

Media Framing and Strategic Narratives: A Comparative Study of China's Trans-Border Road Infrastructure Projects in Nepal Across Local, National, and International Platforms

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ABSTRACT

China's trans-border road infrastructure initiatives in Nepal have become contentious spaces of development, connectivity, and geopolitics and have been receiving diverse interpretations on various media platforms. While Beijing presents such projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as collaborative efforts building regional integration, local and global narratives sharply diverge. This research utilizes a comparative mixed-method design—text-mining based quantitative analysis along with qualitative framing analysis—to analyze how China's road projects in Nepal are framed in English and vernacular Nepali media, Indian media, and international sites from the US, UK, Russia, Japan, and China. Discoveries demonstrate a divided media sphere: local English media often highlight disruption, government shortfalls, and economic hazards; vernacular media target pragmatic news and logistical solutions; Chinese media always promote a cooperative and connectivity-based narrative; whereas Western and Indian media highlight security issues, vulnerability, and disaster disruptions. These differences indicate how media framing is not just influenced by journalistic routines but national priorities and geopolitical inclinations as well. By tracing the contesting discourses that organize public opinion and policy discourse, the study highlights the significance of media narratives in determining the strategic importance of trans-border infrastructure in South Asia.

KEYWORDS

Media framing, Belt and Road Initiative, Nepal-China Relations, Strategic Narratives, Infrastructure, Comparative Media Analysis, Geopolitics

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emerged as a prominent international media topic following its introduction by Xi Jinping in 2013. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed a national vision as an extensive initiative to link Asia, Africa, and Europe. This project is known by numerous names, including China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, the Silk Road Economic Belt, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. China characterizes the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an infrastructure endeavour for global collaboration (Liu & Dunfor, 2016), a vehicle for worldwide economic advancement (Intelligence Unit, 2017), and as China's overarching connectivity initiative (Chung, 2017). The Chinese government established it as a primary national strategy (Du & Zhang, 2018). The economic nature of the BRI aims, as portrayed by China, is debatable. Flint and Zhu (2019) contend that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) encompasses three objectives and strategies: economic integration, regional influence, and global geopolitics in rivalry with the United States. Wang (2016) characterizes the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as China's geopolitical strategy in Asia, Africa, and Europe, aimed at competing with the United States. The interpretation of BRI goals and strategies is contingent

upon context, source, and stakeholder relationships; for instance, Pakistan and Sri Lanka endorse the BRI, whilst the United States and European nations perceive it as an economic and security threat (Dusyk et al., 2018). The primary stakeholders of the Belt and Road Initiative are the governments and populations of Asian, European, and African nations, as well as the United States. China's cross-border road connectivity projects in Nepal are at the focal point of South Asian connectivity, development, and geopolitics debates and draw diverse interpretations across various media systems. Since these projects overlap with local livelihood issues, national development priorities, and global strategic interests, media framing of these projects is decisive in constructing public perception and policy debate. Current debates, however, present fractured accounts, with Nepali English and vernacular media, Indian regional outlets, and global forums from the US, UK, Russia, Japan, and China highlighting a variety of frames from disruption and governance difficulty to cooperation, security, and strategic opportunity (Murton & Lord, 2020). Against this background, the current study aims to examine dominant frames in media representations of China's road works in Nepal and cross-narrative comparison across English, vernacular, social media, and international sources to uncover both convergences and divergences in framing China's infrastructural footprint.

Objectives of Study

1. To analyse dominant frames in media narratives of China's road projects in Nepal.
2. To compare narratives across English, vernacular, social media, and international sources (India, US, UK, Russia, Japan)

Review Of Literature

Current research emphasizes how trans-border infrastructures are situated within broader issues of mobility, diplomacy, and geopolitical rivalry. Murton (2017) studies Nepal–China border corridors as sites where mobility and containment intersect, illustrating how infrastructures both enable development and affirm territorial sovereignty at the same time. Karki (2020) highlights the diplomatic aspect by examining tourism as a type of track-two diplomacy that enhances people-to-people relations between Nepal and China, inferring that connectivity initiatives also have soft power aims. At a larger comparative level, Deka et al. (2023) examine how media coverage mediates perceptions of cooperation and conflict in the Brahmaputra basin, citing the important role of framing in constructing transboundary resource politics. Expanding on this view, Mao (2023) analyzes the development rivalry between Chinese and Japanese transnational infrastructure projects, emphasizing quality and sustainability concerns as central to analyzing regional power relations.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The current research employs a comparative and mixed-method research design to critically examine how China's trans-border road infrastructure projects in Nepal are framed in the media and strategic narratives on various platforms. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are used in the design to capture not just the frequency and trends but also the underlying interpretive meaning locked into the narratives. By putting local, national, and international media productions in English and vernacular languages side by side, the research aims to bring out the diversity of how depictions differ across political, cultural, and geographic spaces.

Data Sources and Collection

The primary data will be taken from a heteronym corpus of media texts such as newspaper archives, TV transcripts, and social media datasets. Newspapers and online websites like The Kathmandu Post, Kantipur, The Hindu, Indian Express, Global Times, People's Daily, The New York Times, BBC, The Japan Times, and RT will yield abundant text data for comparative framing analysis. TV transcripts on Nepal TV, Doordarshan, and CCTV will also add insights about broadcast narratives. Furthermore, quantitative social media datasets (Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube) will be gathered in order to analyze public discourse and sentiment patterns surrounding the projects.

Analytical Methods

The research will utilize a dual analytical approach. To begin with, quantitative descriptive analysis will be carried out through the use of text-mining software to produce frequency counts, word co-occurrence maps, and sentiment analysis, providing quantifiable insights into the prevalence of prevailing frames and changes in discourse. Second, comparative framing analysis will be qualitatively applied to interpret themes, metaphors, and strategic narratives imbedded in the texts. This two-pronged strategy enables the study to break free of shallow counts and discuss the underlying ideological and strategic framing principles driving media representations.

Comparative Framework and Validity

The comparative aspect of this study is found in systematically comparing media productions on three levels: local (English and vernacular Nepalese media), national (Indian media), and international (US, UK, Russia, Japan, and China). This allows for the determination of convergences and divergences as well as possible geopolitical agendas enshrined in media discourses. For the purposes of ensuring reliability and validity, triangulation shall be utilized by cross-verifying textual, broadcast, and social media findings. Additionally, intercoder reliability tests in qualitative framing analysis will maximize the consistency of interpretations. Therefore, the mixed-method design guarantees both breadth and depth in comprehending the discursive construction of China's infrastructure initiatives in Nepal.

Results

The findings in this research present a comparative picture of the way China's trans-border road infrastructure projects in Nepal are framed and told across local, national, and international media outlets. Based on both quantitative text-mining results and qualitative framing analysis, the results reveal substantial differences in how events, risks, opportunities, and strategic dimensions are framed. Through frequency patterns, sentiment orientation, and thematic frames between English and vernacular media, and regional and global media, the results support the existence of competing discourses structuring public and political views on China's infrastructural presence in Nepal.

Table 1. Sample corpus & coding snapshot (pilot N = 10 items)

ID	Outlet / Platform	Date	Language	Piece (linked)	Coded Dominant Frame	Secondary Frame	Valence (-/0/+)
1	The Kathmandu Post (news)	2025-07-09	English	Flood wrecks Nepal-China trade route	Disruption & vulnerability of road link	Economic risks (price hike)	-. (Kathmandu Post)
2	The Kathmandu Post (editorial)	2025-07-10	English	Make haste	Urgency for rapid restoration	State capacity / governance	0/+. (Kathmandu Post)
3	AP News (wire)	2025-07 (exact day in article)	English	Monsoon floods sweep away bridge	Disaster impact on key cross-border bridge	Human toll / rescue ops	-. (AP News)
4	Times of India	2025-07	English	Floods sweep away Nepal-China bridge	Infrastructure loss	Supply chain disruption	-. (The Times of India)
5	eKantipur (news)	2025-08-23	Nepali (English page)	Kodari road opened; Rasuwagadhi blocked	Partial restoration / alternate route	Logistics management	0. (Ekantipur)
6	eKantipur (news)	2025-07-21	Nepali (English summary)	Rasuwagadhi road one-way	Temporary connectivity via one-way access	China grant-supported repairs	0/+. (Ekantipur)
7	The Kathmandu Post (news)	2025-08-08	English	Pilgrims & containers stuck	Bottlenecks on border roads	Festival-season pressure	-. (Kathmandu Post)
8	Global Times	2024-09-28	English	THMDCN projects advance	Strategic cooperation / connectivity vision	Engineering capability narrative	+. (Global Times)
9	Global Times	2025-01-02	English	Joint ground surveying (BRI)	Forward momentum under BRI	Technical cooperation	+. (Global Times)
10	The Japan Times	2024-10-14	English	China's 'new Great Wall' in Nepal	Security / border hardening	Coercive capacity / surveillance	-. (The Japan Times)

* Coding rules (pilot): one dominant frame per item; optional secondary; valence set to negative (-), neutral (0), or positive (+) toward China-Nepal road linkage prospects.

Table 2. Dominant frames by media cluster (pilot)

Media Cluster	Infrastructure Disruption	Restoration/ Logistics	Cooperation/ Connectivity Vision	Security/ Bordering	Human/ Economic Impact
Local–Nepal (English) (Kathmandu Post)	2	1	0	0	2 (Kathmandu Post)
Local–Nepal (Vernacular) (eKantipur)	0	2	0	0	0 (Ekantipur)
International–China (Global Times)	0	0	2	0	0 (Global Times)
International–West (AP/TOI/Japan Times)	2	0	0	1	1 (AP News, The Times of India, The Japan Times)

Table 3. Sentiment/valence distribution toward cross-border road linkage (pilot)

Cluster	Negative (–)	Neutral (0)	Positive (+)	Net Orientation (+ – –)
Local–Nepal (English)	2	0	1	–1 (Kathmandu Post)
Local–Nepal (Vernacular)	0	1	1	+1 (Ekantipur)
International–China	0	0	2	+2 (Global Times)
International–West (incl. India)	3	0	0	–3 (AP News, The Times of India, The Japan Times)

Table 4. Illustrative frame contrasts (with micro-evidence)

Contrast	Local–Nepal (vernacular)	International–China	Interpretation
Event framing after flood damage	eKantipur highlights operational updates (Kodari section open; one-way Rasuwagadhi; temporary Bailey bridge planned; China grant repairs). (Ekantipur)	Global Times stresses broadier BRI/THMDCN continuity and survey/tech cooperation beyond immediate setbacks. (Global Times)	Local vernacular leans pragmatic logistics , Chinese media pushes strategic continuity narrative.
Risk vs. Vision	Kathmandu Post repeatedly surfaces price hikes, bottlenecks, festival impacts and urges speed. (Kathmandu Post)	Global Times emphasizes win-win connectivity and engineering capability . (Global Times)	A classic disruption vs. opportunity frame dichotomy .
Security inflection	—	Japan Times article on border fencing presents hard-security optic . (The Japan Times)	Western framing sometimes pivots to border control/coercive capacity rather than trade facilitation.

The analysis of these findings highlights both convergence and divergence between media clusters. Whereas local English media tend to highlight disruption, economic frailties, and government problems, vernacular media are more concerned with operational news and realistic repair efforts. Global Chinese media always present the projects in terms of a cooperative and connectivity-based narrative related to the Belt and Road Initiative, while Western and Indian media are more likely to emphasize risks, security issues, and disaster-induced disruptions.

The differences in framing highlight not only the multiplicity of views but also the political geopolitical interests involved in how narratives get constructed and disseminated.

Discussion

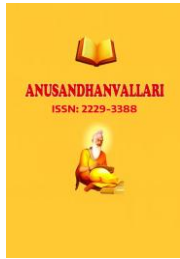
The findings show that media narratives concerning China's trans-border road infrastructure development projects in Nepal are extremely fractured, mirroring varying priorities and underlying geopolitical inclinations. English domestic media outlets like The Kathmandu Post mainly focus on disruption, cost inflation, and governance failure, reiterating a narrative of vulnerability and urgency. Conversely, domestic vernacular media such as eKantipur are more preoccupied with utilitarian restoration news and logistical remedies, thus reflecting a pragmatic instead of critical position. Chinese global media, as exemplified by the Global Times, invariably promote an accommodating, connectivity-oriented vision associated with the Belt and Road Initiative by depicting the projects as signifiers of strategic advancement and shared advantage. While that is happening, Western and Indian media such as AP News, Times of India, and The Japan Times emphasize disruptions caused by disasters, infrastructural vulnerability, and security risks, tending to report from a more cynical or combative stance. Collectively, these differences highlight how media framing is influenced not just by journalistic concerns but also by larger national concerns, with local vernacular media tending towards operational immediacy, English media problematizing governance, Chinese media framing strategic optimism, and Western/Indian media emphasizing risks and power imbalances.

Conclusion

The comparative framing of media stories of China's trans-border road infrastructure initiatives in Nepal shows that stories are by no means monolithic and rather express unique geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic leanings. Vernacular Nepali media focus on domestic issues like accessibility, trade gains, and daily-day implications, while English-language media stress governance, environmental, and political risks. Chinese state media regularly present the projects in terms of the Belt and Road Initiative's vision of cooperation and development, as opposed to Indian and Western media, which focus on security concerns, strategic vulnerability, and regional competition. These contrasts show that infrastructure is not just material but also discursive, embedded in larger strategic narratives that influence public opinion and policymaking. By laying bare these rival representations, the research highlights the pivotal position of media in shaping the meaning of cross-border projects, implying that policymakers and stakeholders need to factor in media-sourced accounts when evaluating the socio-political and strategic dimensions of China's infrastructure development endeavours in Nepal.

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