures, however, conceal substantial and in some respects counter-intuitive variation, confirmed as statistically significant through chi-square tests of independence.

Indian coverage is markedly more critical than Nepali coverage and is dominated by a Competition narrative that is often framed against alternatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. Nepali coverage is more evenly balanced between Opportunity and Governance concerns, consistent with the country's position as a BRI participant navigating both developmental expectation and debt-sustainability caution. The study's most distinctive contribution is that this national divergence does not carry over uniformly to the vernacular press: the Hindi-language *Dainik Jagran* is the most negative outlet in the sample, while the Nepali-language *Kantipur Daily* is the most positive. This reversal points to the need for comparative media research to disaggregate by language market, not only by country.

Methodologically, the study offers a transparent, replicable coding framework, with reported frequencies, cross-tabulations, and chi-square/Cramér's V significance tests across tone, theme, and narrative for four outlets. This goes beyond the largely qualitative treatment of BRI media framing found in much of the existing South Asian literature.

7.1 Limitations

Three limitations should be acknowledged. *First*, the inter-coder reliability check reported in Section 4.8 ($\kappa = .73-.83$ across Tone, Theme, and Narrative), while strong, was carried out on a 10% subsample ($n = 20$) rather than the full dataset; full double-coding would give a more complete picture, and the remaining disagreements, concentrated at adjacent category boundaries, suggest that refining the categories could further improve consistency. *Second*, the study is limited to four print newspapers and does not capture broadcast, digital-native, or social media coverage, which may frame the BRI differently, particularly for younger audiences. *Third*, the cross-sectional 2022-2024 design cannot directly show the shift from early optimism to later scrutiny that the literature describes over time. Consistent with its exploratory nature, the study did not pre-register directional hypotheses, so the effect sizes reported (Cramér's V) should be treated as an initial empirical benchmark rather than a confirmatory test of prior theory.

7.2 Future Research

Future research could extend this design in three directions: *First*, extending the reliability check from a 10% subsample to full double-coding of all 200 articles, refining the Theme and Narrative category boundaries where disagreement was concentrated; *Second*, extending the timeframe backward (for example, to 2014-2024) to test longitudinally whether the shift from developmental optimism to critical reassessment, documented qualitatively in the literature, appears in this study's own coding categories; and *Third*, extending the vernacular-versus-English design to additional country pairs (for example, Pakistan's Urdu and English press, or Sri Lanka's Sinhala, Tamil, and English press) to test whether the participation-status-mediated pattern found here holds more generally across South Asia.

7.3 Policy Implications

For Nepal and other BRI-participant states, the coexistence of substantial Opportunity and Governance narratives in media coverage suggests that public communication emphasizing transparency and implementation safeguards is likely to resonate with an audience that is open to the initiative but not uncritical of it. For India, the dominance of a Competition narrative suggests that public discourse around the BRI is likely to remain closely tied to how India's own connectivity alternatives, such as IMEC, are received domestically, rather than to an independent assessment of BRI project outcomes. More broadly, for communication strategists, the vernacular-

divergence finding shows that a single national messaging strategy is unlikely to reach English-language and vernacular-language audiences in the same way, particularly in participant states such as Nepal.

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Author Contributions

Bandana Singh conceived and designed the study and was responsible for data collection, manuscript drafting, and formal analysis. Yonghong Dai provided supervision, critical revisions of the manuscript, and funding acquisition and proofread the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable. This study is based exclusively on publicly available newspaper articles and secondary sources; no human participants or personal data were involved.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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