

Evaluating Pakistani Media's Perception of Chinese Military Development: A Content Analysis of Pakistani Newspaper

NUST Journal of International Peace & Stability
2023, Vol. 6(1) Pages 1-16



njips.nust.edu.pk

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.37540/njips.v6i1.135>

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Abstract

China's military modernization has led to many concerns among regional and international stakeholders. Many countries see Beijing's intentions to become a military superpower as threatening regional peace and stability. On the other hand, being China's strategic ally, Pakistan considers its military expansion a positive change, driving it to become a regional military power. This research aims to analyze the perception of Pakistani media about the Chinese military by conducting an extensive content analysis of the Pakistani newspaper 'Pakistan Today'. The data helped highlight the Pakistani media's attitude toward China's military ambitions. The analysis suggests that Pakistani newspaper projects China's military might as the balance of power, particularly against its regional rival, i.e. India. The research elucidates that while most Western media coverage portrays Chinese military activities as a challenge to the regional status quo, Pakistani media exhibits it as important for peace and stability in the region.

Keywords

Chinese Military, South China Sea, Pakistani media, military modernization

Introduction

China has the world's largest standing army, with over 2 million active soldiers (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2021). As the Chinese economy expands, the country has also started modernizing its armed forces. Over the past decade, Chinese military development has reached an unprecedented level; the country continues to flex its military muscles by revolutionizing its weapons, aircraft,

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Received 22 September 2021; Revised 31 May 2022; Accepted 14 August 2022; Published online 21 September 2022

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and naval capabilities and increasing its sphere of influence worldwide. These developments have caused apprehensions not only in the West but also among China's neighboring countries (Pachankis, 2022; Yingshi, 2022).

Although Chinese military efforts are mainly focused on the Eastern and Southern sectors (Mastro, 2017), China's growing involvement in the East and the South China Sea, territorial disputes with regional countries, conflicts with India, and position over Taiwan are some of the major concerns for the international community. Moreover, Chinese military expansion and assertive stance over territorial disputes have also triggered serious concerns among the regional countries (Grace, 2017).

Similarly, China's engagement in cyberspace, advancement of the space program, quest for fifth-generation aircraft, development of aircraft carriers, and expansion of military footprints in the South China Sea continues to make international headlines. Western media often portrays China's military modernization as threatening its neighbors and Western regional interests. In response to Chinese military advancement, the US and European nations are also increasing their defense capabilities (Cossa, 2017) and deepening their cooperation with other regional countries surrounding China. Nonetheless, Chinese leaders have affirmed their commitment to building a community of shared destiny (Rizvi, 2017) and assert that the country has always been and will continue to be a proponent of world peace and common development (Lostumbo, 2009). However, more recently, both Western-centric scholarship and media outlets continue to portray the increase in China's military spending, its involvement in the East and the South China Sea, its relations with North Korea and Russia, and China's growing nuclear and missile capabilities as a threat to international peace and security (Maizland, 2020; Bommakanti & Shivamurthy, 2021; Cordesman & Hwang, 2021).

Despite holding an Islamic-Democratic system of governance and political values that are far different from China, Pakistan is China's long-standing partner and one of its closest allies among all its neighboring countries (Small, 2015). Undoubtedly, Pakistan's rivalry and China's wariness with India make the two countries traditional allies and act as one of the major factors behind Pakistan's appreciation of China's military transformation (Wang, 2018). However, much literature also looks beyond the 'India factor' to define Pakistan-China defense cooperation (Boon & Ong, 2021). Keeping this in view, this paper aims to analyze the Pakistani media's perspective of Chinese military power and examines how a prominent Pakistani newspaper projects China's military ambitions and expansion. This research would also help understand Pakistan's ambition to become a strong regional military power and how it shapes the narrative about China's increasing military power in the region.

International media coverage of China's military development and its impact on regional stability has significantly increased in recent years, which plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions about China. Since China began modernizing its military, media coverage of China is apparently dominated by a mindset that considers China a threat to the international community (Hewitt, 2011). With increasing coverage of the negative aspects of Chinese military modernization, foreign media and opinion makers have started to term China as a revisionist power (Panda, 2020) that is changing the regional status quo (TRT World, 2022). On the other hand, the Pakistani government and military leadership view China's military modernization as a significant development toward stabilizing the regional balance of power. Therefore,

this research analyzes the Pakistani newspaper coverage of China's military and explores the agenda-setting theory to comprehend the trends in Pakistani media.

Literature Review

Since the emergence of China as a major power in the region, many countries and scholars have pointed out China's 'hidden' quest to become a superpower (Tkacik, 2007). Despite the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's continuous promotion of China's 'peaceful rise', the country's military expansion, development of modern aircraft, building of its own aircraft carriers, testing new Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), and increasing activities in the disputed areas has already altered the regional geo-political and geo-strategic balance. China has one of the most advanced military and air forces, the world's second most capable navy, and has emerged as a world leader in shipbuilding (McDevitt, 2016). Beijing's move to construct artificial islands, military bases, and deep-sea labs in disputed areas of East China and the South China Sea has raised concerns in the US as well as in neighboring Korean Peninsula, Japan, and ASEAN countries (International Relations Insights & Analysis [IRIA], 2015).

The Chinese army has also unveiled a change in its military strategy to boost its naval capabilities and a shift from 'territorial air defense to both 'defense and offense' (Xinhua, 2015). Although the Chinese leadership has announced to reduce of the overall size of armed forces to below 1,000,000 personnel (Boyd, 2019), China's decision to increase military spending by about 6.2%, reaching a level of US\$174 billion, makes the country second in the world with most military spending after the US (US Department of Defense, 2020). In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping, while addressing the 19th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) National Congress, outlined the midterm and long-term goals for the Chinese military to accomplish national defense modernization and advance strategic capabilities by 2035 and transform the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a world-class military by 2050 (Gao, 2017). These facts incited negative coverage of China, and most foreign media reports started to criticize Chinese military development, question China's ambitions (Shambaugh, 2009), and blame China for undermining regional peace and provoking tensions. Numerous studies have pointed out the causal link between a state's foreign policy and media coverage of a specific issue (Rawan et al., 2018). The government's public relations offices often practice the agenda-setting of mass media to promote internal and foreign policy interests and political agendas (Zain, 2014). Based on the trends in media coverage of China, it is apparent that several regional and international stakeholders view China as a threat (Hewitt, 2011); therefore, it is worth analyzing the Pakistani media perception of the Chinese military and the trends in the Pakistani newspaper on China's regional engagements.

Media framing plays an important role in perception building (Happer & Philo, 2013). Media coverage of certain events also affects foreign relations and evinces the foreign policy-building process (Baker, 2010; Richardson, 2017; Van Dijk, 1998). Media coverage of China's increasing economic influence and military might have been a recent topic of interest for many researchers (Rawan et al., 2018). Studies have revealed that Pakistani media has an overall positive perception of the rise of China, which helps to construct a positive and friendly discourse about China (Afzaal et al., 2019). The constitution of social reality and perception building largely depends upon news media coverage (Park, 2003). Pakistan is China's prominent strategic ally, and both countries cooperate in almost every sector (Pakistan Today, 2015), ranging from space and technology, transportation, and infrastructure, to

military and defense. Hence, it is crucial to examine Pakistan's perception of neighboring China's military expansion and how the Pakistani media view Chinese military development.

Methodology

To analyze Pakistani media's perception of the Chinese military, one of the most prominent Pakistani newspapers, 'Pakistan Today'⁴, was selected on the Nexis system. Nexis is a media monitoring and analytics platform covering print and digital media. The terms *Chinese military* and *China's military* were searched on the Nexis database, while Pakistan was selected as a source country to acquire relevant news articles on the assigned subject. The newspaper was mainly chosen based on extensive coverage of China's military development. The study was narrowed by searching the relevant keywords regarding China's military appearing in newspaper articles and further constricted by the timeline from 01 January 2013 to 31 August 2020.

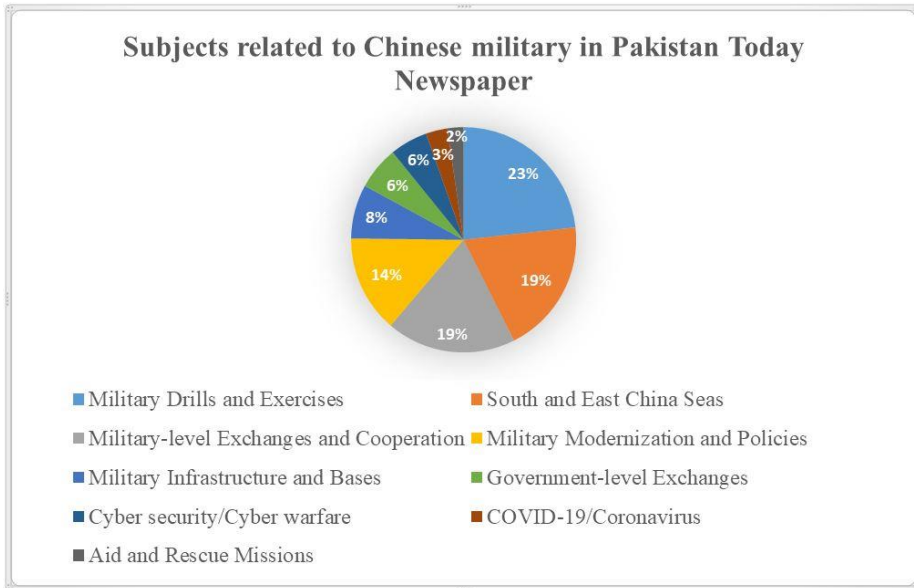
Since the research was being conducted in China, the lack of access to compatible data and content analysis tools restricted this study from focusing on the Nexis system, the best available content analysis software in China. Pakistan Today's compatibility with the proposed research methodology and analytical model was the main reason behind selecting it as the data source for this research. Although there are other major Pakistani newspapers, data collection remained one of the main challenges since other newspapers' coverage data on China's military development was neither relevant to the core theme of this research nor sufficient in numbers to generate a conclusive narrative.

Pakistan Today is a Lahore-based English-language daily newspaper published by Nawa Media Corporation in three major Pakistani cities, namely Lahore, Karachi, and the capital city of Islamabad (Pakistan Today, 2019). The selected newspaper is primarily a print media, and the content is also available on digital platforms. The timeline from 2013 to 2020 was chosen for analyzing the articles primarily because 2013 marked the agreement on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. In the same year, China-Pakistan Strategic Cooperative Partnership was proposed by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang (Xuequan, 2013), which further led to increased news coverage of China and its political, military and economic engagements with other regional countries.

More than 90 articles were analyzed in the Pakistan Today daily newspaper, and some irrelevant and repetitive articles were omitted during the analysis. The content analysis method was used to study the trends and coverage of the Chinese military. The news coverage was divided into nine sections based on the subjects and highlighted issues in the reviewed articles. The collected data from the articles were then categorized into themes based on the relevant subjects related to China's military, its engagements, and developments. The codes and themes pertinent to this research were extracted to analyze the media trend and scope of coverage. Based on data collected from the Pakistan Today newspaper, relevant themes helped identify the frequency of the coverage of different subjects regarding the Chinese military. The allocated subjects and focus of media reporting on China's military can be comprehended from the following chart:

⁴ Pakistan Today website: <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/>

Chart 1: Frequency of different subjects related to the Chinese military that appeared in Pakistan Today Newspaper



The collected news articles show that the subjects related to military drills and exercises are the most reported issue in 30 articles. The second most reported subject was the Chinese presence and concerns of regional countries regarding China’s assertive actions in the South China and East China Seas — appearing 21 and 4 times, respectively. It is also worth mentioning that the keywords related to the South China Sea and the East China Sea appeared 84 times during the last seven years in the Pakistan Today newspaper.

Another subject that received significant coverage was China’s defense and security cooperation with Pakistan and China’s military-level engagements with other regional countries, reported in at least 24 different articles. Even though the Pakistani newspaper mainly focused on the military-level visits between China and Pakistan, appearing 18 times in various articles, the newspaper published at least six articles on Chinese military officials visiting other countries. China’s military modernization and policies also received considerable coverage in the Pakistani newspaper, and the subject appeared in 18 articles. The articles related to border disputes with China’s neighbors, particularly India, were also published. The collected data also showed that the newspaper published 10 articles focusing on Chinese expansion policy with the development of military infrastructures and bases. As China and Pakistan enjoy a close partnership in almost all aspects, the visits of the political leadership of both countries also made several headlines, and the subject of China’s high-level exchanges with Pakistan and other countries was highlighted in 8 articles.

Cyber security and/or cyber warfare was a less-reported subject, appearing only seven times in the Pakistan Today newspaper. Another less-reported subject was China’s aid and rescue missions, appearing four times in the past seven years. While three articles documented China’s military efforts to fight COVID-19 or Coronavirus.

However, as the COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively new and ongoing issue, and this paper focuses on the articles published before September 01, 2020, the issue is not highlighted in many articles. The following section examines the collected data in more detail by exploring some critical subjects and examining the media coverage of Chinese military engagements.

Findings

The analyzed documents have been categorized, based on subjects and the number of articles published related to the relevant areas (see Chart 1). Following is the list of subjects that appeared in Pakistan Today newspaper regarding China's military, arranged in descending order.

Military Drills and Exercises

As China is focused on modernizing its armed forces, military drills and training exercises have become a common subject of discussion and international headlines. Similarly, Pakistani media also gave extensive coverage to Chinese military drills, and the subject was the most reported issue during the study. A large number of analyzed articles reported on joint Pakistan-China military exercises to promote military-level relations. The newspaper also reported multilateral military drills between China and its neighboring countries, including Cambodia, Nepal, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Similarly, the Pakistani newspaper also published the institutionalization of armed forces of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states and highlighted military-level exchanges, including armed forces training and drills among the member states. The articles on bilateral or multilateral military drills projected a positive image of China and emphasized military exercises as necessary for regional security from a broader perspective.

Another aspect that Pakistani newspapers frequently reported was Chinese naval exercises in international waters near the Sea of Japan, the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, and the South China Sea, which raises concerns among the regional countries. However, the newspaper not only reported on China's concerns over the US provocative actions in China's neighborhood that serve as a justification for increasing its military engagements but also stressed the concerns of the US as well as China's neighbors, such as Taiwan's criticism, the Philippines government's concern over increasing Chinese presence in the sea, and Vietnam's repeated condemnation of Chinese military drills in the disputed sea.

In conclusion, the Pakistani newspaper holds a favorable attitude towards the Chinese military in terms of military exercises with neighboring countries and which, according to the newspaper, promotes regional security cooperation and builds confidence among the states. The collected data also reveals that articles regarding the Chinese army's involvement in military drills and operations in the South China Sea repeatedly alerted the US and China's neighbors and resulted in tensions; however, such conflicts did not directly concern Pakistan or its regional interests, and therefore, the media coverage was somewhat neutral concerning other states. Some articles praise China's efforts to promote regional security through collective measures and term China's military drills as constructive. Others have highlighted, while others highlight the apprehensions of the regional states and recognize the rise in Chinese military posture by regularly sending military aircraft and ships to the South China Sea.

South and East China Seas

South and East China seas hold important geographical significance because most regional countries depend on the flow of oil and commerce through these shipping routes (Roy, 1994). China's claim over the South and East China seas, as well as territorial and water disputes with regional countries are some of the main concerns of the regional and international community. Similarly, Pakistani media's reporting on the Chinese military's development in the South China Sea has increased significantly over the past years. The published articles related to the South and East China seas mainly focus on Chinese military expansion in seas and the concerns of regional actors. The term 'South China' and 'East China' seas appeared 84 times in the Pakistan Today newspaper since 2013, while the newspaper published 21 articles related to the South China Sea and four articles on the East China Sea. The studied articles suggest that Chinese military engagements in the South and East China seas have caused serious concerns among the regional countries, while the Chinese side claims to be responding to the US military presence in the region.

It was observed that most newspaper articles included Chinese viewpoints and present statements of Chinese military officials, who frequently stress that Chinese military advancement is aimed at guaranteeing the country's peaceful development. Moreover, the fact that Pakistan Today presents a detailed background of China's Nansha Islands and a comprehensive overview of China's territorial disputes with other regional countries (Abrar, 2016) suggests that Pakistani media attaches great importance to the South and East China seas and the stance of China on the issue. Although most articles published in Pakistan Today on the issue pertaining to the South and East China seas repeatedly highlight China's concerns regarding continuous provocations by the US along China's periphery, the newspaper also reports regional countries' criticism over Chinese man-made island in the South China Sea and militarization of the region.

The articles highlighted the concerns of Japan over Chinese fighter jets challenging the country in the East China Sea; the US criticism over the construction of artificial islands; Taiwan, Vietnam, and the Philippines' concerns over China's aggressive actions over the South China Sea. Such a scope clearly indicates that Pakistani media investigates the issues objectively and offers balanced reports on South China Sea issue. The data analysis further suggests that China has ambitious plans to increase military deployments in disputed seas, particularly around Taiwan, and the presence of Chinese bombers in the South China Sea causes apprehension among the regional countries. However, it is arguable that Chinese actions focus on countering the US military dominance in the region (Abrar, 2016). Furthermore, China continues to clarify its position on the South China Sea by claiming that the US has created hype about the issue and ignored all Chinese efforts to maintain peace in the region.

In conclusion, the analysis of articles suggests that although Pakistan supports China's position on the South China Sea (Dawn, 2020), Pakistani media particularly the Pakistan Today newspaper reports extensively on the controversial issues related to the South and East China seas and increasing Chinese military activities in the region.

Military-level Exchanges and Cooperation

The defense cooperation and military-level exchanges between China and Pakistan often make headlines in Pakistani media. Similarly, the cordial exchanges between the military leaders of both countries have significantly increased during the past few

years. Pakistan Today reported on almost all military-level visits and interactions between the two countries. The analysis reveals that Pakistan Today highlighted military-level exchanges and defense cooperation between China and Pakistan in 18 articles. The coverage of military cooperation included articles on bilateral exercises, counter-terrorism collaboration, and joint production of fighter jets, helicopters, naval frigates, tanks, cruise missiles, and missile systems. In addition, to military-level exchanges with Pakistan, the newspaper published at least 6 articles on Chinese military-level exchanges and cooperation with other countries, including Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Cambodia, Nepal, India, Syria, and Djibouti. The articles on China's cooperation with the countries mentioned above primarily focus on military infrastructures, defense dialogues, border law enforcement cooperation, counter-terrorism, cross-border crimes, joint military drills, and training missions. It was also observed that the Pakistani newspaper mainly focused on the bilateral visits between the military leadership of China and Pakistan. Most of the time, news content highlighted the Chinese military leadership appreciating Pakistan's efforts and sacrifices in combatting terrorism and vice versa. The articles demonstrate that the top military leadership of both countries frequently hold meetings and have complete consensus on bilateral and regional issues.

The analysis suggests that the Pakistani newspaper favors China concerning the articles on military-level visits and frequently highlights the Chinese initiative to strengthen defense and security cooperation among the SCO member states and the Chinese military's positive efforts toward regional peace and stability. However, it was observed that while China maintains military engagements with regional countries, it discourages other states from conducting any official contact and military exchanges with Taiwan, which China considers its own territory.

Military Modernization and Related Policies

Since China announced its ambitions to modernize its military, it has increased its naval activities in the South China Sea. Similarly, the Chinese navy has been actively increasing its role by focusing on building more warships and aircraft carriers to challenge the US military's presence in the region. However, Pakistan Today reported on different aspects of China's military policies ranging from historical perspective to modernization and contemporary military strategies. One of the articles published in Pakistan Today describes how the ancient Chinese military treatise 'The Art of War' written by Sun Tzu (544-496 BC) and other different tactics of ancient warfare continue to influence the military, business, and legal strategies all over the world. The articles that appeared in the newspaper before 2016 mainly praised the Chinese way of dealing with border disputes, as China conducted peaceful dialogues and reduced troops to focus more on trade and economy with its neighboring countries. However, the articles published in 2017 focused on the military standoff along the Doklam sector in Sikkim (the Indo-China border region), where the Chinese blamed Indians for their provocative actions. It was also noticed that issues related to Chinese military development and border disputes were more frequently reported in recent years, as the US accuses Chinese armed forces of their growing activities near Hong Kong and Taiwan. At the same time, the border clashes between China and India in the Galwan valley of Ladakh were also reported in the Pakistani newspaper. Pakistan Today also frequently reported on the issue from the Chinese perspective, as China accuses the Indian army of violating military agreements and attacking Chinese troops in the Ladakh region.

With regard to Chinese military development, it was observed that Pakistani newspaper highlighted the US concerns over China's modernization goals. One of the articles stated that the Chinese military advanced technologies (including facial recognition technology) as part of their modernization. The US also remains concerned that Chinese interests and influence will continue to grow as the country increasingly focuses on military capabilities to achieve long-term goals beyond Taiwan and its immediate territorial concerns. The analysis suggests that Chinese President Xi Jinping attaches great importance to upgrading military technologies and hopes to turn the Chinese military into a world-class force. At the same time, Chinese leadership continues to assert that China supports world peace and prosperity, poses no threat to any country, and has no intentions to challenge the international order. Such an approach sends mixed signals to China's competitors and causes misperceptions among the regional countries.

Some news reports published in Pakistan Today also included China's clarifications and military modernization and pointed out that the country's national defense policy is focused on maintaining security and peaceful development. However, most articles assert that China's quest to modernize its armed forces has alerted regional neighbors and questioned Chinese intentions behind building military alliances and enhancing regional assets. One of the articles also criticized China for being transparent on its military modernization and expansion objectives as the Chinese defense ministry failed to provide details on the national defense budget or how China would fund its military operations.

Military Infrastructure and Bases

As China establishes a logistics network in Asia and Africa, many countries question its military's power projection ambitions (Fang, 2020). Similarly, Pakistani media has extensively reported on the development of Chinese military infrastructure and foreign bases. Pakistani newspaper mainly focused on the Chinese military's engagements in Djibouti, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Vanuatu and raised concerns about China's regional ambitions.

In conclusion, the newspaper offers relatively balanced reporting on the issue by including viewpoints of all stakeholders, for example, the US criticism of Chinese military modernization and increasing military cooperation between China and its neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan. Moreover, the newspaper also highlights the Russian news agency's claims that the Chinese military was seen inside Afghanistan, as China aims to build a military base in the war-torn country.

The data analysis indicates that Pakistani media remain somewhat concerned about the US claims that China may seek to establish additional naval logistics overseas and that the Chinese military may try to gain access to Pakistani ports. However, it was observed that most articles focus on the Chinese claims and assert that China has no intention of expanding its infrastructures in other countries apart from the base in Djibouti. Similarly, most articles regarding China's engagements in Pakistan focus on the economic aspect of China-Pakistan cooperation and dismiss the Chinese military motives.

Government-level Exchanges

The articles published in Pakistan Today on government-level exchanges reveal that China and Pakistan have mutual strategic trust and state-level cooperation as leaders from both countries have applauded the partnership and repeatedly praised the military collaborations. Moreover, it was observed that the leaders of the two

countries have common approaches and discuss the issues and threats related to regional affairs.

The news articles published in Pakistan Today demonstrate positive aspects of Chinese military support to Pakistan, bilateral deals between the two countries, as well as Chinese investment in Pakistan. The articles also indicate that bilateral cooperation between China and Pakistan is a significant feature of international military cooperation between the two countries. Moreover, the Pakistani newspaper reports extensively on China's bilateral cooperation with neighboring countries and the trilateral dialogue between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The data analysis further indicates that Pakistani media holds a favorable position toward China regarding government-level exchanges, and China's involvement in Pakistan was portrayed positively. Nevertheless, one of the articles criticized Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, as China is striving to secure its energy and trade routes in the region. This indicates that Pakistani media not only praises Chinese involvement in the region but also remains concerned about China's motives and expansion policies.

Cyber Security

Although the issue of cyber security and cyber warfare in the context of the Chinese military is not a major concern for Pakistani media, Pakistan Today reported several articles highlighting the US claims that the Chinese government is engaged in cyber espionage and hackers are trying to steal the trade secrets from the US companies for providing them to local competitors. China has also been accused by the US of cyber espionage. It was observed that Pakistani media closely follows Chinese military activities and highlights concerns of international and regional actors. As one of the articles indicates that Taiwan is developing an asymmetric warfare strategy to deter the Chinese military and counter China's electronic warfare activities. Similarly, the news articles in Pakistan Today frequently contain US experts' comments and hold a critical view of China by stating that the country has modernized its weapons industry by copying foreign technology and suggesting that China has been exploiting the markets in Iran and North Korea by providing them with cyber warfare capabilities and spying technologies (Easton & Schriver, 2013).

However, the Pakistani newspaper also included China's viewpoint by stating that the US blames China for cyber theft due to a sense of competition. China considers cybersecurity a common threat and urges that the issue must not be exploited to damage other nations' interests. The articles on the subject of cyber security suggest that both the US and China accuse each other of carrying out extensive cyber espionage and that the tensions over cyber security could lead to further hostilities between both countries. It was also observed that Pakistan Today's articles deliver balanced reporting on cyber security issues. On the one hand, the newspaper echoes Chinese concerns that the US policies towards Asia are primarily focused on containing China's rise in the region and highlights China's frustration with the accusations of cyber theft by the US agencies. On the other hand, it points out the US and Taiwan's concerns over the increasing cyber warfare activities of China.

Aid and Rescue Missions

Chinese military's participation in peacekeeping and rescue missions is part of China's national security goals, which aim to protect the country's more distant economic and strategic interests (Heath et al., 2016). China's rescue and aid missions not only improve its image but also prove to be an effective approach for increasing

its sphere of influence. This has also played an important role in portraying the country's soft image and peace efforts, which was also one of the focuses of the Pakistani newspaper. The collected data reveals that articles on the Chinese military's rescue mission mainly include China's endeavors to search for the missing Malaysian Airline M70 plane in 2014, the Chinese military's efforts to evacuate 800 foreign nationals stuck in the war zone in Yemen in 2015, Chinese military's engagements in Africa during 2017 and Chinese military aid to Cambodia in 2018.

The analysis of documents suggests that although the Pakistani newspaper gave limited coverage to the Chinese military's rescue missions, the studied articles also point out that China often extends humanitarian support to regional countries and engages in search and rescue missions to improve its relations and image at the global level. Similarly, the Pakistan Today newspaper boldly praised Chinese frigates that saved 200 Pakistanis trapped in the war zone during the 2015 Yemen crisis. The newspaper article published on 6 April 2015, quoted Pakistani officials who applauded Chinese efforts by stating that no such evacuation operation could be carried out by air or road from Aden after the city fell to the Houthi forces. Pakistani media commended Chinese efforts by emphasizing that it was the first time for the Chinese military to take part in evacuating foreign nationals under an international humanitarian aid mission.

Moreover, the collected data reveals that Pakistani newspaper also follows Chinese engagements in Djibouti and Cambodia. As China announced that its military base in Djibouti would be used for peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, the article speculates that China might seek similar engagement in Pakistan, even though the governments of China and Pakistan have dismissed such claims (Pakistan Today, 2017). Similarly, when China pledged more than a \$100 million grant to Cambodia, the Pakistani newspaper remained critical of China's support to the Cambodian government by highlighting the Cambodian regime's actions of destroying democracy (Pakistan Today, 2018). The newspaper reported four articles regarding aid and rescue missions conducted by Chinese military vessels and planes and the possible use of overseas Chinese bases for humanitarian missions. The data shows that Pakistan Today follows a somewhat balanced approach towards China, as most articles portray the soft side of the Chinese military for humanitarian missions. However, it also reported concerns of different stakeholders and questioned the Chinese military objectives and real intentions behind Chinese aid missions.

COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese military active engagement in medical relief efforts made frequent headlines and provided China with an opportunity to expand its reach and promotes its soft image. Although only three relevant articles on COVID-19 were analyzed, the term related to Coronavirus appeared 16 times in the data. The subject is closely associated with the Chinese military which is directly involved in vaccine research and distribution, and its medical teams have been dispatched to regional countries to support pandemic prevention measures.

The articles related to the news surrounding the developments on COVID-19 show that the Pakistani newspaper remains somewhat critical of China's engagements, as one of the articles highlights the US government agencies' concerns regarding the protection of COVID-19 vaccine research from China and blames Chinese companies for stealing data. The articles related to the issue of COVID-19 suggest an ongoing international competition for coronavirus vaccines, as the Chinese military has approved CanSino COVID-19 vaccines even before the completion of

Phase 3 trials. Pakistan Today's article on COVID-19 further emphasizes that it is risky for any country to authorize the emergency use of a vaccine before it completes Phase 3 trials (Pakistan Today, 2021).

The analysis of the documents indicates that although Pakistan Today newspaper praised the Chinese military medical team's effort to share their expertise on Coronavirus with Pakistan, at the same time, other articles questioned the Chinese military's decision to permit the vaccine that was still under trial while reporting concerns over authorizing the use of those vaccines in Pakistan.

Concluding Remarks

Although China's increasing military power is often considered a threat to many nations. For instance, the US, Vietnam, and the Philippines repeatedly termed the Chinese military posture as highly provocative (Pham, 2020). However, Pakistan is considered a traditional ally of China, as most Pakistanis (78 percent) have favorable views of China, and 57 percent of the population considers China as Pakistan's most significant ally (Global Attitudes & Trends, 2014). Earlier polls also indicated that Pakistan is one of the few countries with a positive opinion of the Chinese military. Most Pakistanis (57 percent) view China's growing military power as a positive development (Kohut, 2007) since the two countries have close defense relations.

Similarly, Pakistani media often portrays the soft side of the Chinese military and focuses on the constructive nature of the military relations between the two countries. The collected data analysis indicates that most Western media mainly projects negative features of China's growing military might. Pakistani media not only questions Chinese military development but also reports China's viewpoints, and the news coverage in the Pakistani newspaper is slightly favorable towards China.

It was also observed that, unlike other foreign media, Pakistani newspaper covers regional concerns and opinions on different international issues and highlight the Chinese military's aid and rescue missions as positive changes in the country's military policies. The data also reveals that Pakistani newspaper frequently reports on regional countries' concerns over Chinese military development while also highlighting different aspects of the Chinese military's positive steps, such as the reduction of troops and arms, facilitation of military dialogues and exercises between the SCO member states and most importantly Chinese military leadership's supportive stance towards Pakistan.

Agenda-setting theory suggests that mass media coverage of a specific subject is essential in building perception about that matter (McCombs, 2005). Pakistan holds the closest bilateral defense and economic partnership with China among its geographical neighbours and regional powers. The reflection of this relationship is clearly indicated in the media coverage and perception building about the Chinese military through Pakistani media outlets.

Moreover, Pakistan is the only neighbor of China to have less than 50 percent of the population concerned about border disputes (of other countries) with China; whereas the majority of the population of other neighboring countries of China is concerned that territorial disputes with China could lead to a military conflict (Global Attitudes & Trends, 2014). Therefore, Pakistani media is also on a similar course to most of the population as it depicts Chinese territorial disputes from a somewhat neutral to favorable perspective, and Chinese military engagements are not highlighted as a threat in Pakistani media. Although the data analysis reveals that Pakistani media raises concerns over China's growing activities in the South and East China seas and its implication for the region, the Pakistani newspaper does not

portray Beijing's ambitious military expansion in the seas as a security challenge for Islamabad.

Unlike the US and India, which consider China's military activities on its Western and Eastern fronts a direct threat to their own regional interests, Pakistan is less concerned about China's growing regional influence. This notion demonstrates that media coverage is somewhat related to agenda-setting based on a certain state's policies and relations with another state. Most of the coverage of China's military developments in Western media is consistent with governments' hostile attitudes toward China and PLA.

In conclusion, most Pakistani media coverage is based on balanced and objective reporting, including comments and perspectives of different regional and international forces. Nevertheless, the articles analyzed for this research observed a positive trend regarding China. Similarly, the Pakistani newspaper praises the Chinese moves by describing its efforts for a cooperative stance in the region and military development as a peaceful rise.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

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