

De-Westernising China's Global Image: A Discourse Analysis of Muslim Intellectual Elite Narratives on the Belt and Road Initiative

Habibullah^{1*}, Gobinathan Manickam¹, and Ireene Leoncio²

¹*School of Marketing and Management (Media and Communication), Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation, Jalan Teknologi 5, Taman Teknologi Malaysia, 57000 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

²*School of Marketing and Management, Varna University of Management, Varna Center Odesos, ul. "Oborishte" 13A, 9000 Varna, Bulgaria*

ABSTRACT

This study examines how China's global image is constructed in Muslim intellectual elite discourse, with reference to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Addressing the Western-centric bias in existing research, the study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytical approach, integrating thematic analysis, framing analysis, and elements of critical discourse analysis. Drawing on a corpus of elite-authored texts (2015-2020), the findings identify five key thematic frames: economic prosperity, geostrategic interdependence, Sino-U.S. policy comparison, political stability, and regional security concerns, organised through two dominant discursive logics: economic pragmatism and moderated geopolitical framing. The analysis shows that China is primarily constructed as a development-oriented partner, with economic utility serving as the principal evaluative lens, while geopolitical concerns remain secondary and contextually negotiated. The study contributes to the literature by clarifying the distinction between perception, image, and discourse, advancing de-Westernised perspectives in global communication research within a discourse-analytical framework and a constructivist understanding of national image formation. Although limited to English-language elite texts, the findings provide important insights into context-specific constructions of China's image in the Muslim world.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China image, economic diplomacy, elite discourse, framing, soft power

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E-mail addresses:
diy16@tsinghua.org.cn (Habibullah)
gobinathan@apu.edu.my (Gobinathan Manickam)
Ireene.leoncio@vum.bg (Irene Leoncio)

* Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

China's growing global influence, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has intensified scholarly interest in its international image and soft power.

However, existing research remains largely Western-centric, relying predominantly on survey-based studies and elite discourse from Europe and North America. These studies often frame China's rise in terms of geopolitical competition and strategic concern, offering a partial understanding of its global image.

In contrast, the Muslim world represents a strategically significant yet underexplored context. Many Muslim-majority countries are key participants in the BRI, yet their perspectives remain insufficiently examined in the literature. Furthermore, existing studies frequently conflate the concepts of perception, image, and discourse, leading to conceptual ambiguity and overgeneralisation.

This study addresses these gaps by examining Muslim intellectual elite discourse as a site of image construction. It shifts the focus from measuring perception to analysing discourse as an observable and structured form of meaning-making. The study is guided by three research questions: (RQ1) how China's image is constructed in Muslim elite discourse; (RQ2) what dominant discursive frames shape this construction; and (RQ3) how these frames differ from prevailing Western narratives.

This study examines how China's image is discursively constructed within Muslim elite texts by identifying dominant frames and interpretive logics, rather than measuring public perception. It argues that China's image is not uniformly constructed but emerges through context-specific and negotiated discursive logics, primarily

economic pragmatism alongside moderated geopolitical awareness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Perception to Discursive Construction of China's Global Image

Scholarship on country image has traditionally been dominated by perception-based approaches, which conceptualise national image as an aggregate of public attitudes measurable through survey instruments (Anholt, 2008). Foundational work by Joseph Nye situates national image within the broader framework of soft power, emphasising the role of culture, political values, and foreign policy in shaping how countries are viewed internationally (Nye, 2004). Empirically, large-scale surveys conducted by the Pew Research Centre and the Global Attitudes and Trends (GAT) project have played a central role in measuring China's global image, particularly across Western and developed contexts.

These studies reveal important trends, including a gradual decline in favourable perceptions of China across advanced democracies (Xie & Jin, 2022). Similarly, policy-oriented analyses by the Mercator Institute for China Studies highlight structural challenges affecting China's global reputation, including concerns related to governance, transparency, and media freedom (Drinhausen, 2023). While such contributions are empirically valuable, they suffer from two fundamental limitations. First, they are geographically skewed, privileging Western perspectives and thereby marginalising non-Western viewpoints.

Second, they rely heavily on attitudinal measurement, reducing country image to aggregated perceptions and overlooking the processes through which meanings are constructed.

As Kaneva (2011) argues, such approaches risk methodological individualism by neglecting the role of discourse, power, and institutional contexts in shaping national images. Consequently, existing research remains both epistemologically and geographically limited, leaving significant gaps in understanding how China's image is constructed in non-Western settings, particularly within Muslim-majority societies.

To address these limitations, recent scholarship has increasingly adopted discursive and constructivist approaches, emphasising that country image is not merely perceived but actively produced and negotiated through communication processes (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA), particularly the work of Norman Fairclough, discourse is conceptualised as both reflective and constitutive of social reality (Fairclough, 1995). From this perspective, media narratives, policy texts, and elite commentaries function as key sites where meanings about nations are constructed, shaped by power relations, ideological positioning, and institutional contexts. Accordingly, this study shifts the analytical focus from measuring "perception" to examining discursive constructions of China's image, thereby responding directly to a critical gap in the literature.

Building on this discursive turn, it becomes essential to situate China's image within the broader material and strategic context of its global engagement, particularly its economic diplomacy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China's Economic Diplomacy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

China's transformation into a global economic power has been widely interpreted through the lens of economic diplomacy and soft power projection. Early analyses by Kurlantzick (2007) characterise China's rise as driven by non-coercive engagement, development-oriented cooperation, and pragmatic diplomacy, while Wenzhao (2016) highlights the "peaceful rise" doctrine as a guiding principle emphasising collaboration rather than confrontation. Together, these perspectives frame China as an actor seeking to expand its global influence primarily through economic integration and infrastructural development.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents the most prominent manifestation of this strategy. As documented by Li (2017), the initiative was articulated through key speeches delivered by President Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, proposing the development of both the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The geographical context of these announcements, particularly their linkage to regions with significant Muslim populations, highlights the strategic importance of the Muslim world within China's global vision.

From a developmental perspective, the BRI has been framed as a platform for infrastructure development, trade connectivity, and regional integration (Huang, 2016). However, the meaning and implications of the BRI are not fixed; rather, they are shaped by divergent interpretations across geopolitical and intellectual contexts. This variability necessitates a closer examination of how such narratives are constructed and negotiated within specific discursive environments.

Competing Global Narratives: Cooperation and Geopolitical Contestation

The literature on the BRI reveals a contested discursive field, characterised by competing narratives reflecting broader geopolitical and ideological divides. On the one hand, Chinese and many Global South perspectives emphasise the developmental and cooperative dimensions of the initiative. Within this framework, the BRI is presented as a mechanism for fostering economic integration, enhancing connectivity, and promoting mutual benefit. It is often linked to China's broader vision of building a "community of shared future for mankind" (Zhang, 2018), which frames development as a collective and inclusive process (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2017).

On the other hand, a substantial body of Western scholarship interprets the BRI through a geopolitical and security-oriented lens. Scholars such as Mosher (2017) and Godement (2015) argue that China's

expanding economic engagement reflects broader strategic ambitions to reshape global power structures. Others often situate the BRI within geopolitical competition, raising concerns about strategic influence, debt dependency, and expansionism (Jones & Zeng, 2019; Rolland, 2017). Policy analyses further reinforce this perspective, with Europe increasingly characterising China as a systemic rival (Valášek, 2019), while U.S.-based analysts interpret the BRI as a tool of geopolitical influence and strategic competition (Haenle, 2019; Spalding, 2019). These interpretations are often informed by political economy and postcolonial critiques, which frame the BRI as a potential form of neo-colonial expansion.

A growing body of work examines how China's image is constructed through media and elite discourse (Shi, 2015; Zhang, 2017). These studies emphasise that China's image is context-dependent, varying across regions and actors. Importantly, the apparent dichotomy between "Chinese optimism" and "Western scepticism" is often overstated. The literature is internally diverse, and interpretations vary significantly across contexts.

Importantly, these perspectives should not be treated as mutually exclusive or universally accepted. Rather, they represent competing discursive frameworks that shape how China's role is interpreted across different contexts. This divergence underscores the need to move beyond binary representations and instead examine how such narratives are rearticulated within non-Western

discursive spaces, particularly within Muslim intellectual discourse, thereby addressing the question of epistemic imbalance and the need for de-Westernising perspectives in global communication research.

De-Westernisation and Epistemic Rebalancing

The dominance of Western perspectives in global communication research has generated increasing calls for de-Westernisation, an approach rooted in postcolonial theory, particularly the work of Edward Said (Said, 1978). De-Westernisation seeks to broaden the epistemological and geographical scope of scholarship by incorporating perspectives from the Global South and challenging the assumed universality of Western frameworks (Curran & Park, 2000).

In the context of China's global image, this perspective is particularly relevant, as Western geopolitical concerns and media systems often shape dominant narratives. Examining discourse within Muslim-majority contexts, therefore, provides an opportunity to uncover alternative interpretive frameworks, which may prioritise development, sovereignty, and regional cooperation over security-centric narratives. Crucially, de-Westernisation does not imply normative alignment with China's policies; rather, it facilitates a more pluralistic and context-sensitive understanding of global communication processes. To operationalise this perspective, it is necessary to focus on actors who actively produce and circulate such discourses; namely, intellectual elites.

Elite Discourse as a Site of Image Construction

A growing body of scholarship conceptualises elite discourse as a critical site for understanding the construction of national image. As Wang (2011) argues, elite narratives provide insight into how nations are interpreted within policy, academic, and media spheres. Similarly, Fan (2008) highlights the role of elites as discursive gatekeepers who shape both media representation and public understanding.

Building on framing theory, particularly the work of Robert Entman, elite discourse operates through processes of selection, emphasis, and interpretation, structuring how issues are understood and evaluated (Entman, 1993). Furthermore, as noted by Rusciano et al. (1997) and Entman (2008), elite discourse is not merely reflective but constitutive, actively shaping communication environments and influencing broader public narratives.

In this context, analysing elite discourse enables a deeper understanding of how China's image is constructed within influential intellectual circles. It also allows the study to move beyond the limitations of survey-based approaches, which are predominantly Western-centric and insufficient for capturing the complex, context-dependent processes of meaning-making.

Research Gap, Questions, and Contribution

Despite extensive scholarship, significant gaps persist. Existing research remains

heavily skewed toward Western perspectives, relies predominantly on survey-based methodologies, and often conflates key concepts such as perception, image, and discourse. Moreover, Muslim-majority contexts remain underexplored, and there is limited integration of discourse analysis, framing theory, and soft power perspectives.

Addressing these gaps requires a focused empirical investigation guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1 : How is China’s global image constructed in Muslim elite discourse?
- RQ2 : What dominant frames (economic pragmatism vs. securitised framing) structure this discourse?
- RQ3 : How do these frames differ from dominant Western narratives?

By shifting the analytical focus from perception to discourse, this study offers a novel and theoretically grounded approach to understanding China’s global image. It contributes to the literature by examining Muslim intellectual elite discourse, an underexplored domain, and by integrating critical discourse analysis, framing theory, and soft power perspectives

within a de-Westernised framework. In doing so, it advances a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of global communication and international image construction.

METHODOLOGY

To examine how China’s global image is discursively constructed within Muslim elite texts, this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA) and framing analysis. Rather than measuring public opinion through survey-based methods, the study conceptualises texts as sites of discursive production, where meanings, narratives, and ideological positions are constructed and circulated.

In pursuit of this, the authors collected and analysed data using a rigorous research design, as shown in Figure 1, which is elaborated under the following headings.

Research Design

The analytical approach is informed by CDA, particularly the work of Norman Fairclough, which treats discourse as both reflective and constitutive of social reality.

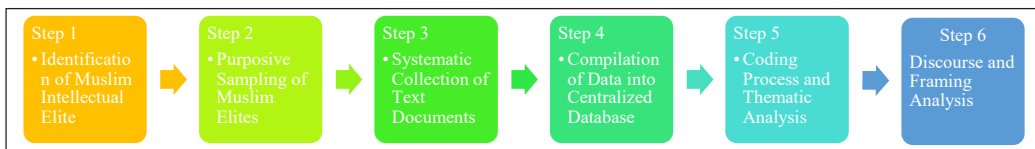


Figure 1. Overview of research design

This is complemented by framing theory as developed by Robert Entman, enabling the identification of interpretive structures through which China is evaluated and positioned.

While the study is fully qualitative, it incorporates systematic coding procedures supported by NVivo (Version 14) to enhance transparency and auditability. These computational tools assist in data organisation and pattern detection but do not substitute interpretive analysis. Accordingly, the study is best characterised as a qualitative discourse-analytical design with systematic analytical support.

Conceptual Scope and Analytical Focus

A key methodological clarification lies in distinguishing between three related but analytically distinct concepts:

Perception: refers to internal cognitive or attitudinal states (not directly observable here)

Image: denotes the broader symbolic representation of a country across narratives

Discourse: The textual and communicative construction of meaning by identifiable actors

The study focuses explicitly on elite discourse, not public perception. Accordingly, it analyses how China is represented, framed, and positioned in elite texts rather than claiming to measure societal attitudes.

Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

Data collection followed a two-stage process combining iterative web-based discovery and purposive sampling.

An initial corpus was generated through a structured web-crawling procedure inspired by random-walk logic (Becchetti et al., 2006), allowing for the identification of interconnected elite-authored texts across institutional platforms. This process yielded an initial pool of 50 texts authored by 22 identifiable intellectual elites. Subsequently, purposive sampling was applied to construct a theoretically relevant dataset. The final analytic corpus consists of 27 texts, selected based on clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria

a) texts authored by identifiable “intellectual elites” (academics, think-tank researchers, senior journalists/columnists, policy analysts, or named government officials); b) explicitly discusses China and/or the BRI in the context of the author’s country or region (i.e., the content addresses China’s image, BRI projects, or China-related policy implications); c) published between the set timeframe; d) accessible in English or in an official English translation; and e) available in a stable public source (not behind a paywall or broken link).

Exclusion Criteria

a) duplicate or near-duplicate content (same text republished across outlets without substantive difference); b) non-elite

authorship (individuals lacking institutional affiliation or identifiable expertise); c) off-topic pieces not addressing China/BRI discourses (e.g., pure trade statistics, unrelated local news); d) paywalled or inaccessible content at the time of collection; e) short items (<200 words) that did not contain substantive opinion/analysis; and f) unattributed opinion pieces or anonymous blog posts. The mentioned criteria are broken down in the audit trail (Figure 2), illustrating the multi-stage screening process used to identify the final analytic corpus from the initial document pool.

Ensuring Stability of Elite Perspectives

To ensure that the analysis captured stable elite perspectives, we selected texts from analytical genres: policy briefs, commentaries, and strategic essays; and confirmed that each author’s argumentation aligned with their broader publication record. NVivo checks showed consistent orientations among repeat authors, indicating that the included materials reflected sustained positions rather than episodic or reactive views.

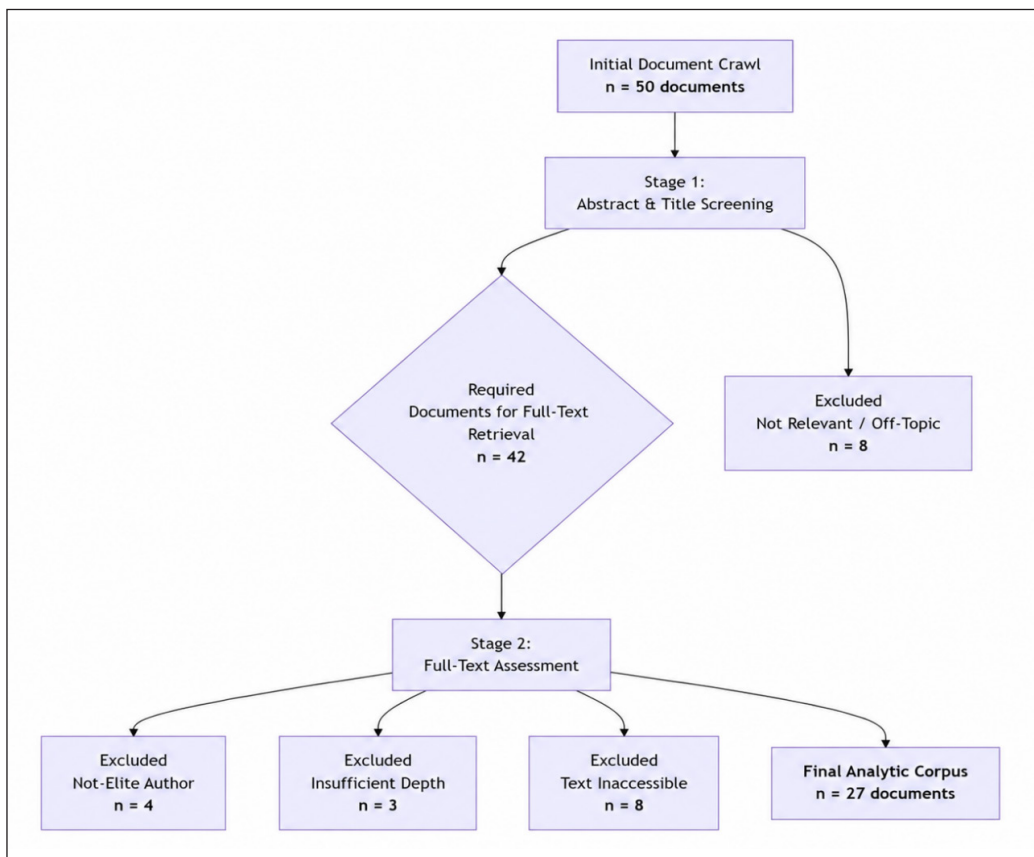


Figure 2. Data selection and filtering process

Crawl Configuration and Pilot Validation: Link Verification and Textual Integrity Procedures

Web-crawling parameters were set after pilot testing alternative configurations. Shallower settings produced overly narrow, seed-constrained outputs, while deeper or unlimited crawls yielded large volumes of irrelevant or outdated material. The final settings (crawl depth four; up to five outbound links) offered the best balance, generating a diverse but thematically coherent corpus. Link integrity was maintained by verifying URL stability, consulting cached archives for dead links, and excluding any item that was retracted, substantially revised, or unrecoverable.

Seed Site Selection and Representativeness: Screening for Authorship Authenticity and Coordinated Messaging

Seed pages, drawn from major national newspapers, regional think tanks, university policy centres, and BRI-focused portals across the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia (details in Appendix A), were chosen to capture diverse political regimes and media systems while ensuring consistent publication of elite, institutionally grounded commentary. Authorial elite status was confirmed through authenticated institutional affiliations using official profiles, academic databases, and cross-verified professional listings; those lacking verifiable ties were excluded. Risks of coordinated or ghost-written material were mitigated through authorship verification, stylistic variation checks,

and cross-system comparisons, none of which revealed evidence of templated or synchronised framing.

Language Scope and Translation Quality

Because the study relied on publicly accessible English-language texts, including English originals and verified official translations, the sample reflects intentionally oriented elites. Vernacular-only commentary in Arabic, Farsi, Bahasa Indonesia/Melayu, Urdu, and Central Asian languages, which may contain more locally grounded or critical views, could not be included. Translation quality was ensured through terminological consistency checks and cross-sentence coherence; any text with unverifiable translation accuracy was excluded.

Unit of Analysis and Sensitivity Testing

The paragraph was selected as the unit of analysis, as it represents a coherent unit of meaning within discourse, allowing for the identification of framing devices, evaluative language, and narrative positioning. Sensitivity testing confirmed that sentence-level coding fragmented meaning, while larger units obscured discursive nuance.

Coding Reliability and Validation: Reproducibility and Data Transparency

To assess analytical reliability, 10% of the corpus was manually re-coded independently of NVivo. Agreement reached 93%, with minor discrepancies confined to subtheme boundaries, confirming the stability of the

thematic structure. For transparency and replicability, the seed list, crawl settings, inclusion and exclusion criteria, full corpus URLs, and complete codebook and coder matrices are provided as supplementary materials and through an OSF repository.

Ethical Considerations

All material analysed consisted of publicly available texts authored by identifiable public intellectuals writing in open-access environments, and no human subjects are directly involved. Under scholarly fair-use norms, additional consent was not required; nevertheless, all NVivo-coded identifiers were anonymised, and only institutionally attributed authors were included to avoid unintended use of private individuals' content. Further ethical practices included accurate representation of authors' arguments and avoidance of selective quotation.

Data Analysis Method

The analysis integrates thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and framing analysis. The thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006), assisted with NVivo, was used to identify patterns and final themes out of the data corpus. Accordingly, the authors employed a structured coding scheme, from raw data to theme generation, involving the following steps:

Coding Procedure and Inter-coder Reliability

Familiarisation. Immersed in the data by reading transcripts repeatedly to understand content and context.

Initial Coding. Generated preliminary codes using NVivo 14 by labelling relevant data segments without predefined categories.

Code Refinement. Reviewed and merged overlapping codes; refined definitions and boundaries for clarity.

Pilot Coding and ICR. To ensure coding consistency, a second independent coder analysed 20% of the corpus using the NVivo 14 software. Cohen's Kappa coefficient was calculated to assess agreement between coders. The analysis yielded a Cohen's Kappa of 0.82, indicating strong agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Additionally, we report raw Kappa (0.82), PABAK (0.89), 95% CI, and include a coder-by-code contingency matrix in Appendix B. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus; unresolved items were adjudicated by the senior author, resulting in the refinement of the codebook and improved coding consistency for the remaining data.

Codebook Development. Developed a detailed codebook documenting each code's name, definition, and example quotes. The codebook documents how lower-level codes were aggregated into the five higher-level themes (see Appendix C). The codebook evolution is demonstrated in the detailed code-merging and code-dropping table in Appendix D.

Full Coding. Applied the finalised codebook to the entire dataset using NVivo 14, ensuring consistency across transcripts.

Theme Generation. Grouped related codes into broader themes representing patterns in the data, iteratively refining through team discussions.

Discourse and Framing Analysis. Beyond thematic identification, the study examined:

Dominant Frames - economic pragmatism and geopolitical/securitised framing

Narrative Structures - how China is positioned in global systems

Discursive Logics - developmental cooperation vs strategic competition

This approach enables interpretive depth, moving beyond frequency counts toward meaning construction and ideological positioning (see evidence trail Figure 3).

Use of QSR NVivo (Version 14)

To add rigour and more accuracy to the handling of data, the coders used QSR NVivo (version 14) to organise the coding process and generate visualisations such as word clouds and thematic charts. Using NVivo's Word Frequency Query function, the analysis systematically identified recurrent terms across the dataset and produced a word cloud visualisation (Figure 4), highlighting prominent keywords such as BRI, China image, economic development, and Muslim world.

Internal Consistency and Codebook Stability: Preventing Frequency Artefacts

The thematic structure demonstrated strong internal coherence. Iterative refinement of the codebook, merging overlapping categories and removing low-frequency items, ensured conceptual clarity.

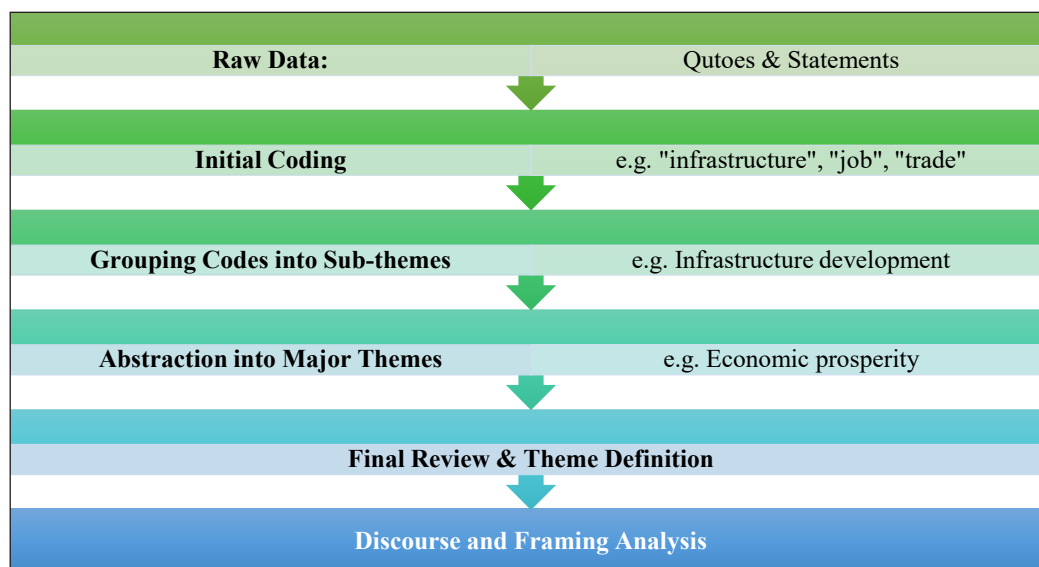


Figure 3. Evidence trail from raw data to theme generation to interpretive analysis

that these themes are organised through two overarching discursive logics: economic pragmatism and geopolitical/securitised framing, which together structure how China is understood, evaluated, and positioned within Muslim elite discourse.

These discursive logics are not mutually exclusive; rather, they coexist in a dynamic relationship, shaping a hybrid narrative in which economic opportunity is foregrounded while geopolitical awareness remains present but moderated. This layered structure indicates that elite discourse does not simply reflect opinion but actively constructs meaning through context-dependent interpretive frameworks.

Economic Pragmatism as the Dominant Interpretive Frame

Across the dataset, the most salient and structurally dominant logic is that of economic pragmatism. While the framing of economic prosperity accounts for approximately 40% of all coded references, its analytical significance extends beyond its numerical prominence. It functions as the primary lens through which other dimensions of China's engagement are interpreted, effectively anchoring the broader discursive construction of China's image.

Within this framework, China is consistently represented as a development-oriented partner whose value lies in its capacity to deliver tangible economic outcomes. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is framed as a transformative mechanism for infrastructure development,

trade expansion, and regional connectivity. For instance, Mahmood (2016) characterises the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as an opportunity to promote an "economics of peace," linking economic integration with broader regional stability. Similarly, Rahman (2016) describes the BRI as a "window of opportunity" for Bangladesh, while policy discourse in Iraq emphasises its potential to address post-conflict reconstruction needs (Al-Bayan Centre, 2018). These representations collectively construct China not merely as an investor, but as a systemic enabler of long-term development trajectories.

This pragmatic framing extends to the micro-level, where employment generation and local economic benefits are emphasised as key indicators of China's positive role. Afghan and Central Asian perspectives highlight the potential for job creation and human development, with Khalil (2016) underscoring the transformative possibilities of the "Great Silk Road." Similarly, Garibov (2018) points to the promise of large-scale investments in Central Asia, while Al-Awar (2017) frames economic cooperation with China as a safeguard against future financial instability. Such narratives reveal a utilitarian mode of evaluation in which China's legitimacy is derived from its constructed capacity to produce measurable socio-economic benefits.

The discourse on trade facilitation and regional integration further reinforces this logic. Scholars from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Southeast Asia interpret the BRI as a strategic opportunity to reposition their economies within global trade networks.

For example, Tago (2016) links the BRI to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, emphasising its role in economic diversification, while Sensoy (2016) highlights Turkey's geostrategic position as a gateway between Europe and Asia. These perspectives illustrate that economic pragmatism is not merely reactive but actively appropriated by local actors as a means of advancing national development agendas.

Interpretive Implications

This economic framing reflects a developmentalist epistemology characteristic of Global South discourse, where material benefits outweigh ideological concerns and foreign policy is evaluated through instrumental rationality. Such representations align with scholarship on soft power as context-dependent attraction (Nye, 2004) and strategic economic communication (Anholt, 2008).

Interdependence and Spatial Reconfiguration Framework

Closely linked to economic pragmatism is the theme of interdependence, which accounts for approximately 22% of the discourse. This framing situates economic cooperation within a broader spatial and geopolitical context, emphasising the mutual dependence between China and Muslim-majority regions.

Elite narratives consistently frame Muslim geography as integral to the success of the BRI, highlighting the strategic importance of countries such as Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and Kazakhstan.

For instance, Ahmadian (2016) portrays Iran as a critical transcontinental bridge, while Al-Naggar (2016) emphasises the centrality of the Suez Canal in facilitating Chinese trade. Similarly, Kukeyeva et al. (2019) underscore Kazakhstan's role as a geo-economic hub at the intersection of major trade routes. These representations reconfigure Muslim-majority regions from peripheral actors into central nodes within global connectivity networks.

This discourse also reflects a broader shift from dependency narratives toward mutual embeddedness. Rather than portraying engagement with China as asymmetrical, elites emphasise reciprocal benefits, wherein China relies on geographic access while partner states leverage their strategic positioning. Kurbanov (2018) captures this transformation by suggesting that the BRI has the potential to convert Central Asia from a landlocked region into a continental bridge for global trade. Likewise, Hamaizia (2020) frames Algeria's participation in the BRI as a means of advancing economic diversification through geostrategic positioning. In this way, interdependence is not merely descriptive but constitutes a discursive strategy for asserting agency within global economic restructuring.

Interdependence as Reciprocal Framing and Distribution of Agency

This theme reinforces a reciprocal narrative, where China requires geographic access and Muslim regions leverage strategic positioning for development.

Such framing challenges dependency narratives and aligns with theories of agency in Global South international relations (Rusciano et al., 1997). A key discursive feature is the active positioning of Muslim-majority countries as not passive recipients but as strategic actors negotiating engagement.

Sino–U.S. Comparison and Discursive Differentiation

The comparison between China and the United States, which appears in approximately 19% of the dataset, introduces a critical evaluative dimension to the discourse. Through this comparative framing, China's image is constructed relationally rather than in isolation.

Muslim intellectual elites frequently position China as a non-interventionist alternative to Western powers, emphasising its commitment to sovereignty and economic cooperation. Al-Naggar (2016), for instance, contrasts China's "peaceful cooperation" with what is articulated as Western hegemonic intervention. This framing reinforces the broader logic of economic pragmatism by aligning China with development-oriented engagement rather than ideological imposition. However, the comparative discourse does not amount to uncritical endorsement. Instead, it reflects a nuanced and context-dependent evaluation in which Western critiques are acknowledged but not fully internalised. Variations in tone are influenced by elite training backgrounds: Western-educated scholars tend to adopt more balanced

positions, whereas regionally grounded or China-linked elites emphasise developmental benefits and non-interference. Despite these differences, the presence of Sino-U.S. comparison across all groups indicates that it functions as a shared discursive reference point for interpreting China's global role.

Hybrid Securitisation

Unlike dominant Western narratives that frame China as a strategic threat, securitisation in this dataset is attenuated and conditional. Elite texts acknowledge geopolitical risks, situate them within broader economic benefits, and avoid framing China as an existential threat. This results in a hybrid discourse, where pragmatism moderates securitisation and opportunity coexists with caution.

Political Stability as an Extension of Developmental Logic

Although less frequently mentioned, the discourse of political stability plays a significant interpretive role within the dataset. Representing approximately 11% of coded references, it is closely intertwined with economic narratives, reinforcing the idea that development and stability are mutually constitutive.

China is often constructed as a neutral and pragmatic actor capable of mediating conflicts without direct intervention. Milani (2016) highlights China's potential to act as a mediator in the Middle East, attributing this role to its non-interventionist foreign policy. This narrative contrasts with representations of Western powers as interventionist and politically intrusive.

At the same time, economic interdependence is framed as a mechanism for conflict mitigation. Zaidi (2017) suggests that projects such as CPEC could foster cooperation and reduce tensions in South Asia by creating shared economic interests. Similarly, Afghan perspectives emphasise the role of regional connectivity in promoting long-term stability (Rabbani, 2016). These narratives illustrate how political stability is discursively constructed as an extension of economic pragmatism, rather than as an independent domain.

Geopolitical Concerns and the Managed Securitisation of China

The South China Sea (SCS) theme, though representing only 7% of references, provides important insight into the presence of geopolitical and securitised framing within the discourse. Unlike economic narratives, which are broadly positive, this discourse introduces elements of caution and strategic concern.

Scholars from Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, highlight the risks posed by unresolved territorial disputes to regional stability and trade. Sukam (2016) emphasises that the success of the BRI depends on resolving such tensions, while Wanandi (2018) underscores the potential role of ASEAN in mediating disputes. However, these concerns do not translate into full securitisation. Instead, they are contextualised within broader economic considerations, resulting in a moderated or “managed” form of geopolitical awareness.

Geographical variation plays a significant role in shaping these perspectives.

Coastal states exhibit stronger concerns due to their proximity to contested areas, whereas inland regions display minimal engagement with the issue. This pattern suggests that securitised narratives are conditioned by spatial proximity and strategic exposure rather than being uniformly distributed across the Muslim world.

Narrative Construction and the Coexistence of Interpretive Frames

Across the dataset, China’s image is constructed through a set of overlapping narratives that reflect both opportunity and constraint. On one level, China is portrayed as a development partner facilitating economic growth and connectivity. On the other hand, it is recognised as a strategic actor with long-term geopolitical ambitions. These narratives coexist in a productive tension, where economic opportunity often tempers strategic concern. This duality underscores the non-monolithic nature of elite discourse. Rather than aligning uniformly with either positive or negative evaluations, elites engage in a process of negotiation, balancing potential benefits against framed risks. The resulting image of China is therefore relational, contingent, and shaped by context-specific priorities.

Agency and Strategic Positioning

A notable feature of the discourse is the distribution of agency between China and Muslim-majority countries. While China is consistently represented as proactive and strategically capable, partner states are not depicted as passive recipients.

Instead, they are framed as active agents capable of negotiating, adapting, and strategically engaging with China's initiatives. This construction challenges conventional dependency narratives by emphasising the capacity of Global South actors to shape the terms of engagement. It reflects a broader shift toward recognising the agency of recipient countries within global economic processes.

Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that China's image within Muslim elite discourse is constructed through a complex interplay of economic pragmatism and moderated geopolitical awareness. Economic considerations provide the primary interpretive framework, while security concerns remain present but secondary. This results in a hybrid discourse characterised by strategic engagement, contextual evaluation, and negotiated meaning. Importantly, these findings reflect elite discursive tendencies rather than generalised public perception. They highlight the role of intellectual elites as key intermediaries in shaping how global power dynamics are interpreted and communicated within specific socio-political contexts.

Frequency Distribution of Muslim Discourses by Thematic Frames and Regions

The frequency analysis of the dataset ($n = 27$) by thematic frames and region helped deepen understanding of how the BRI was constructed across regions within the global Muslim community.

Distribution of Thematic Frames of the Discourses

The distribution of thematic frames of Muslim discourses provides insight into how local contexts influence perspectives toward China's image through the BRI.

Among the elite discourse constructs, the most frequently mentioned was the economic aspect of the BRI, with a total of 11 mentions (40%). This was followed by the BRI's interdependence with Muslim-majority regions, receiving 6 mentions (22%), and the Sino-U.S. policy comparisons with 5 mentions (19%). Comparatively, themes related to political stability and the SCS issue were less prominent, receiving 3 (11%) and 2 (7%) mentions, respectively, as illustrated in Figure 5.

The statistics suggest that most Muslim intellectuals are particularly interested in the economic opportunities offered by the BRI, given its potential to drive development in their strategically significant regions. The strong focus on the economic dimensions reflects a common desire among Muslim countries to capitalise on the economic benefits offered by China's infrastructure projects. Similarly, the notable emphasis on BRI's interdependence with Muslim geography and Sino-U.S. policy comparisons indicates the scholars' aspirations to leverage their geographic significance to achieve socio-economic progress and political stability, preferring soft to hard power.

Another considerable focus on political themes manifests the Muslim expectations associated with the BRI for the prospective political stability in their countries.

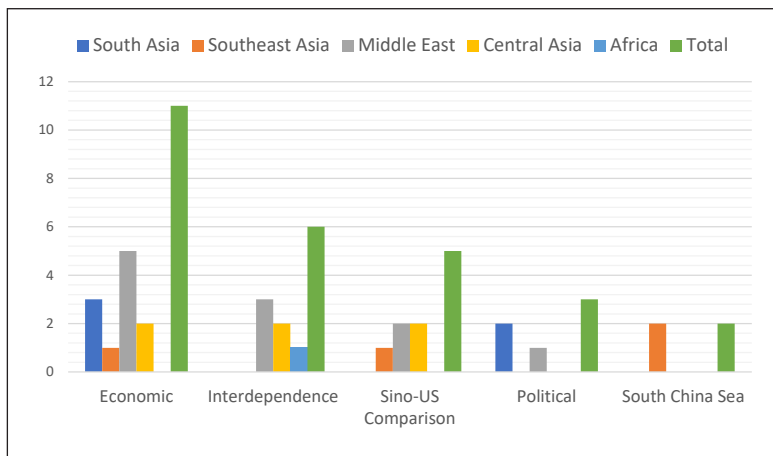


Figure 5. Frequency distribution of Muslims' discourses by themes

Relatively, the lower emphasis on the SCS issue shows the smaller number of Muslim states involved in the dispute. Although less frequently mentioned, the concern persists with certain scholars, given the regional security and global power dynamics.

Frequency Distribution of Muslim Discourses by Regions

Assessing the distribution of Muslim perspectives on the BRI by region, Figure 6 shows that the largest proportion of views comes from the Middle East, accounting for 41% of the total discourse. This reflects the region's high concentration of Muslim-majority states, many of which are eager to engage with the BRI for both economic development and political stability, particularly Iraq, Iran, and Egypt, which portrayed the initiative as a potential vehicle for economic prosperity and political stability.

South Asia and Central Asia account for the second and the third highest proportion of views, contributing 22% and 18% of the

total, respectively, though the interests of scholars in these regions diverge somewhat. The scholars from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan tend to focus on the economic and geopolitical aspects of the BRI, emphasising the significance of its two crucial corridors: CPEC and CMIB, framed as a gateway to regional connectivity, peace, and prosperity. On the other hand, the intellectuals from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan exhibit a keen interest in comparing Sino-U.S. policies, with a noticeable inclination toward China's non-interventionist approach. This may be attributed to China's growing economic and political influence in Central Asia, particularly through its infrastructure investments and energy partnerships under the BRI.

In the case of Southeast Asia, it contributes 15% of the discourse. The scholars from Brunei and Malaysia are optimistic about China's initiatives, whereas the intellectuals from Indonesia have shown a particular concern about the water disputes.

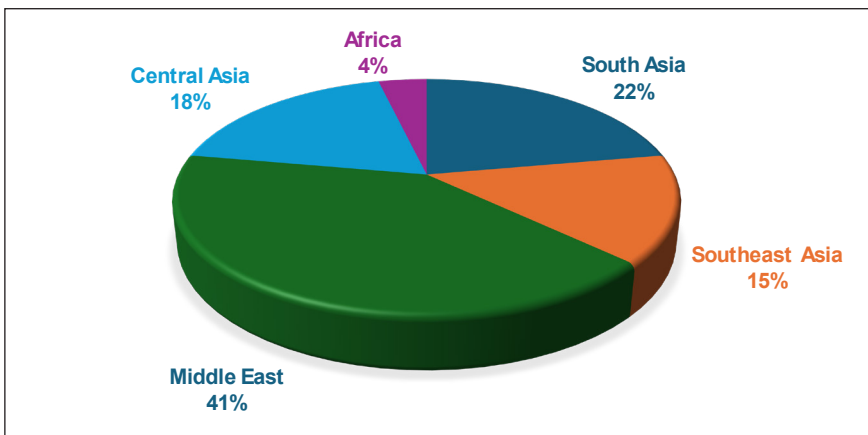


Figure 6. Frequency distribution of Muslims' discourses by region

The emphasis on the SCS by those scholars is likely driven by their proximity to the contested waters and the implications of the China-US rivalry in the region.

The smallest proportion comes from Africa, accounting for only 4%. The Algerian scholar viewed the BRI as a lever for infrastructure development and economic progress. The low statistics from Africa may be attributed to the limited reach of the BRI projects in the region.

The regional distribution of Muslim discourses reflects the varying degrees of engagement and concern with the BRI, shaped by the geopolitical and economic realities of each region.

Regional Variation and Contextual Differentiation

In the final analysis, the regional distribution of discourse reveals significant variation in emphasis and orientation. The Middle East accounts for the largest proportion of texts, with a strong focus on reconstruction and stability. South Asia emphasises

connectivity and economic transformation, particularly through flagship projects such as CPEC. Central Asian discourse is more attuned to geopolitical balancing, while Southeast Asia exhibits heightened sensitivity to security concerns, particularly in relation to the South China Sea. African perspectives, though limited in number, highlight infrastructure development and economic diversification.

These variations reflect the influence of structural factors such as geographic location, economic dependency, and political context. They indicate that China's image is not uniformly constructed but is mediated by local conditions and strategic priorities.

Validation and Robustness of Thematic Frames

Alignment with Real-world Developments

The distribution of thematic frames corresponded closely with observable project dynamics. For example, CPEC optimism aligned with ongoing implementation; Iraq's reconstruction-

oriented expectations mirrored sustained Chinese investment; South China Sea anxieties matched stalled maritime projects in Southeast Asia; and Central Asian enthusiasm reflected expanding rail and connectivity corridors. These convergences suggest that elite discourse is grounded in material developments rather than abstract perceptions alone.

Outlet-type Variation and Author-dominance Checks

Comparisons across outlet types revealed predictable but non-disruptive variation: think-tank texts emphasised geopolitics and interdependence, newspapers foregrounded economic narratives, and government portals consistently highlighted political stability. A robustness test excluding the three most prolific authors showed all five themes persisted with only marginal proportional shifts, indicating that the thematic architecture was not driven by author concentration.

Distinguishing China-focused Views from Domestic Governance Critiques

Coding matrices showed a clear separation between evaluations of China and commentary on domestic political actors. Statements on local governance were coded only when directly tied to China's role, ensuring that the themes reflect narratives about China rather than internal political debates.

Government-affiliated Outlets and Thematic Balance

Government-linked outlets represented under 20% of the corpus. While these

texts placed stronger emphasis on political stability and development, their limited volume prevented them from shaping or homogenising the overall thematic distribution.

Media-system Controls and Cross-regional Convergence

Comparisons across media systems, ranging from highly controlled Gulf and Central Asian environments to more open systems in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Turkey, revealed no evidence of tonal saturation or systematic distortion. Themes appeared consistently across all political contexts, suggesting that elite discourse reflects cross-regional convergence rather than state-driven uniformity.

Country-level Profiles and Structural Exposure

Country profiles (Pakistan, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Iran) showed that thematic emphases aligned with each state's structural exposure to the BRI: debt reliance, infrastructure dependency, and framed risk. National-level contexts thus shaped the tone and focus of elite evaluations.

Temporal Drift Analysis (2015–2020)

Moderate temporal variation was observable across the period. Economic optimism dominated 2015–2017, strategic interdependence intensified in 2018–2019, and the late 2019–2020 saw a modest rise in geopolitical concerns linked to trade tensions and South China Sea disputes.

These shifts indicate changing salience rather than structural transformation.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the results demonstrate that China is primarily constructed through economic pragmatism, whereas geopolitical concerns are present but moderated. Elite discourse produces hybrid, context-dependent narratives, and China is simultaneously viewed as a development partner and strategic actor. Crucially, these findings reflect discursive tendencies within a limited elite sample and should not be generalised beyond this analytical scope.

DISCUSSION

Reframing China's Image: From Themes to Discursive Negotiation

This study set out to examine how China's global image is constructed within Muslim elite discourse, particularly in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Moving beyond descriptive accounts, the findings demonstrate that China's image is not simply "positive" or "negative," but is discursively negotiated through two coexisting logics: economic pragmatism and moderated geopolitical awareness.

This duality advances existing scholarship on soft power by showing that image formation is neither uniform nor ideologically fixed, but instead contingent on context-specific interpretive frameworks. In contrast to dominant Western-centric analyses that foreground Securitisation and threat narratives, Muslim elite discourse

reveals a hybrid evaluative structure, where economic opportunity consistently tempers geopolitical concern.

The Primacy of Economic Pragmatism

A central contribution of this study lies in identifying economic pragmatism as the dominant discursive logic structuring China's image. While prior studies often treat economic perceptions as one dimension among many, the present findings show that economic reasoning functions as the organising principle through which other dimensions are interpreted.

This is evident in the centrality of themes such as infrastructure development, trade connectivity, and employment generation, which collectively frame China as a functional development partner. Importantly, this framing is not merely frequent but structurally dominant; it anchors how geopolitical risks, political implications, and strategic concerns are evaluated.

From a theoretical perspective, this supports and extends soft power theory, suggesting that attraction is not derived solely from cultural or ideological appeal, but also from material and developmental utility. More broadly, the findings reflect a developmentalist epistemology characteristic of Global South contexts, where foreign policy evaluations prioritise tangible outcomes over normative alignment. This challenges universalist assumptions embedded in much of the existing literature on international perception.

Interdependence and the Reconfiguration of Agency

The prominence of interdependence narratives further complicates conventional understandings of China's global engagement. Rather than depicting Muslim-majority countries as passive recipients of Chinese influence, elite discourse consistently positions them as strategic actors leveraging their geo-economic and geopolitical significance.

Instead of reproducing dependency narratives commonly found in Western scholarship, Muslim elite discourse constructs a reciprocal and negotiated relationship, in which partner states are positioned as active agents. This reciprocal framing highlights a key shift in global communication dynamics that agency is distributed rather than centralised. Muslim regions are represented as indispensable to the success of the BRI due to their geographic positioning, natural resources, and connectivity potential. Such representations challenge dependency-based interpretations and instead suggest a model of negotiated interdependence. This finding contributes to broader debates in international communication and political economy by illustrating how peripheral regions actively reinterpret and appropriate global initiatives, rather than merely absorbing them, thereby suggesting that Global South actors are not passive recipients of external influence but strategic participants in shaping engagement. In this sense, China's image is co-constructed

through interaction, rather than unilaterally projected or imposed.

Moderated Securitisation and Contextual Geopolitics

While geopolitical concerns are present, they are notably attenuated and context-dependent. Unlike dominant Western narratives that frame China as a systemic threat, Muslim elite discourse tends to adopt a selective and moderated Securitisation, acknowledging risks without allowing them to dominate the overall evaluative framework.

The Sino-U.S. comparison theme is particularly revealing in this regard. China's non-interventionist approach is frequently contrasted with Western interventionism, leading to a relative preference for China's model of engagement. However, this should not be interpreted as an uncritical endorsement. Rather, it reflects a process of contextual evaluation, where global power dynamics are interpreted through local priorities and historical experiences. The South China Sea (SCS) theme further illustrates this nuance. Security concerns are geographically concentrated and do not generalise across the dataset, reinforcing the argument that Securitisation is spatially contingent rather than universally dominant.

Relational Framing and the Role of Comparative Narratives

The presence of Sino-U.S. comparison highlights that China's image is often constructed relationally, rather than in isolation. Through the lens of framing theory

(Robert Entman), this comparative discourse functions as a mechanism of differentiation, positioning China as an alternative to Western modes of engagement. However, the findings indicate that such comparisons are context-dependent and non-binary. While China is frequently associated with non-interference and economic cooperation, Western actors are not uniformly rejected. Instead, elite discourse reflects a process of selective appropriation and contextual evaluation, reinforcing the hybrid nature of China's image.

Narrative Tension and Hybrid Image Construction

A key insight emerging from this study is the presence of productive narrative tension within elite discourse. China is simultaneously constructed as a development partner, enabling economic transformation as well as a strategic actor with long-term geopolitical ambitions. These narratives do not cancel each other out; instead, they coexist in a dynamic equilibrium, where economic pragmatism mitigates strategic concern. This hybridity underscores the importance of moving beyond binary frameworks in the study of international image construction.

From a critical discourse perspective, this reflects how meaning is produced through negotiation rather than consensus. From a framing perspective, it demonstrates that interpretive structures are layered, allowing multiple evaluations to coexist within the same discourse.

De-Westernising China Image Studies

Taken together, these findings contribute to ongoing efforts to de-Westernise global communication scholarship. By examining Muslim elite discourse, the study foregrounds perspectives that are often marginalised in dominant academic narratives, which remain heavily Western-centric. Importantly, de-Westernisation here does not imply normative alignment with China, but rather an epistemological shift toward pluralising perspectives. The study demonstrates that China's image varies significantly across contexts and cannot be fully understood through frameworks derived solely from Western geopolitical concerns.

CONCLUSION

This study has undertaken a qualitative, discourse-analytical examination of how China's global image is constructed within the textual outputs of Muslim intellectual elites. By shifting the analytical lens from perception-based measurement to discursive construction, the study provides both theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature on global communication, soft power, and international image formation.

The findings demonstrate that China's global image within Muslim elite discourse is neither monolithic nor polarised but is instead constructed through a complex and contextually grounded set of interpretive frameworks. Most prominently, economic pragmatism emerges as the dominant discursive logic shaping these

representations. Across the dataset, China is consistently framed as a development-oriented actor, with emphasis placed on its role in infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and the generation of tangible material benefits. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is interpreted as a mechanism for economic transformation and regional integration.

At the same time, the analysis reveals the presence of geopolitical concerns, although these are not articulated in the form of strong Securitisation. Rather, such concerns are moderated and contextually embedded, resulting in what can be described as a form of “managed Securitisation.” This indicates that while elites remain aware of potential strategic risks and geopolitical implications, these considerations do not dominate the discourse nor negate the perceived economic opportunities.

Importantly, the study finds that elite discourse produces a hybrid and context-dependent image of China. Instead of adopting uniformly positive or negative positions, intellectual elites engage in a process of discursive negotiation, balancing opportunity with caution. Within this process, Muslim-majority regions are not constructed as passive recipients of Chinese influence; rather, they are framed as active and strategic agents capable of shaping the terms of engagement. This reflects a broader reconfiguration of agency within Global South discourse, where local actors assert their strategic relevance in global economic processes. Taken together, these findings suggest that China’s global image is not

merely perceived but actively constructed through discourse, shaped by local socio-political contexts, developmental priorities, and relational comparisons with other global powers.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that China’s global image is not a fixed or inherently stable attribute but a dynamic and contextually mediated construct. It is actively produced, negotiated, and reinterpreted through discourse rather than simply reflected in measurable perceptions. By foregrounding Muslim elite perspectives, the study contributes to a more pluralistic, nuanced, and analytically grounded understanding of global communication processes in an increasingly multipolar world.

Implications of the Study

Theoretical Contributions

The study advances existing scholarship in several important ways. First, it contributes to a growing body of literature that critiques perception-based approaches to studying country image by demonstrating the analytical value of examining discursive construction. By focusing on how meanings are produced and negotiated within texts, the study moves beyond the limitations of survey-based methodologies that reduce complex representations to aggregate attitudes. Second, the integration of critical discourse analysis and framing theory provides a more robust and multidimensional analytical framework. This approach enables the identification of underlying narrative structures, interpretive

frames, and ideological positions that shape representations of China within elite discourse. Third, the study contributes to the ongoing project of de-Westernising global communication scholarship. By foregrounding perspectives from Muslim-majority contexts, an area that remains underrepresented in the literature, it challenges the dominance of Western-centric narratives and expands the geographical and epistemological scope of research on China's global image. Finally, the study introduces the concept of hybrid discursive formation as a theoretical contribution, capturing the coexistence of economic pragmatism and moderated Securitisation within elite narratives. This concept provides a useful analytical lens for understanding how competing interpretations can coexist within the same discursive field.

Methodological Contributions

From a methodological perspective, the study demonstrates the value of treating elite-authored texts as critical sites of meaning production. By analysing policy commentaries, academic writings, and strategic essays, the research captures how influential actors construct and circulate narratives about global power relations. Additionally, the study illustrates how qualitative interpretation can be strengthened through the use of systematic coding procedures and computational tools such as NVivo. While remaining firmly interpretive in orientation, the integration of such tools enhances transparency, consistency, and analytical rigour. A further contribution

lies in the explicit differentiation between discourse, image, and perception. By clearly delineating these concepts, the study addresses a common source of conceptual ambiguity in the literature and provides a more precise framework for future research.

Practical Contribution of the Study

This study offers important practical contributions to policymakers, media practitioners, and international communication strategists by providing a nuanced understanding of how China's global image is constructed within Muslim intellectual discourse. The findings demonstrate that economic development, infrastructure cooperation, and non-interventionist engagement play a central role in shaping favourable narratives about China and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in many Muslim-majority contexts.

For policymakers and diplomats, the study highlights the importance of context-sensitive communication strategies that prioritise developmental cooperation, mutual benefit, and regional agency rather than securitised geopolitical rhetoric. For media and communication scholars, the research provides a discourse-based framework for analysing international image construction beyond Western-centric perception surveys. The study also contributes to broader debates on de-Westernisation in media and communication studies. By foregrounding Muslim intellectual voices that are often marginalised in dominant global communication scholarship, the paper expands the geographical and

epistemological scope of China image studies. This has practical significance for scholars, institutions, and policymakers seeking more inclusive and globally representative approaches to international communication research.

Additionally, the findings may assist governments, think tanks, and international organisations in understanding how strategic narratives are negotiated within the Global South, thereby supporting more effective intercultural engagement, public diplomacy, and policy communication in an increasingly multipolar world.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Despite these contributions, the study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. The reliance on English-language texts introduces a linguistic bias, privileging internationally oriented elites and potentially excluding locally grounded perspectives expressed in vernacular languages. Similarly, the focus on elite discourse means that the findings reflect the views of a specific intellectual stratum rather than the broader population, limiting the ability to generalise to public opinion.

The relatively small size of the analytical corpus, while appropriate for qualitative discourse analysis, further constrains the scope of generalisation. In addition, the use of publicly available materials may introduce selection bias, as certain viewpoints, particularly more critical or informal perspectives, may not be captured.

Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of discursive tendencies within a specific intellectual field rather than as representative of the wider Muslim world.

Building on these limitations, future research could extend this line of inquiry in several ways. Incorporating vernacular-language sources would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of locally grounded discourses and reduce linguistic bias. Expanding the dataset to include a larger and more diverse sample of texts would enhance analytical robustness and enable more systematic comparison across regions. Comparative cross-regional studies could further illuminate how China's image is constructed differently across varying geopolitical and socio-economic contexts. In addition, integrating multi-method approaches, such as combining discourse analysis with interviews, focus groups, or survey data, would provide a more holistic understanding of the relationship between discourse and perception.

Such efforts would significantly deepen our understanding of how global images are constructed, contested, and transformed within diverse communicative environments.

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APPENDIX A – SEED LIST

This appendix provides the complete seed list used to initiate the random-walk web crawling.

A. National Newspapers

- Arab News (Saudi Arabia)
- The News International (Pakistan)
- Dawn (Pakistan)
- Jakarta Post (Indonesia)
- Daily Star (Bangladesh)
- Tehran Times (Iran)
- Gulf Times (Qatar)
- New Straits Times (Malaysia)

B. Think Tanks

- Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (Pakistan)
- Bayān Center for Planning and Studies (Iraq)
- Middle East Institute (Singapore)
- Chatham House – MENA-linked outputs
- Center for Strategic Studies – Jordan
- ISIS Malaysia

C. University Policy Centres

- Centre for Policy Dialogue (Bangladesh)
- Asia Research Centre – Universiti Malaya
- Eurasian Studies Centre – Kazakhstan
- Qatar University Policy Department

D. BRI-Focused Outlets

- Xinhua BRI English Portal
- CGTN BRI Section
- Silk Road Briefing
- Belt and Road News Network

APPENDIX B – CODER MATRICES AND RELIABILITY STATISTICS

Inter-Coder Reliability

- Raw Cohen's Kappa: 0.82
- PABAK: 0.89
- 95% CI: 0.78–0.92

Coder Matrix (20% Sample)

Code	Coder A	Coder B
Economic Prosperity	34	33
Strategic Interdependence	21	22
Respect for Sovereignty	18	19
Geopolitical Concerns	26	27
Sino-U.S. Framing	12	12
Agreement rate: 93%		

APPENDIX C – CODEBOOK

This appendix presents the finalised codebook used in the thematic analysis. It includes raw quote, author & source, applied code(s), higher-level theme, country/region, and year.

Raw Quote	Author and Source	Applied Code(s)	Higher-level Theme	Country/Region	Year
“CPEC offers immense opportunities for promoting the economics of peace in South Asia.”	Khalid Mahmood	Infrastructure Development	Economic Prosperity	Pakistan	2016
“The BRI promises to create thousands of new jobs and to contribute to economic growth in the region.”	Azad Garibov	Job Creation	=	Kazakhstan	2018
“The BRI is contributing to the kingdom’s prosperity by building economic bridges along the Silk Road.”	Abdul Hannan Tago	Trade Facilitation	=	Saudi Arabia	2016
“China’s neutral stance in the Middle East is a pragmatic and sound policy.”	Mohsen Milani	Neutrality, Non-Interference	Political Stability	Middle East	2016
“CPEC could unlock Kashmir and build soft borders, creating economic interdependencies that would deter future conflicts.”	Adnan Zaidi	Economic Interdependence	=	Pakistan	2017
“Turkey controls strategic routes along the Silk Road, making it a key player in the BRI’s success.”	Suleyman Sensoy	Strategic Geography: transit hubs, energy corridors, or gateways	Interdependence with Muslim Geography	Türkiye	2016
“The BRI has the potential to unlock Central Asia and turn it into a prosperous region.” — Sobir	Sobir Kurbanov	Regional Connectivity	=	Uzbekistan	2018
“China’s peaceful cooperation contrasts sharply with Western hegemony.”	Ahmed Al-Naggar	China’s Non-Intervention vs. US Hegemony	Sino-US Policy Comparison	Egypt	2016
“China’s proactive leadership in initiatives like the BRI and the Boao Forum for Asia reflects its growing commitment to fostering regional cooperation, economic development, and a shared vision of Asia’s future.”	Rastam Mohd Isa	Soft Power / Developmental Pragmatism	=	Malaysia	2016
“The SCS dispute must be resolved for the BRI to achieve its full potential.”	Rizal Sukam	South China Sea Concern, Water Disputes	South China Sea as a Hindrance	Indonesia	2016

APPENDIX D – CODEBOOK EVOLUTION

Initial Code Set

- Economic opportunity
- Infrastructure
- Connectivity
- Geopolitics
- Security concerns
- Non-interference
- Political stability
- Cultural respect
- Ideological comparison
- Elite diplomacy
- BRI risks
- BRI benefits

Changes

Merged:

- Economic opportunity + Infrastructure → Economic Prosperity
- Cultural respect + Non-interference → Respect for Sovereignty

Dropped:

- Elite diplomacy
- BRI risks (absorbed under Geopolitical Concerns)

Renamed:

- Connectivity → Strategic Interdependence
- Ideological comparison → Sino-U.S. Framing

Final Codebook

1. Economic Prosperity
2. Strategic Interdependence
3. Respect for Sovereignty
4. Geopolitical Concerns
5. Sino-U.S. Framing