



REPORT

# Projecting Power and Territorial Disputes: The BJP and Indian News Coverage of Border Conflicts

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*Ravale Mohydin*

TRT WORLD  
**research**  
**centre**



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*Ravale Mohydin*

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**WRITTEN BY**

Ravale Mohyidin

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## Abstract

This paper examines Indian media coverage of India's unresolved border disputes with China and Pakistan. The study proceeds with a historical overview of the border disputes between India and the two nations while exploring the influence of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on the Indian media and its ownership of national security as an issue. The BJP's focus on the promotion of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a nationalistic strongman, as well as an evaluation of the media's role in asymmetric conflicts will follow. This article will then compare and contrast the information and

analysis conveyed by The Times of India, the most widely circulated English-language daily newspaper in the country, on India's border disputes with Pakistan and China. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies, including framing research and critical discourse analysis of news text produced from May till July 2020, showcase the Indian media's role in modulating power asymmetry, uncovering the mechanism by which it helps to consolidate PM Modi's image of invincibility, resulting in electoral success. Implications for regional stability and international security will be discussed.

## Introduction



he relationship between India's ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and the Indian news media can be considered to be a symbiotic

one, with much of the Indian media benefiting from government advertising or with media company owners or investors having cross ownerships of businesses that benefit from government patronage. While this is not new to PM Modi's India or even India alone, given that media business models tend to be similar across many countries, this relationship has grown exponentially as the BJP came to, and stayed in, power, with much of the world's media watchdogs criticising the Indian media for toeing the line for the ruling government (Goel & Gettleman, 2020). Given the BJP's influence over the Indian media and its ownership of the issue of national security, this study examines how Indian border conflicts with China and Pakistan are covered by a prominent Indian news media outlet *Times of India (TOI)* during a selected period, attempting to uncover how it translates into electoral success for the BJP.

Following a brief historical overview of India's border conflicts with China and Pakistan, a documentation of the BJP's focus on the promotion of PM Modi as a nationalistic strongman with tough stances on security, as well as an examination of the media's role in asymmetric conflicts, the study looked at whether and how *TOI* media coverage contributed to the reduction or enhancement of power asymmetry between India and China as

well as Pakistan, as the former leads to potential compensation for any inferiority vis-a-vis adversaries while the latter is associated with highlighting moral, combat and/or operational inferiority of the demonised 'other'.

Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach (CSA) was chosen as a method of analysis to conduct Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992) that looks at how discourse can be analysed from a social lens. CSA examines how foreign policy discourse, given that the state identifies itself through it (Campbell, 1992), (re)produces social domination, that is, the power abuse of one group over another (Van Dijk, 2009), or in this case, of one state over another, i.e. the Self against the Other (Campbell, 1992). Using the CSA method, news frames and keywords that are associated with power asymmetry reduction and enhancement were delineated and compared for media coverage of both border conflicts.

The study will look to confirm the hypotheses that *TOI* media coverage of India's border conflict with China will contribute to power asymmetry reduction or diminution while *TOI* media coverage of India's border conflict with Pakistan will contribute to power asymmetry enhancement. In doing so, the research findings will help shed light on how the Indian media helps to consolidate PM Modi's image of invincibility in the eyes of the Indian electorate, resulting in electoral success. A discussion will follow to highlight implications of that for regional stability and international security.

## A Historical Overview

India gained independence from the British Raj in 1947, but its borders with all its neighbouring countries were not demarcated (Onley, 2009), with some of these borders disputed until today. The fact that vast tracts of land in what is known as present-day India were actually loosely self governed (Onley, 2009) and only informally part of the British Raj, and that some neighbouring states' foreign policy was actually being controlled by the British, was bound to lead to blurred boundaries that were inherited once the British Raj ended.

This is directly linked to the border dispute with China: the British did not attempt to demarcate the eastern boundary of Kashmir (which they annexed but chose to not control directly) after the 1899 McCartney-McDonald line<sup>1</sup>: it was proposed that Aksai Chin was to be within China by treating the Indus watershed (basin or valley) as the border (Katarki, 2020), and not who was controlling the region. However, as per Indian assertions, the area was ruled by the rulers of Kashmir and should therefore be part of India (Katarki, 2020). Post Partition in 1947, India released official maps that showed Aksai Chin in India (Katarki, 2020). This eventually led to a war between India and China in 1962 that led to 15000 square miles of what the Indians believed was their territory being consolidated with China. Other areas are also disputed between the two countries along the largely non-demarcated Sino-Indian border. These territories include areas of Ladakh, such as the Depsang Plains and Leh, which became a point of contention in May 2020. In June 2020, amidst a gradual troop build-up from both sides in the high-altitude areas, at least 20 Indian soldiers were killed while fighting with Chinese troops.

While China and India are both regarded as the two largest economies and nuclear powers in Asia, China has an annual defence budget of 179 billion USD in comparison to India's just under 67 billion USD, and while China accounts for 14.14 trillion USD nominal gross domestic product (GDP), India has 2.94 trillion USD nominal GDP (Niazi, 2020).

When it comes to the origin of the border conflict with Pakistan, along with at times contested and undefined borders delineating areas the British ruled directly or indirectly in the Indian Subcontinent, the mechanism

by which directly governed provinces of British India as well as the indirectly-governed Indian princely states were to choose whether to join India or Pakistan - the two nations born as the British Raj ended - was considered inadequate (Cohen, 1995). At the time of Independence, the Muslim-majority princely state of Kashmir had a Hindu ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, who had to choose either India or Pakistan but was contemplating independence instead (Cohen, 1995). Faced with an internal rebellion in October 1947 (Lamb, 1991), he signed an Instrument of Accession in exchange for Indian military support. However, as part of the Instrument of Accession, he stated that he wished for the people of Kashmir to decide their future (Birdwood, 1956). Given conflicting evidence whether the Instrument of Accession was even genuine as it appeared post-dated, with the Indian Army already being posted in Kashmir (Lamb, 1991), international mediation became necessary.

The UN has attempted to mediate between India and Pakistan on numerous occasions since. However, the ceasefire line is regularly violated, resulting in casualties and injuries borne by civilians on both sides (Jaffrelot, 2018). While the Kashmir dispute is a long-standing issue between India and Pakistan, recent developments, including the revocation of Article 370 in August 2019 that revoked the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, declaring it Indian territory, and essentially removed the possibility of a UN-sanctioned plebiscite in Kashmir, has made things worse. A security lockdown was imposed that included the detention of hundreds of people and a communication blackout (Kugelman, 2019). Experts claim that the June 2020 clash between India and China as noted above was also linked with the revocation of Article 370 as it led to Ladakh, an area historically contested between the two, being separated from Jammu and Kashmir and becoming a Union Territory directly ruled by New Delhi, a move opposed by China along with Pakistan (Khaliq, 2020).

<sup>1</sup> British Indian Government proposed a boundary in the disputed area of Aksai Chin to China in 1899, to which the Chinese government never responded.

## The Indian News Media-Government Nexus

The BJP first came to power in 1984 when it won only four seats in the national general elections, but after whipping up significant Hindu support<sup>2</sup>, the party was able to win the Uttar Pradesh state election in 1991. In 1998, as it took charge via the National Democratic Alliance (Aiyar, 2020), the new government carried out nuclear tests, a long held goal for Hindu nationalists, cementing the BJP's popularity, which grew further after the Kargil conflict<sup>3</sup>. Narendra Modi became the Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2001, and even though he was internationally sanctioned for his role during the 2002 Hindu-Muslim Gujarat riots, became very popular domestically (Aiyar, 2020).

In the 2014 general election, Narendra Modi-led BJP won on the basis of a Hindu nationalist agenda. In 2019, PM Modi was reelected with an increased mandate, with him becoming India's "most powerful politician" (Aiyar, 2020). As Hindu nationalism became and remained the centrepiece of Indian politics, the BJP leaned on the 'Indian media to be less objective and more supportive of his [Modi's] agenda' (Sharma, 2018). News media being utilised as an instrument of public opinion management is not new: the concept of parallelism in media was first introduced by Colin Seymour-Ure in 1974 to define the relationship between a medium and a party when he found that newspapers can be linked to a political party through three elements: fidelity to the party's goals, by organisational links or their readers' political leanings (Seymour-Ure, 1974). This concept was further refined by Hallin and Mancini (2004) who defined it as 'political parallelism, reflecting the historical shift that had taken place from links between media and specific parties to links between media and general political tendencies in society' (Hallin and Mancini, 2004 in Van der Pas, Van der Brug & Vliegenthart, 2017, 493). According to Seymour-Ure (1974), the element of organisational links was synonymous with media ownership while Hallin and Mancini (2004) believed 'parallelism was ...driven largely by market segmentation and by the political involvement of owners and journalists' (Van der Pas, Van der Brug & Vliegenthart, 2017, 493).

PM Modi relies heavily on his relationships with the Indian business community that has significant investments in the Indian media industry (Heng, 2016). The

Indian media industry grew ten times between 1991 to 2005 (Aiyar, 2016) following the 1991 liberalisation of the Indian economy, and had already undergone significant commercialisation. Unlike many places in the world, India's newspaper industry is thriving with newspapers still being considered a major source of news: circulation has increased from an average daily unit circulation of approximately 110 million copies in 2009 to more than 160 million copies in 2018, reflecting growth in the digital newspaper industry as well. With technology and the Internet playing a greater role in Indian people's lives, digital newspaper revenues are also expected to continue to grow exponentially, even though they only amount to a small fraction of overall newspaper revenues in India. In terms of revenue, the Indian Media and Entertainment (M&E) sector reached 25.7 billion USD in 2019 and is expected to go up to 34 billion USD by 2022. Digital news consumption is growing significantly, as more than 300 million Indians consume news online (EY India, 2020), with many large newspapers having a digital presence and, at times, multi-million-dollar annual digital revenues (EY India, 2020).

Media owners can be connected to politicians or are politicians themselves (Bhalla, 2019). For example, Republic TV is a part of ARG Outlier Media Private Ltd., which was co-founded and primarily funded by Rajeev Chandrasekhar, a BJP MP (Bhalla, 2019), and Arnab Goswami, a BJP-supporting Indian journalist, who was accused of having unauthorised access to classified government information (Singh, 2021)<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, with the BJP government spending significantly on political advertising and essentially changing the political landscape in terms of requirements for winning elections in India (Choubey, 2019), news media outlets in the country have become dependent on revenue generated by government advertising (Choubey, 2019). Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP), the nodal agency of the PM Modi-led BJP government for advertising on behalf of all ministries and government-funded organisations, spent approximately 535 million USD in three years from 2014-2017 on political advertising and publicity across all mediums including print, television, radio and digital (Choubey, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> The BJP began an agitation over the Babri Masjid, a mosque built in Ayodhya during the 16th century by the Mughal Emperor Babar, which Hindu mythology said was the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. The BJP demanded the mosque be replaced by a Hindu temple (Aiyar, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> An armed conflict fought between India and Pakistan from May to July of 1999 in the Kargil district of Kashmir. The then-BJP leader and Indian PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee sought US intervention that led to Pakistan having to withdraw from strategically important captured positions.

<sup>4</sup> In January 2021, Arnab Goswami's personal communication with the former CEO of the Indian television rating agency Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) revealed that Goswami knew about India's plans to conduct strikes in Pakistan's Balakot city three days before they took place in February 2020, saying that "something big will happen" and "the government is confident of striking in a way that people will be elated" (Singh, 2021).

## Research Methodology

The digital outlet of the *Times of India (TOI)* was chosen as the Indian media source for this study. TOI is an Indian English-language daily newspaper owned by The Times Group (Bennett Coleman and Company Limited), the largest media conglomerate in the country, owned by the Sahu-Jain family (OpIndia, 2014). It is the fourth-largest newspaper in India by circulation and the largest-selling English-language daily in the world according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (India). It is the oldest English-language newspaper in India still in circulation, with its first edition published in 1838. The TOI generates revenue from online advertising and subscriptions (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2020). TOI “publishes articles with emotionally loaded language and with a proNarendra Modi tone” (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2020): an example headline is “When presidents held umbrellas for Modi” (Media Bias/Fact Check, 2020). There have been documented incidents of media censorship with TOI taking down “embarrassing” reports for the BJP hours after they were published (Kohli, 2017).

All TOI articles related to the border conflicts with Pakistan and China were selected from 15 May 2020 to 15 July 2020, reflecting a period when both border conflicts were active as well as widely reported in the Indian news media. The digital news outlet of TOI was selected, as incoming traffic to media organisations’ own news websites is one of the most important sources for online news consumption (Deloitte, 2017). Online content is reflective of the broadcast content that is produced by these channels (Graber & Dunaway, 2017). Moreover, constant connectivity, courtesy of digital media becoming ubiquitous, has resulted in the media becoming weaponised (Vukasovich, 2012).

According to *Projections of Power* (2004) by Robert Entman, news agendas and story angles originate at the top with the executive (the White House), then flow downward, to the network of non-administration elites, then on to news organisations, before finally reaching the public. As part of a feedback loop from lower to higher levels, the way the public reacts to those frames

may lead to frame adjustments. In this system, as per Entman, US Presidents (and the like in other countries) enjoy enormous power in framing the public debate, while the media disseminate the dominant discourse, with little chance for non-elites to contest or even influence dominant frames, invoking issues of power and hierarchy by focusing on constructions of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (Scheufele 1999, 113)<sup>5</sup>.

Given that language is intertwined with social power as it “indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over power and where power is challenged” (Wodak, 2001, 11), the study examines how TOI media coverage of India’s border conflicts with China and Pakistan can modulate power asymmetry. With that in mind, Van Dijk’s Socio-Cognitive Approach (CSA) was chosen as a method of analysis to conduct Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is very much ‘a problem-orientated interdisciplinary research movement’ (Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak, 2011 in Okado-Gough, 2017, 51) focused on ‘doing discourse analysis from a critical perspective’ (Baker et al., 2013 in Okado-Gough, 2017, 51), making transparent the ways in which the text positions and manipulates readers (Lucke, 1996, 19). By analysing ‘news texts, political speeches, advertisements, schoolbooks, etc’ (Fairclough, 2010, 10), CDA attempts to uncover seemingly neutral strategies that may be ideological in nature seeking to represent people or events in order to reach a particular end (Machin and Mayr, 2009 in Okado-Gough, 2017, 52).

Since the state can identify itself through foreign policy discourse (Campbell, 1992), CSA can examine how the discourse (re)produces social domination, that is, the power abuse of one group over another (Van Dijk, 2009), or in this case, of one state over another, i.e. the Self against the Other (Campbell, 1992). Central to the CSA framework is a text’s thematic organisation or the hierarchical between the topics that compose a text, i.e. its ‘macrostructure’ (Van Dijk, 2009 in Carvalho, 2000, 6) or ‘organised sets of propositions’ (Van Dijk, 2009 in Carvalho, 2000, 6).

<sup>5</sup> Even though Entman’s work *Projections of Power* (2004) was produced before social media became prolific, it is evident that Internet and social media networks have a profound effect on political communication (Morozov, 2011; Hung, 2010). A 2012 Pew State of the Media suggested that “platforms such as Twitter and Facebook merely echo the established media, or otherwise simply lead users to established media sites” where the media “remain largely deferential of, and supportive toward, political elites during times of war and crisis” (Robinson, 2014, 462 in Cherkaoui & Mohyidin, 2020, 32). Other studies also show that social media posts tend to duplicate the output of mainstream media (Meraz, 2011; Ragas and Kioussis, 2010; Woolley et al., 2010). Hence, Entman’s model is still relevant because it can accommodate digital and social media as part of the media ecosystem.



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In terms of implementation of the research strategy, the text was reduced to its macrostructure via 'macro-rules', an example of which is 'the deletion of redundant information or the synthesis of various propositions in a sole, more generic, one' (Van Dijk, 2009 in Carvalho, 2000, 6) that eventually led to news frame discovery. By 'detecting generalisations, rules, or regularities' (Klauer and Phye, 2008, 86), these inferred topics or 'macro-propositions' (Van Dijk, 2009 in Carvalho, 2000, 6) derived macro-level meanings which can be considered major meta-level "frames"<sup>6</sup> (Entman, 1993), containing ideological themes as they synthesise related propositions linked to domination by one group over another (Van Dijk, 2009). Subsequently, the following research questions will guide the analysis:

1. What aspects of the border conflict with China did *TOI* choose to highlight?
2. What aspects of the border conflict with Pakistan did *TOI* choose to highlight?
3. Did *TOI* media coverage differ in terms of enhancement of power asymmetry when it came to border conflicts with China and Pakistan?
4. Did *TOI* media coverage differ in terms of diminution of power asymmetry when it came to border conflicts with China and Pakistan?

As the BJP wields significant influence over the Indian news media and focuses on promoting PM Modi's "invincibility", and by association, India itself (Venu, 2016), as well as given China and Pakistan's respective military and economic strength in comparison with India, the following hypotheses will guide the analysis:

**H1:** *TOI* media coverage of border conflicts with China will promote the Peaceful Resolution frame more than with Pakistan

**H2:** *TOI* media coverage of border conflicts with China will promote the Capacity frame more than with Pakistan

**H3:** *TOI* media coverage of border conflicts with China will promote the International Support frame more than with Pakistan

**H4:** *TOI* media coverage of border conflicts with China will promote the Economic frame more than with Pakistan

**H5:** *TOI* media coverage of border conflicts with Pakistan will promote the Terrorism/Violence frame more than with China

**H6:** *TOI* media coverage of border conflicts with Pakistan will promote the Law and Order frame more than with China

**H7:** *TOI* media coverage will attempt to diminish power asymmetry significantly more while covering India's border conflict with China in comparison to India's border conflict with Pakistan by promoting Peaceful Resolution, Capacity, International Support and Economic frames more.

**H8:** *TOI* media coverage will attempt to enhance power asymmetry significantly more while covering India's border conflict with Pakistan in comparison to India's border conflict with China by promoting Terrorism as well as Law and Order frames more

<sup>6</sup> Bateson (1955) originally put forward the concept of framing by examining the processes through which people thought and behaved during situations of cooperation or conflict.

## Research Findings

*TOI* coverage of the border conflicts with China consisted of 258 articles during the period of study, while the same media outlet's coverage of border conflicts with Pakistan consisted of 103 articles. Given that there was a significant difference in the number of articles produced by *TOI* on the border conflict with China as compared with Pakistan, percentages of articles were used for analytical purposes. Confirming the first hypothesis, analysis<sup>7</sup> revealed that *TOI* had statistically significantly more articles promoting the Peaceful Resolution frame covering the border conflict with China, i.e. higher proportion of coverage of peace processes as well as attempts at dialogue and stability, than with Pakistan. Thirty per cent of *TOI* articles promoted the Peaceful Resolution frame when it came to the border conflict with China, compared with 0 per cent of articles covering border conflict with Pakistan. Confirming the second hypothesis, analysis<sup>8</sup> revealed that *TOI* had statistically significantly more articles promoting the Capacity frame covering the border conflict with China, i.e. higher proportion of coverage of Indian military capacity, than with Pakistan. Twenty seven per cent of *TOI* articles promoted the Peaceful Resolution frame when it came to the border conflict with China, compared with 13 per cent of articles covering border conflict with Pakistan. Confirming the third hypothesis, analysis<sup>9</sup> revealed that *TOI* had statistically significantly more articles promoting the International Support frame covering the border conflict with China, i.e. higher proportion of coverage of international support for the Indian stance, than with Pakistan. Thirteen per cent of *TOI* articles promoted the International Support frame when it came to the border conflict with China, compared with 4 per cent of articles covering border conflict with Pakistan. Confirming the fourth hypothesis, analysis<sup>10</sup> revealed that *TOI* had statistically significantly more articles promoting the Economic frame covering the border conflict with China, i.e. higher proportion of coverage of economic consequences of conflict, than with Pakistan. Nine per cent of *TOI* articles promoted the Economic frame when it came to the border conflict with China, compared with 0 per cent of articles covering border conflict with Pakistan. Con-

firming the fifth hypothesis, analysis<sup>11</sup> revealed that *TOI* had statistically significantly more articles promoting the Terrorism frame covering the border conflict with Pakistan, i.e. higher proportion of coverage of violence and terrorism-related incidents, than with China. One per cent of *TOI* articles promoted the Terrorism frame when it came to the border conflict with China, compared with 28 per cent of articles covering the border conflict with Pakistan. Confirming the sixth hypothesis, analysis<sup>12</sup> revealed that *TOI* had statistically significantly more articles promoting the Law and Order frame covering the border conflict with Pakistan, i.e. higher proportion of coverage of purported legal violations by Pakistan, than with China. Two per cent of *TOI* articles promoted the Terrorism frame when it came to the border conflict with China, compared with 85 per cent of articles covering the border conflict with Pakistan.

As the analyses above reveal that *TOI* media coverage for border conflicts with China met the condition of promoting Peaceful Resolution, Conflict Capacity, International Support and Economic Consequences significantly more than *TOI* media coverage for border conflicts with Pakistan, the seventh hypothesis stands confirmed: *TOI* media coverage for border conflicts with China attempts to diminish power asymmetry with India significantly more than with Pakistan.

Finally, as the analyses above reveal that *TOI* media coverage for border conflicts with Pakistan met the condition of promoting Terrorism as well as Law and Order significantly less than *TOI* media coverage for border conflicts with China, the eighth hypothesis stands confirmed: *TOI* media coverage for border conflicts with Pakistan attempts to enhance power asymmetry with India significantly more than with China.

<sup>7</sup> As per a chi-square goodness of fit analysis ( $\chi^2=30$ ,  $p<.001$ )

<sup>8</sup> As per a chi-square goodness of fit analysis ( $\chi^2=4.9$ ,  $p<.05$ )

<sup>9</sup> As per a chi-square goodness of fit analysis ( $\chi^2=4.77$ ,  $p<.05$ )

<sup>10</sup> As per a chi-square goodness of fit analysis ( $\chi^2=9$ ,  $p<.05$ )

<sup>11</sup> As per a chi-square goodness of fit analysis ( $\chi^2=25.14$ ,  $p<.001$ )

<sup>12</sup> As per a chi-square goodness of fit analysis ( $\chi^2=79.18$ ,  $p<.001$ )

## Discussion

Comparing the results of this study with the Indian leadership's political communication and messaging on India's border conflicts with China as well as Pakistan suggests that *TOI* media coverage very much reflects the political elite's narratives (Entman, 2004). *TOI* media coverage of India's border conflicts with China and Pakistan appears to be a conduit for modulating power asymmetry between India and its neighbours.

Given Chinese military and economic superiority as denoted by the figures above, India can be considered the 'weaker country' as far as power asymmetry is concerned. As *TOI* media coverage chose to promote Peaceful Resolution, (enhanced) Capacity, International Support (for the Indian stance) and Economic Consequences (for the Chinese economy) of the border conflict with India, the importance of each of these frames in projecting India, as at least an equal, if not superior, match for the Chinese, evidenced that *TOI* media coverage of the border conflict with China was more likely to serve the purpose of asymmetry diminution with the aims of improving standing, boosting the morale of (Indian) supporters and potentially compensate for inferiority vis-a-vis adversaries, as noted by Shinar and Bratic (2010).

*TOI* media coverage was more likely to promote the Peaceful Resolution frame to cover India's border conflict with China in comparison to India's border conflict with Pakistan. *TOI* described it as a conflict resulting from an incompatibility of goals (instead of violence)-oriented and solution (instead of victory)-oriented (Lynch, 2007), via the use of words such as 'defusing' and 'diplomatic', while describing joint peace processes and other concerted efforts as well as including Chinese official communications as part of news. The border conflict with China has been defined as a 'confrontation' and 'standoff', terms that usually assume equal standing of both parties. This can be viewed as a contribution to the reduction of asymmetry, especially as part of a peacemaking "ritual" (Shinar & Bratic, 2010, p.140).

This orientation can be attributed to a few factors. According to Datta-Ray (n.d.), India's foreign policy has always been influenced by the Gandhian concept of

non-violence as India's first Prime Minister Jawarharlal Nehru 'forged a unique foreign policy that expressed [Mahatma] Gandhi's ideas' (Datta-Ray, n.d.). As per Datta-Ray (n.d.), PM Modi is 'resolutely faithful to his predecessors' and hailed the example of membership in 'arch-rival' China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a pragmatic and fruitful result of New Delhi's labours to secure loans from non-Western institutions for projects that India would not be able to secure funding for (such as environmentally detrimental coal power plants (Datta-Ray, n.d.) and to eradicate poverty - also considered a form of violence). However, the same membership in China's AIIB was ridiculed as the reason behind PM Modi being "scared" of China as per Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi<sup>13</sup> referring to the Indian government borrowing 750 million USD from AIIB in June 2020 as the reason behind PM Modi "deliberately misleading the country about the extent of Chinese encroachment" (Scroll staff, 2020). Indeed, PM Modi did not directly name China in multiple national addresses after at least 20 Indian soldiers were killed in one attack (Ghargi, 2020). In contrast, when it comes to Pakistan, the rhetoric is more bellicose. After the February 14, 2020, attack in Pulwama<sup>14</sup>, PM Modi said:

"Those of our enemies sitting in Pakistan think that attacks like Pulwama will have an adverse impact on our country, I want to remind them, you've seen destruction due to [the] path you've chosen" (Narendra Modi Official YouTube Channel, 2019 in Ghargi, 2020).

*TOI* was more likely to promote the Capacity and Economic Consequences frames while covering India's border conflict with China than with Pakistan. Indian capacity enhancement and economic consequences of the conflict between India and China are very much interlinked and contribute to the diminution of India's power asymmetry with China:

"With tension brewing between India and China, the Centre is readying guidelines to fast-track [promotion of] local manufacturing of active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) used in making medicine formulations...India currently sources 70-80% of APIs...from China because of cost viability...[as

<sup>13</sup> Rahul Gandhi is the great-grandson of Prime Minister Jawarharlal Nehru.

<sup>14</sup> That was alleged to have originated from Pakistan, which was denied by Pakistani authorities (Latif, 2020). It was a suicide attack carried out by a Kashmiri man allegedly tortured by Indian armed forces in Indian administered Kashmir (BBC News, 2019).

per a senior official] “The objective is to boost local manufacturing of critical APIs and in the current situation, it assumes prime importance” (Times of India, June 19 2020).

Specifically speaking, references to enhancing Indian capacity for goods, calls for the boycott of “inferior” Chinese goods and the loss of a huge Indian consumer market contributed to the diminishment of India’s power asymmetry with China on the economic front. A BJP coalition partner was quoted saying:

“We should encourage and promote swadeshi products. It is also in the priority list of the PM” (Times of India, June 19, 2020)

The Sanskrit term “*swadeshi*” refers to the 1905 Swadeshi movement, a part of the Indian independence movement that contributed to the development of Indian nationalism (India Today, 2015). It encouraged the use of Indian products and burning British made goods and is the basis of PM Modi’s ‘Make in India’ campaign, a 2014 grand initiative relying heavily on foreign direct investments and global markets. This brings us to the importance of promoting the International Support frame in alignment with the BJP’s strategic objectives.

*TOI* was more likely to promote the International Support frame while covering India’s border conflict with China as compared to India’s border conflict with Pakistan. International support for the Indian stance also contributes to diminution of India’s power asymmetry with China:

“As Indian troops remain dug in at Ladakh in a prolonged standoff with China, allies are pitching in with commitments to deliver urgently needed weapons and ammunition for the Indian armed forces. France has promised to deliver additional Rafale jets next month, an in-service Israeli air defence system is expected soon, precision artillery rounds will be sent by the US, and Russia will make early deliveries of ammunition and weapons worth \$1 billion.” (Times of India, June 29 2020)

Weeks after the two countries clashed, an American aircraft carrier entered Indian waters. The US is particularly increasingly collaborating with India due to “shared misgivings about China’s growing aggressiveness across much of Asia” (Ganguly, 2020), as China threatens US hegemony in global politics and econ-

omy as well as Indian hopes to become an Asian superpower. Experts considered this a signal to China (as well as others) that the US was standing with India (Verma, 2020): international support for the Indian stance enhances India’s position in an otherwise arguably asymmetric conflict, and the promotion of this support can be said to not only blend in well with PM Modi’s brand of nationalistic populist politics that brought him to power in the first place (Ranjan, 2020) but also BJP’s efforts to showcase his global reach and “world champion” image by organising massive rallies abroad with other world leaders (Daniyal, 2019)

Moreover, if *TOI* was more likely to promote the International Support frame while covering India’s border conflict with China, that means that it was less likely to promote the same when it comes to India’s border conflict with Pakistan, which it was. That would reflect New Delhi’s current stand on the matter: armed ‘violence in Kashmir is a law-and-order problem’ (Sreedharan, 2009, 100), purely a conflict between the Indian state and Pakistan-sponsored terrorists that does not require any third-party mediation or support (Joseph, 2000 in Sreedharan, 2009). It could also be read as a portrayal of the Indian leadership not needing any international support for their stance, given that Pakistan lags economically and militarily.

However, instead, *TOI* media coverage of the border conflict with Pakistan appeared to highlight international alignments with India’s perception of Pakistan itself, if not alignments with India’s perception of the border conflict with Pakistan. To illustrate, *TOI* was more likely to promote the terrorism frame as well as the Law and Order frame while covering the border conflict with Pakistan as compared to China. Concerning power asymmetry, terrorism has been termed the “weapon of the weak” (Azzam, 2003). Terrorism is “practised by marginalised groups that cannot influence the government’s policies through legitimate means” (Perliger, 2018). According to Locks (2015), in reference to American struggles in Afghanistan and Iraq, “bad guys know what works: asymmetric warfare”. Terrorism has thus been linked with weakness, illegitimacy and criminal behaviour, as reported by *TOI*:

“A joint security operation was launched close to the LoC [Line of Control]... “Around 5.55 am, a group of terrorists tried to sneak into the Indian territory on this side of the Line of Control.” Jammu-based defence spokesperson Lt Col Devender Anand said. “The terrorists were seen crossing the



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (L) performs Bhoomi Pujan at 'Shree Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir' (Ram Temple) in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh on August 05, 2020. (Indian Government / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

LoC, and alert troops of the Indian Army foiled the infiltration bid, resulting in the killing of one terrorist." (Times of India, July 1 2020)

According to Ray (2004) who studied The New York Times, The Washington Post and Los Angeles Times, the US media covers the border conflict between India and Pakistan using frames such as Outside Interference, Violent Neighbour and Foreign Fighters (Ray, 2004) - all references related to Pakistan-related terrorism. Further, Mohyidin (2020) also found that 'CNN coverage is more aligned with NDTV coverage than GEO News [Pakistani news outlet]' (Mohyidin, 2020, 21) and that CNN uses the label 'terrorists' (Mohyidin, 2020, 18). By using terms such as 'resorting' and 'sneak' as well as referring to security breaches in very early morning hours (depicting crime and immorality), the above is an example of how TOI media coverage reflects powerful global actors' alignment with India's perception of Pakistan.

US-Indian media alignment on the use of the Terrorism frame can be attributed to three potential factors: Firstly, many US officials have been unsupportive of Pakistan's role in the US war in Afghanistan, accusing the country of facilitating terrorists in order to gain or maintain political leverage in the country (Mangaldas, 2018).

Apparently, the "same terms are being used to describe Pakistan's role in Kashmir as its role in Afghanistan, in an apparent attempt to develop a 'case' for American efforts being thwarted by Pakistan" (Mohyidin, 2020, p.20). India also looks to curb Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan for multiple reasons as an "Afghanistan that is indirectly controlled by Rawalpindi [referring to Pakistan's purported influence over the Taliban] is detrimental to Indian strategic interests" (Pant & Kaura, 2018). It appears that both the US and India view Pakistan as a key barrier to their influence and success in Afghanistan and may want to delegitimize its entity in Afghanistan and Kashmir by promoting it as a "pesky neighbour" (Ray, 2004). This is also highlighted by the promotion of the Law and Order frame as reflected in the heavy reporting of 'unprovoked' ceasefire violations as well as losses and disruptions to daily life:

"Pakistan violated the ceasefire twice along the Line of Control (LoC) in J&K's Rajouri and Poonch districts for the third consecutive day... "Around 7.30 am, Pakistan resorted to unprovoked firing of small arms...around four to five villages were affected by the intense shelling. Some cattle died while a cowshed was damaged" (Times of India, June 10, 2020)

Secondly, as noted above, the US considers India strategically important in the larger 'Indo-Pacific region' (Pant, 2015), and according to a Pentagon report, "there is a broad consensus within Washington and Delhi that each depends on the other to sustain a favourable strategic equilibrium as Chinese power rises" (Daggett, S., Library of Congress., & Federation of American Scientists, 2010, 65). Thus, the US is lending its global influence to support and legitimise the Indian stance on the Kashmir issue (that is essentially the root cause of both border conflicts in this study) that appears to be utilised by India in its border conflict with China as well. Finally, Islam and Muslims receive negative reporting from Western media outlets while reporting on Muslims, and consequently, Muslim causes or conflicts primarily affecting Muslims such as the Kashmir dispute (Hassan & Omar, 2017). Terms such as "Muslim" and "terrorist" have become almost synonymous (Eid & Karim, 2014, 105 in Alghamdi, 2015, 203). Given that "BJP leaders have repeatedly made Hindu nationalist and anti-Muslim remarks" (Human Rights Watch, 2020), demonizing Muslims as "terrorists" (India Today, 2019), TOI promotion of the Terrorism frame while covering the border conflict with Pakistan is perhaps to be expected.

Since PM Modi has gone on record vowing to "completely isolate" Pakistan internationally (Dhaka Tribune, 2019), US-India media alignment is perfectly aligned with the BJP's narrative on national security (Mukhopadhyay, 2019). Serving the purpose of asymmetry enhancement against Pakistan, it augments the strongman image of PM Modi in the eyes of the Indian electorate. According to President Barack Obama in his 2020 memoir, the quickest route to national unity in India is "expressing hostility toward Pakistan" (Obama, 2020 in Iqbal, 2020). For example, two weeks after the Pulwama attack in February 2020, when the Indian Air Force carried out airstrikes destroying alleged "terrorist launch pads" in Pakistan's Balakot city, PM Modi said, in an election rally, that "ghar mein ghus ke maareng" [We will go inside their home (Pakistan) and hit them] which later famously became a BJP election slogan for the 2019 Indian general election, resulting in their largest mandate ever (Ghargi, 2020).

According to Shinar and Bratic (2010), reductions in asymmetry, though meant to create an appearance of power symmetry between two countries by "amplifying the perception of the power wielded by a seemingly weaker side" (Shinar & Bratic, 2010, p. 140), can backfire as the attempt may have a boomerang effect,

resulting in radicalising of peace processes and deadlocks (Shinar & Bratic, 2010). This is evident when it comes to the border conflict between India and China as, at the time of writing, the strategy has resulted in a "deadlock" (Purohit, 2020) after multiple rounds of talks. According to the Indian government, the two sides jointly agreed to end the 'standoff', as well as withdraw troops and artillery from the border while the Chinese state-backed news outlet Global Times reported the news was 'not accurate' and meant to appease the Indian public before the Hindu festival of Diwali (Purohit, 2020). This confirms that BJP's ownership of the issue of national security is perceived to be associated with its electoral success domestically. Indeed, in November 2020, despite the significant human security and economic fallout from the severe spread of the novel coronavirus in India, the BJP won key regional polls by successfully evoking the ongoing border clash with China along with the revocation of Article 370 in Muslimmajority Kashmir, espousing nationalistic fervour (Al Jazeera, 2020).

Now, Indian security experts believe that "mediation by Moscow can break the deadlock" (Guruswamy, 2020). Such recommendations can also be viewed as a contribution to the reduction of asymmetry via the media, portraying both parties to be of equal standing in the peacemaking processes, particularly in the presence of a prestigious third-party (Shinar & Bratic, 2010). What this (and other asymmetry reducing media coverage) may entail for regional stability and international security remains to be seen, but Indian media coverage of both border conflicts with China and Pakistan may add to regional instability. While it is well documented that media coverage contributing to asymmetry enhancement, as is the case of the border conflict with Pakistan, is linked with war journalism (Shinar & Bratic, 2010), Indian coverage contributing to reducing asymmetry even, as is the case with China, is not resulting in a peaceful resolution but is instead associated with a deadlock that may help win elections but is likely a ticking time bomb.

## Conclusion

The study has conclusively shown that TOI media coverage of India's border conflicts with China and Pakistan is in alignment with the BJP's focus on national security, confirming their influence over media narratives when it comes to border conflicts. Power asymmetry was modulated by promoting news frames such as Peaceful Resolution, Capacity, International Support and Economic Consequences to contribute to a reduction in power asymmetry with an economically and militarily stronger state, i.e. China. On the other hand, findings showed the TOI coverage contributed to the enhancement of power asymmetry by promoting news frames such as Terrorism as well as Law and Order while covering the border conflict with a relatively weaker state, economically and militarily, i.e. Pakistan. The findings of this study confirm BJP's attempts to

strategically control information via the news media to consolidate its image in the eyes of the Indian electorate as the strongest political party that is prepared to face external threats successfully.

As noted above, this media focus on power asymmetry modulation has implications for regional as well as international security. While it is quite evident that PM Modi's strongman image and BJP's ownership of national security resonates with the Indian electorate, the strategy may not be as effective when it comes to conflict resolution in a seismic neighbourhood. Whether conflict resolution, which may be the most sustainable route to ensuring national security rather than just apparent posturing, is a priority for the PM Modi-led BJP, only time can tell.



*The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi (C) visits Nimu in Ladakh to interact with Indian troops, on July 03, 2020.  
(Indian Government / Handout - Anadolu Agency)*

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