

INDIAN PRINT MEDIA REPORTING ON OBOR INITIATIVE: A QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Media reporting on any subject or policy is the provider of first hand knowledge to the common people of a country. When it comes to reporting any other country's policy initiative or some socio-economic agenda, it automatically gets politicized in other country's media. Given the importance of role that media play at sub-regional, regional and inter-regional platform; it becomes quite inevitable for media to provide accurate and objective information to their readers. China's One Belt One Road(OBOR) initiative is one such initiative which frequently feature in Indian print media that had shaped the firsthand view of Indian common people about this initiative. Given the size and impact of this initiative, it is imperative for academia to critically examine the reportage done by Indian print media – Here Times of India and The Hindu, and try to understand India's perception on One Belt One Road(OBOR).

Keywords: Bangladesh, China, India Myanmar Economic Cooperation (BCIM EC), One Belt One Road(OBOR), *The Hindu*, *The Times of India*.

INTRODUCTION

Indian print media reporting on One Belt One Road(OBOR) is if not very intense then still had have done a considerably moderate reporting. India's English print media is basically dominated by two groups in terms of circulation, one is *The Times of India* and the other one is *The Hindu*.¹ *The Times of India* is generally considered as taking a hard stand on news related to China whereas *The Hindu* is considered as being very objective on China news and also document Chinese perception. Since the announcement of One Belt One Road(OBOR) by Chinese President Xi Jinping in Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan and Indonesian Parliament in Indonesia in September and October 2013,

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respectively, ² these two English medium Indian newspapers have given a considerable amount of reportage on the Chinese initiative. In this section we shall try to figure out the nature of their reporting and the significance for Indian policymakers or try to gauge the perception of Indian intellectual class through their articles that appeared in the above mentioned two print media. We have collected the news articles, editorials or any news piece that had appeared in these two English newspapers. To collect the news articles, we have used the *Access World News* portal which provides access to all the print news media reportage across the world as well as the online edition of these two newspapers. The time period we have chosen is from 2013-2015, a total little more than two years of period. The initiative itself was pronounced in September and October 2013, so news regarding this initiative started appearing in electronic and print media from this time onwards itself. Years 2013 and 2014 have also been very crucial year for India and China as both the country saw change in leadership and major shift in their domestic and international profile. President Xi Jinping vowed to keep the pace of socio-economic reform and keep china as the engine of world economy while Indian Prime Minister Modi also embarked on the process of intense economic reform and emphasis on the trade and commerce. In such a crucial time period both China and India have embarked on series of projects which will have lasting impact on Asian economy as well as world economy. In this backdrop, we shall try to evaluate the reportage on One Belt One Road initiative in the abovementioned two Indian English print media quantitatively and qualitatively.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Since the pronouncement of OBOR initiative, in the last four months of 2013, Indian media haven't given a very wide range of reportage on the Initiative. Most of the reporting were done on high-level bilateral exchange or State visit like Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to China in October, 2013. Indian media haven't reported that Chinese side has extended any invitation to Indian side to join OBOR initiative. This was most probably because Chinese side may be still working on the *modus vivendi* of OBOR project and wanted to do more homework before inviting India to join the project. They even may be trying to calibrate India's response if they are being invited to the project. *The Times of India* has clearly shown no sign of carrying big editorials on the Chinese initiative. They have merely mentioned this initiative under eye-catching themes like the reporting on 28th Oct, 2013 titled "*Xi calls for comprehensive strategy to engage neighbors*". In September 2013, *Times of India* reported that "*China looking to sign FTA with Sri Lanka*". In relation to directly related news on Chinese OBOR Initiative, as authors have searched through the *Access World News* Portal and the websites of above mentioned two English news print media, could not find articles. In fact, we were able to trace only single news article that appeared in *The Times Of India* (23 December, 2013), and in *The Hindu* (21 December, 2013). Both reported on Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar Economic Cooperation (BCIMEC). This news was about the First Joint Working Group meeting of the BCIM EC held in Kunming and has got stamp of approval from the Indian government. Besides highlighting the positive aspect of this project, the challenges for

Indian diplomacy and business were also given voice in their reporting. Here the important point is that BCIM EC had been pronounced much before the pronouncement of *One Belt One Road Initiative* in September-October, 2013. BCIM EC have been in discussion among the scholars of the four countries since more than decade but it got official stamp in May, 2013 when BCIM EC were mentioned in India-China Joint communiqué during the State visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to India.³ In 2013, these two Indian print media reporting were confined to BCIM EC.

Reason behind it is quite evident. Indian print media have been paying much attention to China related issues in last few years given the growing trade and commerce activity between China and India. In May 2013, BCIM EC got official recognition by the government of both India and China as it was included in the Joint Communiqué in May, 2013. Second, the first official meeting of BCIM EC Joint Study Group was held in Dec, 2013 in Kunming, where India was represented by Joint Secretary (East) of Government of India, making it a high level intergovernmental meeting, thereby gaining importance in print media.

China although had announced the One Belt One Road Initiative in late 2013, but had not raised the initiative with India till Feb 2014. In Feb 2014, India-China held seventeenth round of border talk in New Delhi where Chinese Special Representative Yang Jiechi extended invitation to India to join Maritime Silk Road to Indian Special Representative Shiv Shankar Menon as reported by the PTI. But by the time, the then UPA government had already become a lame duck government and couldn't take major policy initiative. In 2014, India was passing through national election and outgoing UPA government was preoccupied with domestic politics. Given the political situation in India and China's ongoing deliberation on Vision and Action Plan for One Belt One Road, Indian print media, as it could be sensed from the intensity of their reporting, had not been pursuing the Initiative. It was only in March, 2015 when China announced Vision and Action plan for One Belt One Road Initiative that world media started following aggressively OBOR. In India, *The Times of India* and *The Hindu* had also raised their number of reporting on the Initiative in the following years. We have analyzed the entire collected news piece in both the newspapers in tabular form.

For the quantitative analysis, we have used different variables. We collated 147news articles (News pieces, editorials, opinion all included). News articles have been sorted using variables like length of articles(Below 350 words is categorized as short, above 350 words as medium and above 1000 words as long), degree of attention paid to OBOR, the number of themes of content, the nature of their perception on OBOR. Authors of news articles were also taken into consideration. Articles of journalists of the respective newspapers were characterized as the raw news material but editorial and opinion were characterized as analytical and influential category which had the ability of molding the public opinion. These editorials and opinions were written by scholars, International relation experts and public intellectuals from the national and international institutions. In Table 1, only directly related newspapers were counted on the different variables. Remaining articles that were indirectly related have been reckoned collectively in Table 3.

Table 1(a): News Items in Indian Newspapers by Length (2013-2015)

Newspaper		Length			Total
		Short (less than 350 words)	Medium (More than 350 words)	Long (More than 1000 words)	
<i>The Hindu</i>	2013	1	2	0	3
	2014	7	13	1	21
	2015	14	23	22	59

Table 1(b): News Items in Indian Newspapers by Length (2013-2015)

Newspaper		Length			Total
		Short (less than 350 words)	Medium (More than 350 words)	Long (More than 1000 words)	
<i>The Times of India</i>	2013	4	0	0	4
	2014	17	3	0	20
	2015	18	21	1	40

In order to know the attention paid by these two print media to Chinese initiative OBOR, an Attention Score has been calculated by dividing the total number of news pieces on OBOR or related initiative by 365 days multiplied by one hundred to get the standardized score. Year 2013 is exception as OBOR was initiated very late that year but still counted as full year for statistical purposes.

Table2: Attention Score (2013-2015)

Newspaper	2013	2014	2015	Aggregated Score	Mean Score
<i>The Times of India</i>	14.6	73	146	233.6	77.86
<i>The Hindu</i>	21.9	76.65	215.35	313.9	104.6

THEMES OF THE EDITORIALS

What are the themes of the editorials constituting the content of the news is very important in determining the attention given to Chinese initiative of OBOR. After going through all the news pieces, we have broadly categorized three distinct themes that got priority in two Indian news print media: BCIM EC, CPEC, Maritime Silk Road. Besides these three themes that got most attention in their reporting, there are some other aspects of OBOR that got reported frequently in Indian print media. These include, *interalia*, China-Nepal-India Economic Corridor, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, BRICS bank, China-Myanmar Oil Pipeline project, etc. All these projects are now connected to China's grand OBOR initiative which got attention in Indian print media. There are some news items that can't be distinctly categorized so have been grouped into OBOR category as these reports are directly or indirectly related to the Initiative.

Table 3: Editorials by Theme (2013-2015)

News paper	BCIM	CPEC	Maritime Silk Road	China-Indo EC	China-Eurasia EC	CNI EC	AIB	BRICS Bank	Silk Road Fund	OBOR	Total
<i>The Hindu</i>	1+1+8	0+5+12	2+10+11	0	0+1+0	0+1+	0+2+5	0+0+2	0+1+1	0+3+27	93
<i>The Times of India</i>	1+5+3	6	2+7+10	0+1+1	0	0+1+2	0+0+4	0+0+1	0+1+1	0+0+8	54

From the above tables, it is quite evident that OBOR gained much attention in Indian public discourse in 2015 when China announced Vision and Action Plan of the initiative and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited China in May, 2015. In May 2015 itself, *The Hindu* published some six long articles on China which impinges upon the Chinese initiative. Even before Modi's State visit to China, in April, 2015, there appeared some half dozens of articles written by diplomats or scholars on peripheral geo-politics being crafted by China, all in the backdrop of President Xi's State visit to Pakistan. Year 2015 saw an upward trajectory in China-India bilateral exchanges as both countries were trying to gain support for their own several domestic developmental projects.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

After going through each articles themed on OBOR or even briefly mentioning this Chinese initiative in their content, we found a pattern that whenever a high level visit from either side happened, there had been a growing talk about this Chinese initiative in the Indian print media. On any State visit from either side to any country, media usually reports. In this context, there is a consistency on mentioning the Silk Road initiative directly or indirectly. Likewise, President Xi's visit to Southeast Asia (October, 2013) was reported by the Indian print media especially *The Hindu*. In their reporting, they even mentioned economic and strategic move of China in Southeast Asia. During Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's State visit to China, there was talk about strategic dialogue between India and China but didn't find mention of the then newly pronounced Chinese initiative of OBOR. Again in February 2014, Pakistan's President Mamnoon Hussain went on State visit to China and in April same year .Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to discuss CPEC plan. This became a hot topic for Indian media and they even published reportage on Chinese aid to Pakistan and their implication for India. Chinese President Xi Jinping's State visit to India in September, 2014 was also extensively covered and in that backdrop, Chinese Initiative OBOR also got mentioned. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's State visit to China in May 2015 was also widely reported and in that backdrop Indian media published some report on the Chinese initiative. After analyzing the content, way of narration, length of the reporting, attitude in the reporting and the nature of reportage on the Chinese OBOR Initiative, we found out that most of the reporting can be categorized into following three sections:

BCIM EC: Since the announcement of OBOR initiative by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, Indian and Chinese both have emphasized on the BCIM EC. Indian media have reported profusely in this section. Although this initiative has been initiated much before OBOR initiative, in recent two years, this section of OBOR got a strong push. This was the main reason for widespread media attention. Both the above mentioned two print media have done more or less positive reporting on this section of OBOR as its success is connected to India's success.

CPEC: Since the moment when news of Chinese investment in Pakistan broke out, it became a topic of discussion in Indian print and electronic media. With the announcement of OBOR in 2013 and later the announcement of CPEC section during visit of Pakistan's President to China (February, 2014), it became a flashing news in Indian Media. In February itself, *The Hindu* has widely covered visit of Pakistan's President to China and the outcome of second meetings of the Joint Cooperation Committee on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. *The Hindu* reported, "China says, Economic corridor with Pakistan on, ignoring raising threat of terrorism in the proposed areas." (18th February, 2104). Report also quoted Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying stating, "The relevant cooperation is not directed at a third party, and it will have no detriment to the relevant parties' position on the [Kashmir] issue." Since China conformed about her plan of massive investment in economic corridors, India embarked on a series of diplomatic protests as reported by Indian media. First, the then India's Foreign Secretary Sujata Singh while meeting with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in April, 2014, lodged a formal complain about Chinese project traversing through the disputed territory. Again while official visit of Indian Vice-President in June, 2014, was on, India lodged official complaint. Chinese President visited Pakistan in April, 2015. It also became a bone of contention between the Indian and Chinese government. Indian government have formally conveyed dissatisfaction over this section of OBOR initiative through many diplomatic channels. Indian print media reporting on CPEC is quite intense given India's outright opposition to this section of Chinese project while completely ignoring China's official position on CPEC. *The Hindu* and *The Times of India* have been reporting on Chinese presence in disputed territory between India and Pakistan and Chinese investment which has been a cause of concern for Indian Government again doing negative reporting. From late 2013 till 2015, there were some few dozens of reportage that appeared in both the newspapers collectively ranging from raw information to strategic analysis of the project. They also repeatedly reported India's opposition to the project and Chinese response to them. According to these reports, CPEC Project got official stamp from the Chinese Government during the state visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Pakistan in April, 2015. Besides these Indian formal protests, these newspapers have also reported Chinese expert view about the project asking India not to be over worried on the Chinese project as China also maintain warm relationship with India and this project won't alter Chinese official position on Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan. Indian strategists and foreign experts have written long editorials on the subject analyzing its impact on India's interest and long term geo-strategic implications. Of-course they have also criticized huge Chinese investment and utter neglect of Indian sensitivities which is not entirely true given the positive spirit of OBOR initiative.

Maritime Silk Road: Indian print media has also done considerable amount of reporting on the Maritime Silk Road since it was offered to India in February, 2014. Maritime Silk Road became a topic of intense debate in Indian strategic circle because many people think it would have a deep impact on the Indian interest in the Indian Ocean and Asia Pacific at large. Indian Ocean is considered as India's sphere of influence and India should have bigger say in this region. Given India's inability to project its influence and its own domestic and international issues, China have taken lead in projecting her own ambitious project in the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean. Under Maritime Silk Road, China would construct ports and infrastructure that had become a topic of intense debate in Indian print media. India's basic concern on the Maritime Silk Road is connected to the huge Chinese investment in Sri Lanka which were being highlighted by Indian media as strategic asset of China, that again goes against the spirit of globalization and China's effort to bring development in Asia and help realize Asian dream.

On the basis of the content analysis and the ideas extracted from their narration and attitude depicted in some editorials, we found out that these reporting can be categorized into following three sections:

Strategic: All the Indian news reporting on the OBOR can be summarized as more strategic rather than economic and policy initiative. Since India has always been wary of Chinese strategic assets in and around the Indian Ocean, the new push for connectivity and strategic infrastructure development in the Indian Ocean littoral countries make India more critical to such projects. Although Indian government has been showing more restraint in voicing their opinion but the media houses and public intellectuals have voiced their concern more critically. Chinese academia, strategic analysts, even Chinese Ambassador to India have tried to mitigate Indian concern by rightly voicing their idea of development and bringing together world's largest economy. In a report published by *The Hindu* (April 1, 2015), Chinese Ambassador to India Mr. Li had elaborated in detail the Chinese idea of OBOR and why India should join it. Chinese side has often expressed willingness to help Indian side mitigate their concern and bring India on board. Even Chinese side invited India to participate in Sri Lanka port city construction and be a part of economic activities. After going through a critical analysis of their reporting, it seems that India is not willing to play a second fiddle role in Chinese initiative. India's problem is lack of pragmatism that it often shows in their policy drive towards China.

Indian media have also highlighted President Xi's call for a new Asian Security concept that is broadly based on "*Panchsheel*" or "*Five principles of Peaceful Coexistence*". In that positive spirit, India should not be worried about the strategic implication of the OBOR project as China has no such intention. China wanted to have *shared prosperity* for Asia and India should respect and cooperate in China's effort.

Economic: Although Indian print media reporting on OBOR has heavily taken strategic color but there are some who have voiced economic aspect of the initiative. Many have vouched for participating in the initiative given the economic benefit that India can reap from the initiative. India needs a huge amount of investment in infrastructure development and expertise that it badly lacks. China appears to be offering very timely all that India requires. Again, given the changed geo-political scenario, India should also change its stand of maintaining

neutrality and always viewing the initiative of other countries through strategic eyes. In a globalized world, India would be successful in gaining economic benefit only if it changes her outlook on such grand initiative and adjusting domestic politics. After the new government took over in India in May 2014, *The Hindu* highlighted PM Modi as a business friendly leader who had visited China many times as the Chief Minister of Gujarat---a western State in India where there is ample Chinese investment, which should be the right approach for molding Indian public perception on the Chinese initiative for the sake of economic development of the region.

Policy: Some serious editorials and opinions published in both *The Hindu* and *The Times of India* have voiced serious policy problems in Indian approach towards China and are cautious about India dealing with China. Some former high level diplomats- cum- scholars had aired their concern in lack of vision on Indian side in dealing with China. China in the 21st century is a changed country with huge economic might with utterly different systems. Given China's complex power projecting initiative, India needs to showcase their imaginative power to harness the benefit and minimizing the loss in her influence in the respective domains. India can neither afford being a part of the initiative nor can be active participant in the initiative given China's solo approach towards crafting and implementing the project. India may opt for middle way to craft her role in this Pan-Asian connectivity. India must bring in some imaginative thinking in her foreign policy regarding China. It is the policy consideration that led India to launch its own *Project Mausam* and *Spice Route Maritime Initiative* which is a good sign as China is willing to merge Silk Road Initiative with the Indian ones.

There are also some intermittent reportings which are indirectly related to OBOR initiative like reporting on Chinese economy and social issues that, after the announcement of OBOR initiative, are being frequently commented upon. We would summarize by saying that having some concerns on such a vast initiative is quite normal but then having a positive attitude should be the core idea to push forward the agenda of mutual cooperation for the sake of greater benefit and media can play a vital role in bridging the divide.

ENDNOTES

1. Accessed on 25 February, 2017 at http://auditbureau.org/Top_Circulations.pdf
2. “*Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*”, Beijing, March 28, 2015, Accessed at http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html; on 25 February 2017.
3. See Para 18 of the *Joint Statement on the State Visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to India* at <http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateraldocuments.htm?dtl/21723/Joint+Statement+on+the+State+Visit+of+Chinese++Li+Keqiang+to+India>; accessed on 25 February, 2017.