

The Construction of China's Image in Indonesian Mainstream Media: Taking The Jakarta Post as an Example

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Abstract: In the new era, the national image is becoming increasingly important for a country to improve its international influence. The mainstream media, as a means for the general public to learn about others, plays a significant role in shaping a country's image. By studying the reports from July 2016 to December 2023 in The Jakarta Post, the English mainstream media with the largest circulation and influence in Indonesia, this study analyzes the image of China presented by The Jakarta Post under the guidance of the Framing Theory. The analysis in this study shows that the image of China constructed by The Jakarta Post is contradictory and multifaceted: China is regarded as a promoter of regional development, a producer of tensions and an alarming partner at the same time. As the "other" in Indonesian eyes, the multifaceted image of China provides insights for China in shaping its national image among ASEAN countries.

Keywords: The Jakarta Post; China's image; Framing Theory; ASEAN; Mainstream Media

1. Introduction

Since the "South China Sea Arbitration" on July 12, 2016, the dispute has been frequently reported by mainstream media in Europe and the United States, as well as media in sovereignty claimant countries. Indonesia is one of the founding members of ASEAN and the largest economy of ASEAN, who has an important voice in ASEAN's diplomatic and economic affairs. Studying the Indonesian mainstream media's reports and analyzing the public opinion environment and China's image behind the China-ASEAN cooperative relationship is of great strategic significance for promoting the development of cooperation between China and

ASEAN, enhancing China's influence in Southeast Asia, as well as constructing a good image of a great power. Founded in 1983, The Jakarta Post is the leading English-language daily newspaper in Indonesia, with the highest circulation and influence in the country. With a mainstream audience of foreign readers and local intellectuals in Indonesia, the newspaper covers politics, economy, culture and other aspects, and is an important source of information on international news for the Indonesian middle class. It is relatively neutral in its stance and views, and "has been recognized by the Indonesian Union of Journalists as one of the Indonesian newspapers that best adheres to the ethics and standards of journalism" [1].

Taking The Jakarta Post's reports on the issue from July 2016 to December 2023 as the object of study, this study, through the qualitative content analysis method, explores the discourses and attitudes towards China of Indonesia, a non-sovereign claimant, in reporting on the disputes in the context of the China-ASEAN relationship, and analyzes what kind of Chinese image is constructed by its news discourse.

2. Research Methods

Several studies have been done on the national image of China shaped in Indonesian medias from different perspectives, most of which have been done through content analysis. Some studies take the reports on economy as the object, such as Li [2]. Some focus on all reports about China in a certain period of time, such as Huang [3] and Liu [4]. In this paper, through the Dow Jones Factiva database, The Jakarta Post was selected as the search object, and the relevant reports from July 2016 to December 2023 were searched with the keyword "South China Sea" (SCS), and 678 relevant reports were found. According to the conflicts and changes in international situation, the number of reports is

unevenly distributed from year to year, and the specific statistics are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Pieces of Related Reports in The Jakarta Post

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019
Quantity (piece)	98	128	100	63
Year	2020	2021	2022	2023
Quantity (piece)	73	58	57	101

From Table 1, we can see that the Jakarta Post reported frequently on the issue from July 2016 to 2018. There were relatively few reports from 2019 to 2022, partly due to the temporary stagnation of international exchanges and dialogues due to the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic. Since 2023, the reports on this issue kept an increasing tendency again. From the perspective of Frame Theory, this paper adopts content analysis by reading each news report intensively and selecting typical reports for in-depth interpretation to analyze the emotions and attitudes of The Jakarta Post in the process of reporting the related issue, and summarizes the characteristics of China's image constructed in the report.

Frame theory is widely used in the field of news communication at home and abroad, and has been applied in the study of national image. The publication of some achievements also proves that it has practical application value and operational significance. The definition of the word "framework" in the field of sociology is generally accepted to come from Goffman [5]. He believes that the human definition of a situation depends on the principle of organizing time and the participation of individual subjectivity, and the framework refers to the basic elements of this [6]. The concept itself was intended to elaborate on how people understand the events that occur in their daily lives, and was later introduced into the field of news communication. As Walter Lippmann pointed out, "by the time it reaches the reader, each newspaper is already the product of a series of choices." [7] By limiting the perspective and context of news, the framework conveys not only the information of events, but also the facts and opinions described by each other to the audience in the process of disseminating news reports, which has a great impact on the formation of the audience's concept. This is especially true in the construction of national image to the outside world. The media

undertakes most of the information dissemination tasks and is an important window for countries around the world to understand another country.

Within the possible scope of the framework, careful reading and analysis of the text is one of the core contents of the framework research. This study takes the text of The Jakarta Post's report on the related issue as the main content of the study, explores the selectivity in the framework, summarizes the types of news framework adopted by the newspaper in reporting the event, and interprets the national image of China constructed by the framework.

3. Analysis of The Jakarta Post's Reports

According to Zhang Kun and Chen Yali, "the news frame can construct reality through three levels: the high-level frame defines the theme of an event, which appears through the title, introduction, etc.; the middle-level frame is played by the selected main event, previous events, attribution, influence, etc.; the low-level frame involves the words and rhetoric used in the report" [1].

Based on the headlines and the first paragraphs of the retrieved news reports, the high-level frameworks of The Jakarta Post's reports can be classified into the following three categories: (1) conflict framework, which highlights the conflict and confrontation between the two sides; (2) measures framework, which focuses on the handling and progress of the incident; (3) consequence framework which discusses the possible political and economic consequences of the event. The Jakarta Post reported more conflict frameworks and consequences frameworks from 2016 to 2017, highlighting disputes over sovereignty between China and ASEAN countries and ASEAN member countries, and some actions that caused tension. It highlights the tension and antagonism. From 2018 to 2023, the leading framework of the newspaper was the measure framework. Under this framework, it reports the feasible measures that countries should take and the discussions and suggestions of all parties, which continuously pays attention to the process of dealing with the issue, thus making "peaceful settlement of disputes and seeking regional security" [1] the dominant narrative of the newspaper. It is worth noting that in the construction of the measure framework, Indonesia and ASEAN are usually the active

parties in the headlines of the newspaper's news reports, such as the report "Indonesia promotes the strengthening of maritime security links" on August 26, 2016, and the report "Indonesia hopes that China will ensure the promotion of the SCS Code of Conduct Consultation" on May 17, 2017. The newspaper conveys to the audience Indonesia's basic position on the issue and its positive image, that is, Indonesia hopes to promote all parties to resolve disputes through peaceful consultation and jointly safeguard regional interests.

4. The Image of China Constructed in the Report

Through the construction of conflict framework, measure framework and consequence framework, The Jakarta Post's reports tend to be neutral and pluralistic, conveying the complex feelings of Indonesia and ASEAN countries towards China. On the one hand, China and some ASEAN member countries have sovereignty disputes. On the other hand, China and ASEAN have a close and cooperative relationship. The parties do not want to lose their voice in the negotiations, nor do they want to interrupt or affect the economic partnership because of disputes. As a result, in the context of conflict, there are multiple and contradictory images of China in The Jakarta Post's reports.

4.1 A Regional Development Facilitator

In some reports, The Jakarta Post acknowledged that China is a responsible big country who strives to seek peace and stability in Southeast Asia, and actively promotes communication and peaceful consultation between the countries concerned. Specifically, some news headlines state that China actively promotes regional peaceful development. For example, "ASEAN and China will rebuild trust and confidence"(Sept.8, 2016), "China and ASEAN have made progress in the consultation on the Code of Conduct in the SCS"(July 23, 2018) , "ASEAN-China: China will not become another hegemony like the United States"(July 30, 2019), China won't be another hegemon like US (2019-7-4), and "ASEAN and China will resume talks on the Code of Conduct in the SCS in July" (June 14, 2021). The above news headlines show that despite the disputes between China and ASEAN countries over the sovereignty, China still hopes to resolve the conflicts through peaceful consultation and actively promote

cooperation and development between ASEAN and China.

4.2 A Friendly but Alarming Neighbor

Since 2013, China and Indonesia have maintained a good strategic partnership. In its reports, The Jakarta Post also tried to explain to readers the friendly relations between China and Indonesia, and repeatedly mentioned the cooperation between China and Indonesia. For example, "China looks forward to strengthening relations with Indonesia" (Sept.27, 2016), and "China continues to invest in Indonesia despite the conflict" (Jan.10, 2020). Despite the conflict between the two countries on Natuna Island, China has not interrupted its economic investment in Indonesia and is a good neighbor who keeps its promises. However, China's political, economic and military power, as well as China's attitude on the issue, make Indonesia vigilant. The Jakarta Post pointed out that "Indonesia see China as dominant power" (Jan. 15, 2020), "The weight of a giant" (Nov.6, 2019). The newspaper states that "China values neighbors, but asserts sovereignty in SCS" (Oct.17, 2017). There is no doubt that, in The Jakarta Post's report, China is not only a friendly neighbor, but also an advancing giant and an alarming partner.

4.3 A Tension Maker

Between 2016 and 2018, The Jakarta Post reported extensively on conflicts and disputes between China and Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and other countries. From 2019 to 2021, the newspaper's reports on the issue mainly focused on the conflict between Indonesia and China over the waters near the Natuna Islands. Although The Jakarta Post has repeatedly emphasized Indonesia's position as a non-claimant and tried to report from an outsider's perspective, the headlines and contents of its news reports have conveyed to readers the impression that China is a tension maker.

Among the 326 news reports on the issue between July 2016 and December 2018, the headlines of some news reports outlined the negative image of China, such as the report "Five Filipinos disappeared after fishing near the disputed shoals" on November 28, 2016, and "I can't stop China's island building" on March 20, 2017. These titles seem to be neutral, but they portray the weak image of other parties in the

dispute, thus highlighting China's strength and aggressiveness. From 2019 to 2021, most of the reports involved the conflict between Indonesia and China. Therefore, the headlines of most of the news reports were firm and clear, indicating Indonesia's firm position of defending its own interests and conveying the image of China's territorial invaders. For example, on June 5, 2020, "Indonesia and its neighbors protested against China's sovereignty claims...", and on September 14, 2020, "Indonesia reminded China of its sovereignty".

In addition, whether reporting on disputes between China and the Philippines, Malaysia and other countries, or describing conflicts between China and Indonesia, the content of the report has repeatedly questioned China's sovereignty and denied the legitimacy of the nine-dash line. When talking about the dispute, The Jakarta Post has repeatedly pointed out that China's claim of sovereignty has no basis in international law. For example, on August 18, 2016, the report stated that "the Hague Arbitration Court said that China's claim of historical rights to resources under the nine-dash line in the SCS has no legal basis" [8]. In the June 5, 2020, in the report titled "Indonesia Protests with Neighbors over China's Claims in the SCS", it is mentioned that "Indonesia reiterated its long-standing position that it is not a party to any territorial dispute in the SCS, while insisting that China's historical claims are clearly lacking in international legal basis" [9]. "China's claim of sovereignty over nearly 90% of the SCS is illegal in many ways" [10]. In addition, it stated that "Indonesia and all ASEAN claimant states do not recognize China's 'nine-dash line', which is not based on international law" [11].

At the same time, The Jakarta Post's report stressed that China ignored international law and international treaties, vigorously built artificial islands in the sea, deployed military forces, and created regional tensions. The newspaper quoted US's criticism that China "has proceeded to deploy some of the most dangerous weapons from its arsenal to the artificial islands it had illegally built in the disputed waters" [12]. It also claimed that "China's increasing military power and frequent incursions into the territory of several Southeast Asian countries have exacerbated tensions and heightened concerns that China is gaining effective control" [13]. The above reports convey to readers the message that

China is a threat to regional peace. In addition, words such as "aggressive", "incursion" and "ambition" appear frequently, shaping China's aggressive regional image. For example, in a report in 2017, it claimed that "Indonesia has taken a series of actions seen as bold moves against China's territorial ambitions in the SCS" [14].

4.4 A Summary

From the above analysis, it can be found that The Jakarta Post adopted the measure framework in its reports when shaping China as a facilitator of regional partnership, while the conflict framework and consequence framework were adopted when presenting the negative image of China. As the most popular mainstream English media in Indonesia, its depiction of China plays a crucial role in shaping the readers' impression and misunderstanding of China as an threatening and alarming "other".

5. Conclusion

Generally speaking, when reporting on the disputes, The Jakarta Post follows the principle of safeguarding regional and national interests, that is, maximizing the interests of ASEAN and Indonesia. Therefore, although The Jakarta Post generally creates an objective and neutral narrative perspective, China in its reports is still contradictory and multifaceted, which is not only a disturbing factor causing regional tension, but also a promoter of regional cooperation and development; it is not only a friendly partner, but also an alarming power in the Asia-Pacific region. This multi-faceted image has a negative impact on China's construction of a good image of a great power. In the future, China should strive to optimize its regional image, strengthen political mutual trust with ASEAN countries, eliminate their concerns, and disseminate and emphasize the concept of "community of shared future". At the same time, we should make full use of the mass media in the new era, such as the new media platform and other network channels, so that the outside world can understand China through more angles and ways, and spread a positive image of China to the outside world.

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