

RESEARCH ARTICLE

China's Soft Power Strategies towards Pakistan: Analysis of the US Press Narrative

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Abstract: The global state system is divided based on the power capabilities of states, which consist of hard and soft power. Powerful states confront each other, either directly or indirectly, in pursuit of their national interests and to maintain a balance of power. In today's globalized world, media plays a crucial role as an instrument for projecting narratives against rival states. The United States, as the world's leading economic power, seeks to maintain its global hegemony both politically and economically. Meanwhile, China is emerging as the world's second-largest economy, with the potential to challenge the U.S. in the foreseeable future. One of the key sources of China's rising influence is its soft power. The U.S. is increasingly concerned about China's soft power strategies, viewing them as a potential threat to its influence in various regions, including Pakistan, a strategic and long-standing ally of the U.S. This research aims to explore how the U.S. press constructs narratives about China's soft power strategies in Pakistan and to examine the relationship between the U.S. press and government. Using quantitative content analysis, this study analyzes selected news articles from The New York Times and The Washington Post. The findings reveal that the U.S. press primarily portrays China's soft power strategies in Pakistan in a conflictual manner.

Keywords: US, Press Narrative, China, Soft Power Strategies, Pakistan

Introduction

The U.S. emerged as a global power after World War II, but it was not the sole dominant force in the world; it had to contend with another superpower, the USSR. The confrontation between these two powers is known as the Cold War in contemporary world politics. In any such confrontation, power is necessary to secure victory. At that time, the U.S. narrative was based on liberal and democratic values—i.e., that all people should have equal economic and political rights. In contrast, the USSR adhered to a communist form of government. Ultimately, the U.S. narrative prevailed, but it was largely supported by the use of hard power. The Cold War ended in 1990 with the disintegration of the USSR, leaving the U.S. as the world's only superpower. The bipolar world order shifted into a unipolar one. In the late 1980s, Joseph Nye conceptualized power in two categories: hard power and soft power. According to Nye, power is the "ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants (Hong, 2013). The means of power during the Cold War era were primarily through hard power. In international politics, hard power is defined as "the ability to reach one's goals through coercive actions or threats (Cohen, 2009; Lams, 2016). Tangible sources of power like military strength and armaments are hard to power.

According to Joseph Nye, there are intangible sources of power for a particular country, such as culture, political values, and foreign policy. He argued that, in the current global system, the US should focus on soft power because it enables a country to gain popularity and persuasive influence in the international arena (Cohen, 2009). At the beginning of the 21st century, several countries emerged as major global powers in terms of their military, economy, and culture, leading to a shift in the world order from a unipolar to a

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multipolar system. The US needed to maintain its hegemony through alliances and offshore balancing. The US also had to deal with powers that had different forms of government and economic systems, such as socialism and communism, much like its ideological conflict with the USSR (Lams, [2016](#)).

In 2005, Joseph Nye wrote an article in the Wall Street Journal Asia, where he discussed China's emerging soft power, noting that China was evolving not only economically but also through its "attractive traditional culture," and that China was "now entering the realm of global popular culture" (Barai & Kar, [2020](#); Russel et al., [2016](#)). While US congressional reports in 2005 focused on China's rise as an economic and military power, they paid little attention to China's soft power. As Chinese soft power gained traction on the global stage, China's attractive culture became more popular through media, film, sports, tourism, education, foreign policy, institutions like the Confucius Institutes, and cultural exchange programs. These efforts helped popularize China's soft image worldwide. The US soon realized that in the new age of global information, soft power sources were the true means of gaining influence internationally. Success no longer depended on whose army won, but on whose story prevailed (Barai & Kar, [2020](#)).

According to US political philosophers and government officials, China's economic growth has taken on an aggressive tone because, with its growing economic capabilities, China is attempting to shift the world order in its favor. Through economic policies, educational institutions, governance systems, and culture, China is trying to undermine democratic values globally (Heeg, [2016](#)). This view was expressed by US Vice President Mike Pence in his speech at the Hudson Institute on October 4, 2018. He stated, "We hoped that economic liberalization would bring the US and China together in a great partnership," but instead, China has chosen economic aggression. He declared that "Beijing is employing a whole-of-government approach, using economic, political, and military tools, as well as propaganda, to advance its influence and benefit its interests at the expense of the US" (Kulumzhanova & Ospanova, [2021](#)). China's economic aggression represents a new era of conflict between global powers. It could be seen as a new Cold War, as direct confrontation is not feasible in the contemporary world, especially between nuclear powers. The White House is confronting China's economic aggression with a series of economic and political policies. For example, the agreement between the US, Mexico, and Canada stipulates that each member will refuse to enter free trade agreements with non-market economies like China. The US is facing specific challenges regarding China's influence through soft power in South Asia, a region of strategic importance to the US (Campbell, [2012](#); Schnell & Schnell, [2021](#)).

US and Pak-China Relations

The US has been uncomfortable with Pakistan-China relations, particularly regarding the implementation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). While the US did not oppose CPEC directly, it expressed indirect reservations. In 2018, James Mattis, the US Secretary of Defense, stated that "the One Belt, One Road also goes through disputed territory," adding, "I think that in itself shows the vulnerability of trying to establish that sort of dictate" (Jan et al., [2018](#)).

The US's Pivot to Asia strategy serves as a countermeasure to China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, aiming to curb China's rise on the global stage (Saleem & Mian, [2014](#)). The growing capabilities of the Chinese navy, bolstered by CPEC, are also seen as a significant threat to the US. After visits to India and Afghanistan, James Mattis fully embraced India's stance on CPEC, citing the route's passage through disputed territories. Following his visit, he remarked, "The US opposes the OBOR because, in this era of globalization, no country can dictate the One Belt, One Road," adding, "Strategically, we need to confront China where we think its direction is unproductive" (Barai & Kar, [2020](#)). Gen (R) Ghulam Mustafa, a defense analyst, stated in an interview with Global Village Space Magazine that "besides being an attempt to continue its geopolitical rivalry with China, the US has criticized CPEC to further exert pressure on Pakistan" (Schnell & Schnell, [2021](#)).

In 2006, Joseph Nye wrote an article in the Wall Street Journal Asia, stating, "China's rising power is an issue, and the US needs to address it" (Qaisar Abbas, [2021](#)). He pointed out that recent US Congressional reports have focused heavily on China's growing military and economic power, but there has been less attention given to China's increasing soft power. Minxin Pei, a professor at Claremont McKenna College, noted that "this narrative has widespread appeal across party lines in the US," with US policy management towards China shifting towards "confrontation" (Kulumzhanova & Ospanova, [2021](#)). The Hudson Institute, based in Washington, DC, published a report on Vice President Pence's remarks regarding China's foreign policy. He stated, "We thought that economic liberalization would make China our partner in trade, but China has chosen economic aggression" (White House, 2018). He further added, "China is now spending more on its military expansion and attempting to erode US military advantages on land, sea, and space". Pence concluded, "I assure you, America will stay the course" (Verma, [2023](#)).

Jane Perlez wrote an article in The New York Times about Pence's speech, noting that he "gave a speech warning of a tougher approach towards Beijing." Zhang Brahui, a professor of International Relations at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, remarked that "this will look like a declaration of a cold war." He further added, "What China may do is more important than what it will say in response to Pence's speech" (Ali, [2020](#)).

Jiao Liang wrote that both countries are going to confront each other like a new cold war. There are certain reasons behind this confrontation, first China's rapid economic growth, less dependency on the Strait of Malacca due to OBOR, China adopting its developmental model than the American model, and Chinese Navy presence in the South China Sea near American fleets. America has particular perceived threats from China and now it is a matter of hegemonic stability (Ali et al., [2017](#)).

Pak-US relations have long been marked by mistrust and suspicion. A significant deterioration in this bilateral relationship occurred in 2017 when the United States refused to disburse \$350 million in military aid to Pakistan, citing concerns that the South Asian nation was not doing enough to combat terrorism (Lou, [2022](#)).

China's soft power strategies, such as trade, cultural projection, educational diplomacy, supportive foreign policy, and initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), are key drivers of China's increasing influence in Pakistan. As a result, both countries are enjoying strong bilateral relations. Some American studies suggest that China has become a new ally for Pakistan in terms of economic and military aid (Ibrar et al., [2019](#); Saboor et al., [2022](#)). However, the US harbors significant concerns about China's growing influence, particularly in Pakistan, due to its strategic importance in the region. Historically, the US has utilized Pakistan as an ally in its efforts to counter rival powers in the region. Now, with the US-China rivalry reaching a global scale, the US is focused on containing China's influence in the region, while Pakistan must balance its relationships with both global powers. This study aims to examine how the US press frames China's strategic soft power towards Pakistan, focusing on the narratives surrounding China's growing influence in the region (Gul et al., [2022](#)).

Objectives of the study

This research is based on the following objectives

- ▶ To explore the strategic soft power of China towards Pakistan
- ▶ To the analysis of the US press narrative related to China's strategic soft power towards Pakistan.
- ▶ To establish a critical analysis of the relationship between the US press and government on coverage of China's strategic soft power in Pakistan

Research Hypothesis

H1. Global ambitions theme emerged as the dominant theme in the reporting of Chinese soft power in the US press.

- H2. Conflictual slant is the dominant approach in the US press while reporting on China.
- H3. The New York Times mainly reports China's soft power strategies through the perspective of global dominance as compared to the Washington Post
- H4. New York Times primarily adopts a conflictual slant towards China's soft power strategies as compared to the Washington Post
- H5. Topics relating to regional supremacy are mainly reported in a conflictual slant as compared to other topics.
- H6. Editorials in the selected press adopt more conflictual slants as compared to news and opinion columns.

Research Methods

Quantitative content analysis is an appropriate methodology for conducting this research. The aim of this study is to examine the U.S. press narrative related to China's soft power in the context of Pakistan. The U.S. newspapers The New York Times and The Washington Post were selected for this analysis. To explore the U.S. press narrative regarding China's strategic soft power toward Pakistan, data was gathered from the digital websites of the two selected newspapers.

Using the keyword "China-Pakistan," 1,155 news stories appeared in The New York Times and 550 appeared in The Washington Post within a three-year time frame (January 2020 to November 2022). These stories covered a wide range of topics related to China and Pakistan in general. Specifically, The New York Times published 37 news articles mentioning China's strategic soft power towards Pakistan, while The Washington Post published 32 articles during the selected period. The articles were identified based on the contextual relevance of this phenomenon. Op-ed articles were also included in this selection, while other types, such as book reviews, weather reports, marketplace articles, and blogs, were excluded due to their irrelevance.

This research applied a framing approach defined by Robert Entman (1993). According to Entman (Anwar et al., 2020), texts present frames that are established by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that reinforce specific themes or judgments. The coding process included all 69 selected news articles, with framing determined based on the literature review and contextual analysis of the topic. The table below presents a sample of this study.

Table 1
Sample Summary

Newspaper	Dates	Number of Articles
The Washington Post	1/1/2023 – 30/11/2023	32
The New York Times	1/1/2023– 30/11/2023	37
Total		69

These articles are units of analysis of this study when categorizing sentences and keywords in a codebook to determine whether prevailing narrative's slants are supportive, conflictual, and mixture.

Codebook

For the determination of slants, this research followed the Merriam-Webster definition of "supportive." According to the dictionary, "supportive" means "serving to give support to the truth." To classify a news article as supportive, it must contain sentences in which the U.S. expresses concern or shows support for China's activities in Pakistan.

The second slant, conflictual, is also defined by Merriam-Webster as "a lack of agreement." To categorize a news article under this slant, the article must contain sentences or phrases that demonstrate the U.S. expressing disagreement with China's actions or accomplishments in Pakistan.

The third slant is a mixture, defined by Merriam-Webster as "a distinct entity formed by the combination of two or more different things." A news article falls into this category if it includes sentences or phrases indicating mixed views of the U.S. regarding China's political activities in Pakistan.

Themes and Issues of Articles

By analyzing the 69 selected news articles, this research classified them into the following themes: regional dominance, economic aggression, and challenge to the U.S. Articles categorized under the regional dominance theme highlight China's actions in Pakistan as part of its ambition to establish dominance in the region. The economic aggression theme includes articles that describe China's policies towards Pakistan as manipulative, suggesting that these policies are not genuinely aimed at Pakistan's development. Instead, they argue that China exploits the concept of free trade to serve its own interests in exchange for economic aid. Lastly, the challenge to the U.S. theme encompasses articles where China's growing influence in Pakistan and the region is framed as a potential threat to U.S. interests.

The articles were also classified by issue: politics, security, economy, regional supremacy, socio-cultural topics, and global ambition. During this categorization, strict rules were followed to ensure that no article overlapped across multiple issues. Each issue was covered in the selected articles, and the classification was based on the content of the news related to these topics. Both the researcher and the coder reached a consensus on the categorization after carefully reading all the paragraphs of each article.

Results

Frequencies of the concerned data are presented below, newspapers, themes, topics, and news types are gathered for the understanding of the whole data.

Table 2
Newspaper ID

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	The Washington Post	32	46.4	46.4	46.4
	The New York Times	37	53.6	53.6	100.0
	Total	69	100.0	100.0	

As mentioned above in table 2 Newspaper ID, The New York Times has 37 news articles, and the Washington Post at second with 32 news articles. The New York Times gives 53.6% coverage and the Washington Post gives 46.4%. The total sample size is 69 articles from both newspapers.

Table 3
Issues Covered by Newspapers

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Security	19	27.5	27.5	27.5
	Politics	12	17.4	17.4	44.9
	Economy	20	29.0	29.0	73.9
	Regional supremacy	12	17.4	17.4	91.3
	Socio-Cultural Topics	6	8.7	8.7	100.0
	Total	69	100.0	100.0	

Table 3 issues covered by Newspaper is comprised the issues covered by both newspapers, security related articles are 19 with 27.5%, 12 articles covered the issue of politics at 17.4%, Economy issue is the top issue with 20 articles, and 29%, regional supremacy is the same with politics and socio cultural topics are 6 with 8.7%.

Table 4
Key Themes

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Regional Dominance	8	11.6	11.6	11.6
	Economic Aggression	11	15.9	15.9	27.5
	The challenge to the US	19	27.5	27.5	55.1
	Global Ambitions	31	44.9	44.9	100.0
	Total	69	100.0	100.0	

As details mentioned in Table 4 key Themes, all the determined themes that are covered by both newspapers are presented here. The regional dominance theme is covered in 8 articles with 11.6%, economic aggression in 11 articles with 15.9%, Challenge to US in 19 articles with 25.7% and the global ambitions theme is on the top list covered in 31 articles with 44.9%.

Table 5
Slants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Conflictual	40	58.0	58.0	58.0
	Supportive	9	13.0	13.0	71.0
	Mixture	20	29.0	29.0	100.0
	Total	69	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 Slants is about the frequency of the slants covered by the news articles from both newspapers. The conflictual slant is the dominant slant covered by both newspapers in 40 articles with 58%, the supportive slant is the least in 9 articles with 13% and the mixture slant is on the second number covered in 20 articles with 29%.

Table 6
News Types

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Editorials	5	7.2	7.2	7.2
	Opinions	35	50.7	50.7	58.0
	News Story	29	42.0	42.0	100.0
	Total	69	100.0	100.0	

Table 6 News Types is about the frequencies of the news types of the articles taken by both newspapers. Editorials were 5 with 7.2%, opinions were 35 with 50.7% and news stories were 29 with 42%.

Testing of Hypothesis

H1. Global ambitions theme emerged as the dominant theme in the reporting of Chinese soft power in the US press. This hypothesis is proved with the analysis of cross-tabulation in SPSS software. With Chi-square test the hypothesis 1 is proved that the global ambitions theme emerged as a dominant theme among all other themes which are covered both newspaper's articles.

Table 7

Newspaper ID key Themes Cross tabulation

		Key Themes				Total
		Regional Dominance	Economic Aggression	The challenge to the US	Global Ambitions	
Newspaper ID	The Washington Post	4	3	14	11	32
	The New York Times	4	8	5	20	37
Total		8	11	19	31	69

As Table 7 Newspaper ID, key Themes Cross tabulation indicates in both newspapers the global ambitions theme emerged as a dominant theme as compared to other themes. Regional dominance is at least at 8, economic aggression is at 11, a challenge to the US is at 19 and global ambitions are at 31.

Table 8

Chi-Square Tests 1

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.833 ^a	3	.032
Likelihood Ratio	9.085	3	.028
Linear-by-Linear Association	.185	1	.667
N of Valid Cases	69		

Table 8 Chi-Square Tests 1 indicates that the Pearson Chi-Square test is .032 and it supports this hypothesis.

H2. Conflictual slant is the dominant approach in the US press while reporting on China. Three slants were determined after the careful reading of the concerned data. The second hypothesis is tested with the help of cross-tabulation of newspaper ID and the slants.

Table 9

Newspaper ID Slants Cross tabulation

		Slants			Total
		Conflictual	Supportive	Mixture	
Newspaper ID	The Washington Post	17	8	7	32
	The New York Times	23	1	13	37
Total		40	9	20	69

Table 9 Newspaper ID Slants Cross tabulation indicates that the conflictual slant is a dominant slant as compared to others. Conflictual slant is covered 17 times in the Washington Post and 23 times in the New York Times. The total number of this slant from both newspapers is 40 times, the supportive slant is the least among all covered 9 times in both newspapers and the mixture slant is on second number covered 20 times in both newspapers.

Table 10
Chi-Square Tests 2

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.823 ^a	2	.020
Likelihood Ratio	8.566	2	.014
Linear-by-Linear Association	.038	1	.845
N of Valid Cases	69		

Table 10 Chi-Square Tests 2 indicates that the Pearson Chi-Square is .020 and it supports this hypothesis.

H3. New York Times mainly reported China's soft power through the perspective of global ambitions as compared to the Washington Post. The answer to this hypothesis is proven by the analysis of cross-tabulation between key themes and newspaper ID. With the help of the Chi-Square test between two variables, the results are shown in percentages where the exact result of the hypothesis is drawn.

Table 11
Chi-Square Tests 3

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.833 ^a	3	.032
Likelihood Ratio	9.085	3	.028
Linear-by-Linear Association	.185	1	.667
N of Valid Cases	69		

Table 12
Key Themes Newspaper ID Cross-tabulation

			Newspaper ID		Total
			The Washington Post	The New York Times	
Key Themes	Regional Dominance	Count	4	4	8
		% of Total	5.8%	5.8%	11.6%
	Economic Aggression	Count	3	8	11
		% of Total	4.3%	11.6%	15.9%
	The challenge to the US	Count	14	5	19
		% of Total	20.3%	7.2%	27.5%
	Global Ambitions	Count	11	20	31
		% of Total	15.9%	29.0%	44.9%
Total	Count	32	37	69	
	% of Total	46.4%	53.6%	100.0%	

Table 11 key Themes Newspaper ID Cross-tabulation shows that as compared to the Washington Post the New York Times gives more coverage to China's soft power towards Pakistan in the context of Global Ambitions. The Washington Post gives 15.9% coverage in the context of global ambitions while the New York Times gives 29%. The dominant theme according to both newspapers is global ambition with 44.9%. The second dominant theme is a challenge to the US with 20.3% by the Washington Post and 7.2% by the New York Times and the total is 27.5%.

H4. New York Times primarily adopts a conflictual slant towards China's soft power as compared to the Washington Post. To test this hypothesis again Chi-Square cross-tabulation test is conducted in SPSS.

Table 13 Newspaper ID Slants Cross-tabulation

			Slants			Total
			Conflictual	Supportive	Mixture	
Newspaper ID	The Washington Post	Count	17	8	7	32
		% of Total	24.6%	11.6%	10.1%	46.4%
	The New York Times	Count	23	1	13	37
		% of Total	33.3%	1.4%	18.8%	53.6%
Total	Count		40	9	20	69
	% of Total		58.0%	13.0%	29.0%	100.0%

Table 13 Newspaper ID Slants Cross-tabulation shows that the conflictual slant is a dominant slant according to both newspapers at 46.4%. The answer to this hypothesis is that the conflictual slant is primarily adopted by the New York Times which is 33.3% more than the Washington Post which is 24.6%. The hypothesis is supported by the Pearson Chi-Square test which is .020.

Table 14

Chi-Square Tests 4

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.823 ^a	2	.020

H5. Topics relating to regional supremacy are mainly reported in conflictual slants as compared to other topics. This hypothesis is tested with the help of a Chi-Square cross-tabulation test between slants and topics.

Table 15

Issues covered by Newspapers Slants Cross-tabulation

			Slants			Total
			Conflictual	Supportive	Mixture	
Issues covered by Newspapers	Security	Count	10	4	5	19
		% of Total	14.5%	5.8%	7.2%	27.5%
	Politics	Count	4	2	6	12
		% of Total	5.8%	2.9%	8.7%	17.4%
	Economy	Count	12	1	7	20
		% of Total	17.4%	1.4%	10.1%	29.0%
	Regional supremacy	Count	12	0	0	12
		% of Total	17.4%	0.0%	0.0%	17.4%
	Socio-Cultural Topics	Count	2	2	2	6
		% of Total	2.9%	2.9%	2.9%	8.7%
	Count		40	9	20	69
	% of Total		58.0%	13.0%	29.0%	100.0%

As mentioned above in Table 15, issues covered by Newspapers Slants Cross-tabulation issues related to regional supremacy are mainly covered in conflictual slant. 17.4% of regional supremacy issues are under the conflictual slants the hypothesis is supported according to this test but another economic issue is also covered by 17.4% in the conflictual slant.

H6. Editorials in the selected press adopt more conflictual slants as compared to news and opinion columns. For the answer to this hypothesis, a cross-tabulation test between news types and slants is conducted.

Table 16
Slants News Types Cross-tabulation

			News Types			Total
			Editorials	Opinions	News Story	
Slants	Conflictual	Count	4	20	16	40
		% of Total	5.8%	29.0%	23.2%	58.0%
	Supportive	Count	0	5	4	9
		% of Total	0.0%	7.2%	5.8%	13.0%
	Mixture	Count	1	10	9	20
		% of Total	1.4%	14.5%	13.0%	29.0%
Total	Count		5	35	29	69
	% of Total		7.2%	50.7%	42.0%	100.0%

As shown in Table 16, Slants and News Types Cross-tabulation, 7.2% of the total articles analyzed were editorials, of which 5.8% had a conflictual slant. Compared to other news types, editorials are distributed across all slant categories but are predominantly conflictual. Opinion pieces make up 57.7% of the sample, with 29% of them having a conflictual slant. News stories constitute 42% of the sample, with 23.2% displaying a conflictual slant. Although editorials are fewer in number (only five), four of them adopt a conflictual slant.

The sample size of this study comprises 69 news articles from both newspapers. Based on indicators such as slants, themes, and topics identified in the sample, key elements were analyzed during the hypothesis testing process. The findings confirm that the primary objective of this study—to systematically and scientifically assess the U.S. press narrative on China’s soft power strategies in Pakistan—has been achieved, revealing that this narrative is predominantly conflictual.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is not surprising that the Global Ambitions theme emerged as a dominant focus in the reporting on China's soft power strategies toward Pakistan. The U.S. press, particularly The Washington Post and The New York Times, frames China as a global competitor and political power. Recently, China announced its industrial strategy, Made in China 2025, which the U.S. press and electronic media have frequently portrayed as part of China's global ambitions. Similarly, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is often reported in the U.S. press as a manifestation of China's desire to reshape global affairs in its favor. This focus is evident in the fact that 31 out of the 69 analyzed articles fall under the Global Ambitions theme.

Pakistan, as a developing country, has been a significant recipient of Chinese economic and military aid, alongside other developing nations in regions such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, including Sri Lanka. The U.S., as a global power, views China’s growing influence in these developing economies with concern, primarily due to ideological differences. Should China gain substantial influence in these countries, it is expected that they may adopt the Chinese model of governance rather than democratic systems. Moreover, the U.S. has also accused China of meddling in its political and security affairs, as highlighted in a report published in The New York Times. (Wong & Ismay, 2019). The New York Times also reported China’s BRI as a modern Marshal Plan which clearly indicated the Chinese global ambitions (Watkins et al., 2018).

The New York Times reports on China's soft power more frequently in the context of global ambitions compared to The Washington Post. As an agenda-setting newspaper, The New York Times not only shapes public opinion but also influences other media outlets within the U.S. Its readership includes a broad audience, notably influential figures such as political leaders and business executives, giving it a significant impact on shaping perceptions.

The conflictual slant dominates the coverage, with 40 out of 69 analyzed articles categorized under this slant. This suggests that the U.S. press generally views China's soft power strategies towards Pakistan unfavorably. The U.S. media shows minimal support for China's increasing engagement with Pakistan. Only 9 out of 69 articles adopt a supportive slant, primarily focusing on regional security issues, where China is collaborating with Pakistan to combat terrorism in Afghanistan. Otherwise, 20 articles fall under a mixed slant, indicating that the U.S. press is ambivalent about China's growing influence in Pakistan. The U.S. media has already highlighted the challenges posed by the strengthening of Pak-China ties, framing them as a potential threat to U.S. interests (Azhar, [2018](#)). Alice Wells, Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian affairs, clearly opposed the CPEC and offered an alternative economic plan for Pakistan, she also raised some serious questions about China's authoritarian behavior in CPEC procedure. The US press narrative is dominantly conflictual while reporting China's soft power strategies towards Pakistan.

Another observation from the data analysis is that The New York Times published 37 articles, of which 23 (33.3%) fall under the conflictual slant. In comparison, The Washington Post published 32 articles, with 17 (24.6%) categorized as conflictual. The New York Times contains only one article with a supportive slant, whereas The Washington Post has eight supportive articles. This indicates that the overall agenda of the U.S. press towards China-Pakistan relations is predominantly conflictual. The U.S. is reluctant to endorse China's soft power strategies in Pakistan, as the press frames these strategies as efforts to achieve global and regional dominance.

Both newspapers cover key issues such as politics, security, economy, and regional supremacy. Topics related to regional supremacy and the economy are primarily framed in a conflictual slant. For instance, 12 articles focus on regional supremacy, all of which adopt a conflictual slant. Similarly, 20 articles address economic topics, with 12 of them framed conflictually. The U.S. press consistently portrays China's economic and regional activities in Pakistan as problematic. This narrative aligns with U.S. political rhetoric, such as Vice President Mike Pence's remarks that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is being built on disputed land, emphasizing the need to contain China's influence on multiple fronts (WhiteHouse, 2018).

Editorials often reflect the overarching policies of a newspaper. In this study, five editorials were analyzed from both The New York Times and The Washington Post, with four adopting a conflictual slant and one adopting a mixed slant. This highlights a clear trend in the U.S. press: the coverage of China's soft power strategies towards Pakistan is predominantly framed in a conflictual manner. This conflictual framing explains the overall dominance of the conflictual slant in the coverage by both newspapers. Notably, no editorials were categorized under the supportive slant.

Reflection on Indexing and Framing Theory

As mentioned, this study applies two theoretical frameworks. The first is the Indexing Theory, which examines the relationship between the press and government policies, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. The results indicate that a conflictual slant dominates reporting on China's soft power strategies in Pakistan. This reflects the broader context of the emerging China-U.S. rivalry, with the U.S. government adopting the "America First" policy to address China's growing influence in the Asian region. In the coverage of China's soft power, certain phrases frequently appear, such as "threat to U.S. interests in the region," "promotion of undemocratic values," and "opposition to free markets." These phrases frame China's actions as contrary to U.S. national interests.

According to U.S. state policy, the media is expected not to endorse authoritarian values or any elements that conflict with national interests. Given the ideological differences, China is consistently portrayed negatively in the U.S. press, particularly concerning its strategic ambitions in South Asia. As U.S. policy shifts its focus from the Middle East to Asia, where China is expanding its influence in key maritime regions, the U.S. aims to contain China to maintain its hegemonic power. Thus, the prevalence of a conflictual slant in press coverage aligns with U.S. state policy.

The second theoretical framework applied in this research is Entman's Political Framing Theory. Entman defines framing as a process in which selected aspects of perceived reality are emphasized through communication to promote a particular interpretation of a problem (Entman, 1993). All selected articles were analyzed to identify various issues, themes, and slants, which were carefully determined by the researcher after a thorough reading of the entire sample. The U.S. press has framed international events involving China and Pakistan from the perspective of U.S. state interests. It tends to highlight aspects that directly or indirectly align with U.S. national interests.

For instance, soft power, which refers to the ability of a state to influence others through non-coercive means, is often reframed by the U.S. press as "economic aggression," "regional supremacy," and "global ambitions." These frames are strategically employed to spotlight key issues, shaping public opinion and directing attention towards matters perceived as threats to U.S. interests.

According to both theoretical frameworks used in this study, the U.S. press aligns closely with the government's stance. The U.S. government's foreign policy and actions significantly influence how the press frames news related to other countries. The findings of this research support both theoretical arguments, demonstrating the press's role in reinforcing state narratives.

Impact on Pak-China Relations

Pak-China relations entered a new phase with the official announcement of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Historically, the relationship between the two countries has been positive, with China providing consistent diplomatic and moral support to Pakistan during critical times. In recent years, China's emerging soft power has been evident through its practical support for Pakistan, including economic aid, bailout loans to reduce reliance on the IMF, and investments in infrastructure projects. However, China's growing influence in Pakistan has raised concerns in the U.S., as Pakistan is not only a long-standing ally but also a strategically significant partner in the region.

The U.S. press adopts a conflictual narrative, reflecting the U.S. government's disapproval of the expanding Pak-China relationship. The U.S. has recently criticized CPEC and offered alternative development plans, signaling its discontent with Pakistan's increasing alignment with China. This highlights a challenging diplomatic situation for Pakistan, as it must balance its relationships with both nations. The U.S., as a global superpower, wields considerable influence over international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF and maintains a military presence in Afghanistan, Pakistan's neighbor. Meanwhile, China remains a crucial regional partner, especially given Pakistan's strained relations with other neighboring countries, including Iran, Afghanistan, and India. In these complex geopolitical circumstances, Pakistan cannot afford to lose the support of either China or the U.S.

Limitations and Further Research

This quantitative content analysis has certain limitations. Although the research followed the complete process required for a systematic and scientific content analysis, the sample size—drawn from only two newspapers—is relatively small. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, future research could include a larger sample encompassing multiple newspapers, as China's soft power strategies are reported differently across various U.S. media outlets.

The researcher initially intended to expand the sample size by including more newspapers but was unable to do so due to limited access. Additionally, not all aspects of China's soft power strategies identified in the literature review were covered in the selected newspapers, suggesting that a broader range of publications might offer a more complete picture.

For those interested in investigating this topic further, it is recommended to use a larger sample and to conduct a comparative analysis between Chinese and U.S. media to explore how each frames China's soft power strategies toward other countries.

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APPENDIX

Coding Sheet

Content categorization scheme

A content categorization scheme is the key to content analysis. A coding sheet will be designed for the variables, categories, and rules will be identified.

China’s strategic soft power towards Pakistan: Analysis of the US press Narrative

Variables	Categories	Rules
Newspaper IDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ The Washington Post▶ The New York Times	(Jan 2021 to November 30)
Topics/ issues of salience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Security▶ Politics▶ Economy▶ Regional supremacy▶ Socio-cultural topics▶ Global Ambitions	Stories containing these issues. There must be specific rules where these topics don’t overlap.
Key Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Regional Dominance▶ Economic aggression▶ Challenge to US	These themes are identified from the selected data
Type of story	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ News Articles, Opinion	
Frames	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Conflictual▶ Supportive▶ Mixture	

Code sheet

Newspaper ID: The Washington Post = 1, the New York Times= 2

Issues: Security = 1, Politics = 2, economy = 3, regional supremacy = 4, socio-cultural topic= 5, others = 6

Story types: Length of the stories: to be measured in columns

New types: Editorial= 1 Opinion = 2 News Story= 3 Missing = 9

Frame: Conflictual = 1, Supportive = 2, Mixture = 3

Themes: regional dominance= 1, economic aggression= 2, challenge to US= 3, Global Ambitions = 4

Conceptualization and operationalization of the categories

A conceptual description of a thing or issue explains the abstract characteristics and relationships to other conceptual entities. On the other hand, an operational description of an issue is in terms of the actual physical actions and manifestations. The conceptual and operational definitions of this study are as follows:

Categories/ issues	Conceptualization	Operationalization
Security	All the problems related to the security of the region	News stories of both the US newspapers related to security interests of the US among the region concerned with China either framed as Conflictual, Supportive, and a mixture

Categories/ issues	Conceptualization	Operationalization
Politics	Political interests of the US and China in the South Asian region especially related to Pakistan	News stories published in both newspapers which indicate how the US press is framing China-Pakistan relations within the frames of its own political interests
Economy	The issues concerning China's economic activities in Pakistan	News stories published in both newspapers related to China's growing economic activities in Pakistan and how the US press framed these activities as either Conflictual, Supportive, or Mixture
Regional Supremacy	The Actions and policies of China-related its influence on South Asian region	with the framing of News stories in both newspapers China's regional supremacy either the press narrative is supportive, conflictual, and a mixture
Socio-Cultural topics	Social and cultural activities of China in Pakistan	News stories of both newspapers related to social and cultural activities of China and Pakistan within the frames of Confclitual, Supportive and Mixture
Global Ambitions	China’s global ambitions by using all its means of power	How the US press in framing China’s soft power strategies towards Pakistan in context of China’s global ambitions