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(Citation)
Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies,14(2):184-206

(Issue Date)
2025-07-03

(Resource Type)
journal article

(Version)
Version of Record

(Rights)
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(URL)
https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14094/0100503516

Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies

ISSN: 2476-1028 (Print) 2476-1036 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/reas20

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To cite this article: Yuan Zhou (19 Mar 2026): Deciphering China's Central Asia policy: insights from state media narratives, Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies, DOI: 10.1080/24761028.2026.2647683

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2026.2647683

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Published online: 19 Mar 2026.

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JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY EAST ASIA STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2026.2647683

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Deciphering China's Central Asia policy: insights from state media narratives

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ABSTRACT

Central Asia is crucial to China's strategic goals, including energy security, regional stability, economic expansion, and geopolitical influence. After the Soviet Union's collapse, China rapidly established diplomatic ties with Central Asian states, forming strategic partnerships exemplified by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative launched in 2013. However, the opaque nature of Chinese foreign policy complicates direct analysis of its regional strategies. Within this context, the tightly controlled narrative of Chinese state media serves as an essential indicator of governmental positions and policy directions. This study conducts a thorough analysis of Central Asian portrayals in prominent Chinese state media outlets, specifically *People's Daily* and *Global Times*, spanning the last two decades. Employing quantitative text analysis techniques, this study tracks and elucidates China's state media coverage of Central Asia, shedding light on the strategic narratives crafted by the Chinese government. The findings demonstrate that both the intensity and thematic focus of media coverage shift in tandem with changes in China's diplomatic posture and strategic objectives. These adjustments in media narratives are indicative of geopolitical and economic objectives, aligning closely with China's diplomatic engagements and strategic shifts. This nuanced analysis provides deep insights into the mechanics of China's policy toward Central Asia, offering substantial implications for policymakers, academics, and strategic analysts focused on Asia-Pacific geopolitics. Moreover, the findings lay the groundwork for future investigative directions, proposing the adoption of qualitative content analysis and detailed country-specific studies to deepen the understanding of China's influence in Central Asia.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 23 August 2025
Accepted 5 March 2026

KEYWORDS
China; Central Asia; state media; foreign policy; text analysis

1. Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia has emerged as a region of significant geopolitical and economic importance, garnering extensive attention from policymakers, academics, and strategic analysts worldwide. Initially characterized by limited engagement, China's relationships with Central Asian states have progressively matured into comprehensive strategic partnerships encompassing diplomatic, economic,

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and security dimensions.[1] This transformation has been shaped by a range of factors, including institutional and geopolitical continuities rooted in the Soviet period, China's strategic imperative to ensure stability in Xinjiang, structural asymmetries in power and resources, and shifting global geopolitical dynamics. Central Asia's strategic significance for China arises primarily from its pivotal geographic position at the crossroads of Eurasia, its abundant natural resources – including extensive reserves of oil, natural gas, and critical minerals – and its considerable market potential as an emerging hub for infrastructure projects and international trade.[2]

Historically, Central Asia transitioned from being a Soviet-controlled periphery to a competitive arena of geopolitical interests involving major global powers, particularly China, Russia, and the United States (U.S.).[3] The dissolution of Soviet dominance created a considerable geopolitical vacuum, triggering intense competition among these powers for regional influence through varied political, economic, and security measures. Immediately following the Soviet collapse, Russia actively sought to retain its traditional sphere of influence via institutional frameworks such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and military alliances like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).[4] Simultaneously, the U.S. rapidly expanded its presence in Central Asia in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, establishing military bases and intensifying diplomatic and economic interactions to facilitate its broader strategic objectives in Afghanistan and regional counter-terrorism efforts.[5]

Amidst these shifting dynamics, China initially adopted a cautious yet strategically calculated approach toward Central Asia, primarily driven by concerns over regional stability and the potential repercussions for its internal security, particularly regarding its ethnically diverse Xinjiang region.[6] The significant presence of Uyghurs and other ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang amplified Beijing's apprehension about instability or separatist movements emanating from neighboring Central Asian states. The rise of radical Islamic movements and separatist groups during the late 1990s and early 2000s, combined with the geopolitical ramifications of the September 11 attacks and subsequent U.S.-led military intervention in Afghanistan, substantially intensified China's regional security concerns. These developments highlighted the risks associated with extremist ideologies and militant activities potentially spilling over into Xinjiang, prompting China to fortify its security framework and deepen its diplomatic engagement in the region.

A major turning point in China's regional strategy was the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001. The SCO significantly enhanced multilateral cooperation among member states by creating mechanisms to collectively address regional security threats, notably terrorism, separatism, and extremism, while also promoting extensive economic cooperation and deeper political dialogs.[7] Further amplifying China's engagement in Central Asia was the initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by President Xi Jinping in 2013. This ambitious initiative considerably elevated Central Asia's strategic importance within China's broader geopolitical agenda, explicitly aiming to strengthen economic connectivity, enhance infrastructure development, and foster regional integration. The BRI thus represents a pivotal element of China's strategy to reinforce its economic influence and diplomatic presence in Central Asia.[8]

Scholarly focus on China's policy toward Central Asia has been consistent over the years. Research has explored various dimensions of China's engagement with the region, including economic ties, political influence, and cultural exchanges.[9] With Xi Jinping's

ascent to leadership, China has shifted toward a more assertive international strategy.[10] This transition is epitomized by the BRI, which seeks to fortify China's ties with Central Asian nations, underscoring a broader and more ambitious foreign policy agenda.[11] However, Xi Jinping's increasing consolidation of power over Chinese political and social spheres has complicated the study of Chinese politics and foreign policy.[12] The tightening grip on accessible information and research resources significantly hinders empirical studies, posing substantial challenges for scholars attempting to analyze the nuances of these international relationships.

Recognizing these constraints, this study argues that analyzing state-controlled media narratives provides a valuable alternative pathway to understand China's foreign policy orientations toward Central Asia. The Communist Party of China (CPC) exerts stringent control over media through an intricate system of ownership, regulation, and censorship.[13] Within this context, the carefully curated narratives of Chinese state media act as pivotal indicators of government positions and policy directions. The media's coverage of international affairs is strategically aligned to support state diplomacy.[14] Consequently, this research aims to elucidate China's policy toward Central Asia by examining how the region is portrayed in significant Chinese media outlets, specifically the *People's Daily* and the *Global Times*, over the past two decades. By conducting a systematic analysis of these portrayals, this study shows that the intensity and thematic focus of media coverage adjust dynamically in response to shifts in China's diplomatic strategies and strategic priorities. These adjustments in media narratives are indicative of geopolitical and economic objectives, aligning closely with China's diplomatic engagements and strategic shifts.

This research addresses significant scholarly gaps by providing a detailed empirical examination of China's policy toward Central Asia through the analysis of state media narratives. Existing literature frequently adopts broad theoretical frameworks or geopolitical perspectives, which often overlook the subtle and dynamic shifts in policy articulation and representation. To address this limitation, this study employs structural topic model (STM), an advanced quantitative text analysis method, enabling a systematic identification and tracking of thematic structures and their evolution over time. By using STM, this research offers nuanced insights into China's strategic messaging and sheds light on previously under-explored dimensions of its regional diplomacy.

This nuanced analytical approach yields substantial insights into the underlying mechanisms of China's policy toward Central Asia, demonstrating how state media coverage serves as a reliable barometer of Beijing's evolving diplomatic priorities and strategic objectives. The insights gleaned from this research provide critical guidance for policymakers, academics, and strategic analysts focused on Asia-Pacific geopolitics, helping them to anticipate and respond to China's moves on the geopolitical chessboard. Furthermore, the findings of this study not only enhance our current understanding but also establish a foundation for future investigative endeavors. It is recommended that subsequent research adopt qualitative content analysis to dissect the narratives and rhetoric used in Chinese state media more deeply. This approach would allow for a more granular understanding of the subtleties in how China portrays its interactions with Central Asian countries, potentially uncovering shifts in tone and emphasis that quantitative methods might overlook.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: Section two reviews the existing literature on China's policy toward Central Asia. Section three explores the role of international news reporting by Chinese media in understanding China's foreign policy. Section four outlines the empirical strategy, including data collection and analytical methods. Section five presents the empirical findings. The conclusion synthesizes the key insights and underscores the contributions of this study to the field.

2. A review of studies on China's Central Asia policy

China's policy toward Central Asia has been a focal point of extensive scholarly inquiry, often analyzed through the lens of the "Great Game" framework.[15] This paradigm, historically rooted in the 19th-century rivalry between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia over Central Asia, is now applied to the modern power dynamics in the region, encapsulating the strategic competition among global powers such as China, Russia, and the United States. This lens suggests that China's increasing involvement in the region is driven not only by economic and security imperatives but also by the desire to counterbalance U.S. influence. The events following 11 September 2001, marked a significant shift in regional geopolitics as the U.S. increased its presence in Central Asia. This expansion was evidenced by the establishment of American military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, part of a broader strategy to support its military campaigns in Afghanistan and to monitor regional developments. China, perceiving this expansion as a direct challenge to its strategic interests, responded by intensifying its own diplomatic, economic, and security posture in the region.[16]

Beyond geopolitical considerations, domestic imperatives play an equally critical role in shaping China's Central Asia strategy. Firstly, economic cooperation with Central Asian nations and the region's energy resources are pivotal for supporting China's reform and opening-up policy, providing essential economic benefits and energy security.[17] Strategic infrastructure projects – such as the Central Asia – China gas pipeline and the Kazakhstan – China oil pipeline – have significantly strengthened China's energy supply chains and contributed to broader economic stability. Secondly, the security of its western border, particularly the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, is a significant motivator for China's policy toward Central Asia.[18] Given Xinjiang's geographic proximity and deep ethnic and cultural ties to Central Asia, Beijing views the region as susceptible to cross-border instability and the spread of separatist sentiments. Consequently, safeguarding stability in Xinjiang through proactive diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives is a core priority for China. Thirdly, the CPC views the promotion of democracy by the US in Central Asia with apprehension, fearing that such movements could inspire similar democratic sentiments within its borders, thereby posing a threat to the one-party regime's stability.[19] As a result, China's regional policy combines developmental initiatives with robust security measures and active efforts to counter perceived ideological threats. Collectively, these domestic concerns underscore the strategic logic behind China's Central Asia policy-one that aligns internal stability objectives with regional geopolitical ambitions through a tightly interwoven mix of economic engagement, security coordination, and ideological containment.

China's Central Asia policy is characterized by a sophisticated and multi-dimensional engagement strategy that employs a variety of tools across different sectors to strengthen

ties and expand influence. In the energy sector, China has substantially enhanced its long-term energy security and fostered economic interdependence through significant projects like the China – Central Asia gas pipeline and the Kazakhstan – China oil pipeline.[20] In logistics and connectivity, Beijing has invested heavily in infrastructure under the BRI, financing railways, highways, and dry ports to integrate Central Asia into global supply chains centered on China.[21] Furthermore, China extends its strategy to economic development and trade facilitation, endorsing special economic zones and offering considerable development financing to regional governments.[22] In the area of border security and counter-terrorism cooperation, China has utilized platforms such as the SCO to advance joint security exercises, intelligence sharing, and counter-extremism initiatives, particularly targeting threats linked to separatism and transnational terrorism.[23]

In addition to economic and security engagements, China has substantially increased its soft power initiatives aimed at shaping cultural perceptions and strengthening societal ties. These efforts include establishing Confucius Institutes in major Central Asian cities, funding scholarships for Central Asian students at Chinese universities, conducting extensive cultural exchanges, and investing in the restoration and conservation of historical Silk Road sites.[24] Such initiatives seek to promote the image of China as a benign and culturally respectful power with a shared historical legacy. Chinese media outlets have also expanded their presence in the region, broadcasting Mandarin-language content and producing localized materials to shape public narratives.[25] These cultural diplomacy initiatives are designed to promote the image of China as a benign, historically connected partner, thereby reinforcing its broader economic and geopolitical objectives.

Recent scholarly debates have shifted from viewing China's role in Central Asia solely through the lens of traditional geopolitics to more nuanced examinations of its long-term strategic intentions, regional reception, and implications for global order. Scholars argue that the BRI has transformed China's regional posture, expanding its influence not only economically but also normatively, as China seeks to shape regional governance standards.[26] Others highlight China's role in promoting a distinct model of regionalism that diverges from Western liberal norms by emphasizing sovereignty, noninterference, and elite-level diplomacy.[27] Critics have expressed concern over the lack of transparency and accountability in Chinese investments, warning that they may exacerbate governance issues and foster authoritarian entrenchment.[28] Scholars also emphasize the mixed reactions among Central Asian societies and governments – ranging from strategic cooperation to public skepticism – highlighting the complex interplay of dependency, agency, and resistance.[29]

Although existing research has examined various aspects of China's policy toward Central Asia, there remains a notable gap regarding a systematic and comprehensive analysis of China's overall approach to the region. A key reason for this gap is the opaque nature of China's foreign policy decision-making processes,[30] which significantly complicates efforts to gain a clear understanding of its Central Asia policy. Additionally, the majority of existing studies primarily rely on macro-level theories and traditional analytical frameworks rather than empirical investigations. In response to these limitations, this paper proposes that international news coverage by Chinese state media serves as a reliable reflection of the government's foreign policy orientations. The following section will elaborate on the mechanisms through which the Chinese government exerts control over international news reporting and demonstrate why a systematic empirical analysis of such media content provides valuable insights into China's foreign policy.

3. Media as a proxy for Chinese foreign policy

Previous research has extensively examined the Chinese government's pervasive control over the media.[31] President Xi Jinping has underscored the central role of journalism in governance, famously asserting that Party-affiliated media "must bear the surname of the Party."[32] This statement reflects the CPC's longstanding view that the media is not an autonomous public watchdog but a core instrument of political authority, propaganda dissemination, and ideological reproduction. The CPC maintains comprehensive control over China's media landscape through a sophisticated apparatus that integrates institutional ownership, regulatory oversight, content supervision, and extensive digital surveillance infrastructure.

First, the dissemination of politically significant news in China is tightly orchestrated through centralized mechanisms. Major stories are typically released first by the state-run Xinhua News Agency, whose wire copy must be reproduced verbatim by all other domestic media outlets.[33] This practice ensures uniformity in content and framing across platforms, leaving little room for editorial deviation. Xinhua also retains an exclusive monopoly on the importation and distribution of foreign news.[34] Domestic media organizations are explicitly prohibited from republishing content from international sources without prior state authorization, thereby filtering external narratives before they reach the Chinese public.

Second, foreign investment in China's media industry is severely limited.[35] While limited participation by domestic private capital is permitted in certain non-core areas – such as entertainment or lifestyle journalism – the structural control of politically consequential media institutions remains firmly in the hands of the state. This ownership model guarantees that editorial direction, budgetary oversight, and staffing decisions remain aligned with Party directives, safeguarding ideological conformity and insulating the media ecosystem from external influences that could undermine the CPC's authority.

Third, entry into the journalism profession is tightly regulated through a formal credentialing system that functions as a mechanism of political filtration.[36] Journalists must undergo official assessments that evaluate their educational background, technical qualifications, and – crucially – their adherence to Party ideology. Press credentials are only granted or renewed for those who demonstrate a commitment to CPC principles. This system operates as a political filter, systematically excluding dissenting voices while cultivating a media workforce that is both technically competent and ideologically aligned.

Fourth, all media organizations in China are institutionally affiliated with a Party or government sponsor.[37] Even nominally commercial outlets, including joint-stock media companies, are required to operate under the oversight of a designated supervising body, typically a Party or state institution. These sponsoring entities exercise substantial influence over editorial policies, staffing decisions, financial planning, and publication licenses. This vertical integration ensures that media institutions remain embedded within the CPC's administrative hierarchy, thereby aligning journalistic output with the Party's broader strategic and ideological objectives.

In addition to these institutional mechanisms, the Chinese government also enforces extensive digital censorship through the "Great Firewall" – a vast system of online surveillance and filtering that restricts access to foreign information and suppresses politically sensitive content.[38] Collectively, these mechanisms create a tightly controlled media environment engineered to regulate the flow of information, suppress dissenting

narratives, and promote the CPC's strategic and ideological objectives. This architecture of control plays a critical role in maintaining the Party's hegemony over public discourse and the national information order.

Crucially, the Party's manipulation of media narratives extends beyond domestic politics to encompass international news coverage. Although there are subtle variations in the framing of international affairs between Party-affiliated and nominally commercial newspapers, a striking degree of consistency persists across outlets – highlighting the pervasive influence of centralized media control.[39] Content analysis of the *People's Daily*, the Party's flagship newspaper, reveals a significant decline in foreign news reporting since Xi Jinping came to power.[40] Compared to the Hu Jintao era, international coverage under Xi has decreased by approximately 50%, reflecting a strategic recalibration of media priorities. This reduction signals a growing emphasis on promoting domestic policy achievements and ideological messaging over global affairs, despite China's increasing involvement on the world stage. This trend has been accompanied by a broader transformation in the tone and function of international news reporting. As political centralization under Xi has intensified, editorial practices have become more ideologically driven, moving away from relatively descriptive or objective reporting toward narrative constructions that emphasize China's diplomatic virtue, historical grievances, and civilizational prestige. These developments indicate that the CPC increasingly views international media coverage as an extension of domestic ideological governance and foreign policy projection.

A fundamental principle guiding Chinese media's international news reporting is to support government diplomacy.[41] According to a directive from the Central Propaganda Department, "international news reporting shares the same fundamental task as diplomatic work, which is to reflect and serve our country's independent and peaceful foreign policy."[42] This alignment is evident in empirical studies of *Xinwen Lianbo*, China Central Television's flagship news program, which show that countries with strong economic ties to China tend to receive more favorable coverage.[43] This pattern underscores the instrumental function of international news reporting in China: it is not primarily intended to inform domestic audiences objectively about world affairs, but to cultivate narratives that reinforce the state's diplomatic objectives and global image.

Further evidence of this dynamic is found in content analysis of *People's Daily* coverage of Japan and Sino-Japanese controversies. While Japan is often portrayed as a historical antagonist – particularly in relation to issues such as Yasukuni Shrine visits and textbook controversies, which are tied to the portrayal and minimization of Imperial Japan's wartime atrocities – state media typically refrains from inflaming mass nationalist sentiment unless doing so aligns with specific diplomatic or strategic objectives.[44] This restraint reflects a broader strategy of calibrated messaging, whereby state media assert China's historical grievances without jeopardizing broader diplomatic goals. In this context, the *People's Daily* operates as a critical tool of the CPC, shaping public discourse by delineating the boundaries of acceptable nationalism and foreign policy debate.

Given the high degree of information control exercised by the CPC, the analysis of Chinese state media coverage of Central Asia offers a valuable empirical window into China's foreign policy priorities in the region. The next two sections present a systematic investigation of how Central Asia is represented in leading Chinese state media outlets, with the aim of uncovering the strategic logic that shapes Beijing's engagement with its western neighbors.

4. Empirical strategy

This study adopts a computational content analysis approach to investigate how Chinese state media portray Central Asia and to infer the underlying patterns of foreign policy signaling embedded in official news narratives. Specifically, it employs Structural Topic Model (STM), a probabilistic text modeling technique that enables researchers to uncover latent thematic structures in large-scale text corpora while incorporating document-level metadata to estimate topic prevalence and content variation.

4.1. Data collection

To examine how Central Asia is represented in Chinese state media, this study draws on news articles from two prominent outlets: *People's Daily* and *Global Times*. *People's Daily*, published under the direct supervision of the Central Committee of the CPC, is widely regarded as the most authoritative official newspaper in China. It covers a wide range of topics, including state policies, major political developments, leadership activities, and international affairs. The content and editorial tone of *People's Daily* are often interpreted as direct reflections of the views and priorities of China's top leadership, making it a valuable source for understanding official discourse.[45]

By contrast, *Global Times* is a state-affiliated tabloid known for its explicit nationalism and unambiguous support for government positions, particularly in the realm of international affairs. Although it operates under the umbrella of the People's Daily group, *Global Times* occupies a unique niche as one of the few state-approved publications that specialize in foreign news and geopolitical commentary. Its editorial style is notably more direct, confrontational, and populist than that of *People's Daily*, often engaging in rhetorical strategies designed to mobilize nationalist sentiment and project Chinese assertiveness on the world stage. Despite functioning within the same system of Party oversight and censorship, *Global Times* plays a distinct role in shaping public opinion, reinforcing foreign policy narratives, and articulating the CPC's stance on controversial international issues in a tone that resonates more strongly with popular audiences.[46]

The dataset used in this study was sourced from the Wisers database, a comprehensive and widely recognized repository of Chinese-language media content. The period of analysis spans two decades, covering the entirety of Hu Jintao's presidency and the first two terms of Xi Jinping's presidency – specifically, from 15 March 2003, to 10 March 2023. To construct the dataset, all articles published in People's Daily and Global Times that mentioned "Central Asia" or any of the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) were collected.[47] This approach ensures a systematic basis for evaluating how Chinese state media have portrayed Central Asia over time.

The final dataset includes 8109 articles from *People's Daily* and 4608 articles from *Global Times*. Figure 1 presents the monthly distribution of articles from each outlet. As the figure shows, the frequency of coverage in the two newspapers is highly correlated, reflecting similar editorial rhythms shaped by national diplomatic developments. Notably, there is a significant increase in reporting on Central Asia following Xi Jinping's announcement of the Silk Road Economic Belt in 2013, underscoring the

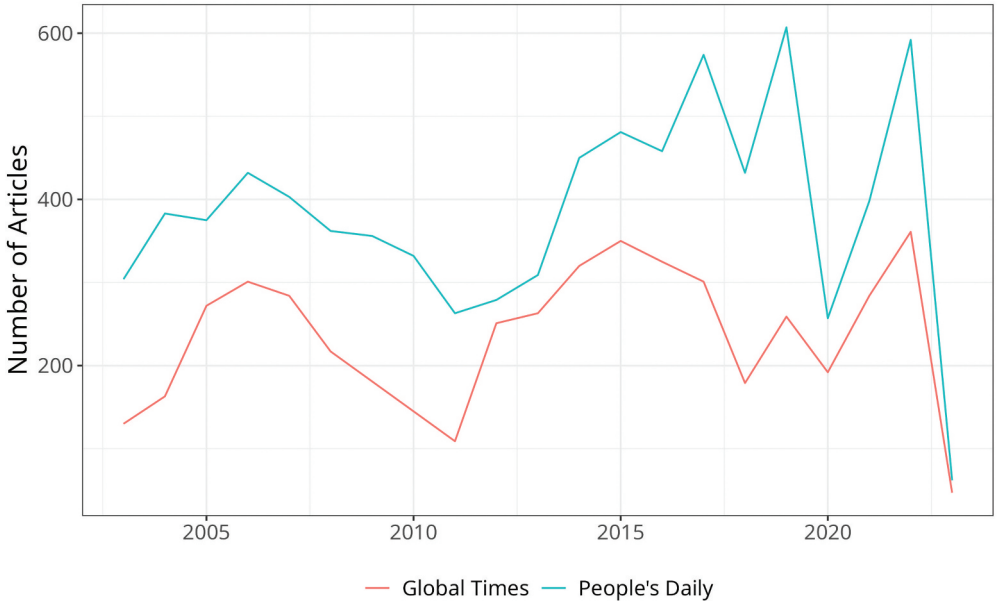


Figure 1. Monthly number of news articles on Central Asia in each newspaper.

region's rising strategic importance in Chinese foreign policy. The only major decline occurred in 2020, corresponding with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted media agendas and shifted national reporting priorities.

Previous studies of Chinese political communication note that not all *People's Daily* texts carry the same signaling value. In particular, "homophonous pen names" and organizational bylines (e.g. Zhong Sheng; Ren Zhongping) are widely treated as quasi-authoritative commentaries produced by writing teams and intended to convey the position of important party-state actors, often in moments of heightened policy salience or when leadership-level guidance is being communicated.[48] I therefore screened the corpus for these bylines. However, in this Central Asia – focused dataset they appear only rarely, and when they do, Central Asia is typically mentioned in the context of broader critiques of U.S. policy rather than being the primary object of analysis. Given both their low frequency and limited topical specificity in this corpus, I do not analyze them as a separate sub-sample. Instead, the analysis relies on topic modeling to capture the more routinized, systematic patterns of narrative emphasis that structure Central Asia coverage across the two outlets over time.

4.2. Text preprocessing and topic modeling

The corpus of news articles was preprocessed using the R packages *jiebaR*[49] and *quanteda*.[50] While the general steps for processing Chinese-language text are similar to those used for English, particular attention must be paid to the linguistic characteristics of Chinese, especially the absence of whitespace delimiters between words. As a result, word segmentation was a critical preprocessing task. To achieve accurate segmentation,

I employed the *jiebaR* package, which is well-suited for handling Chinese word boundaries. The segmented text was then converted into tokens using *quanteda*, enabling further analysis. Subsequent preprocessing steps included the removal of punctuation marks, numerical characters, and common stop words based on the Baidu stop word list.[51]

To uncover latent themes in Chinese media coverage of Central Asia, I applied probabilistic topic modeling, a widely adopted technique for identifying hidden semantic structures within large corpora.[52] Specifically, this study employs the STM, which belongs to the family of probabilistic topic models but offers key advantages over standard approaches such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). STM allows for the inclusion of document-level metadata as covariates, enabling the analysis of how topic prevalence varies across contextual dimensions.[53] In this study, I included two covariates: the publication source (*People's Daily* or *Global Times*) and a continuous time variable ("day"), which measures the number of days elapsed since the start of the research period (15 March 2003). These covariates enable a dynamic and comparative analysis of topic prevalence across both time and media outlet.

A crucial methodological decision when fitting an STM is determining the optimal number of topics. As no universally accepted criterion exists for this selection,[54] I estimated a series of models with varying topic numbers and evaluated them using both quantitative and qualitative measures. Quantitative metrics included held-out likelihood, residuals, variational lower bound, and semantic coherence.[55] Figure 2 illustrates how these metrics change as the number of topics varies, demonstrating trade-offs across different measures. Higher values of held-out likelihood, semantic coherence, and variational lower bound indicate improved model performance, whereas lower residual values indicate better model fit. To complement these quantitative indicators, I qualitatively

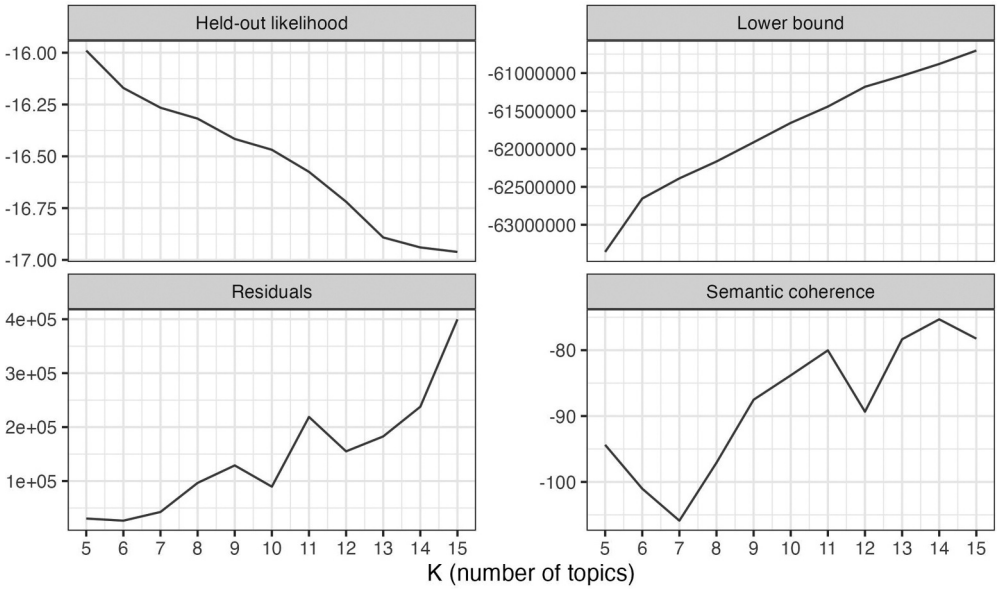
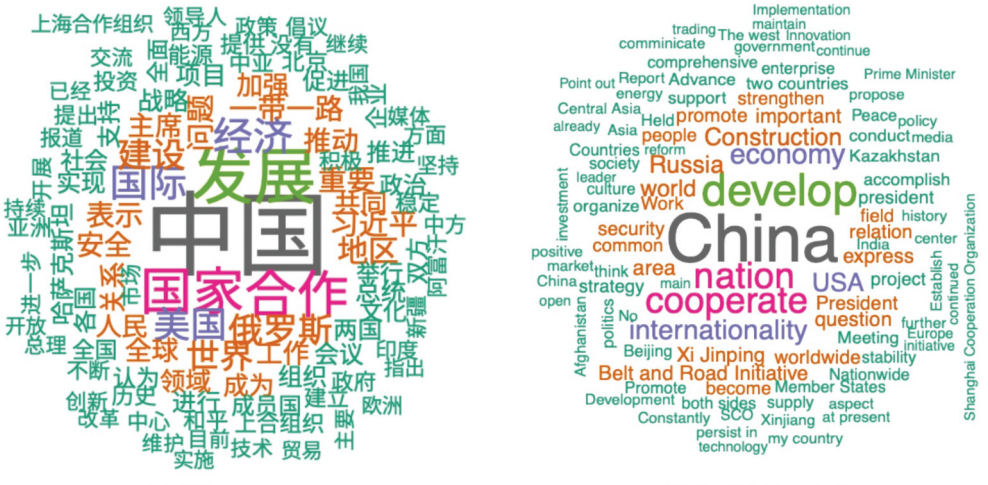


Figure 2. Model diagnostics by number of topics.

assessed the interpretability and coherence of topics generated by each model. Taking into account both statistical validity and substantive interpretability, the ten-topic STM emerged as the most appropriate solution, offering a meaningful thematic structure that aligns effectively with the analytical objectives of this research.

5. Results

Prior to applying the STM to the corpus, a frequency analysis was conducted to obtain an overview of Chinese state media's coverage of Central Asia. Figure 3 illustrates the 100 most frequently used words during the research period, with the original Chinese terms presented in the left panel and their English translations provided by Google Translate in the right panel. The most prominent term is "China," highlighting that Chinese media consistently frame their narratives about Central Asia around China's own strategic interests, initiatives, and diplomatic objectives. Among Central Asian countries, only "Kazakhstan" prominently appears within the top 100 words, indicating a particular media emphasis on Kazakhstan, likely due to extensive bilateral economic relations, resource exports, and its strategically important location. Conversely, the absence or significantly lower frequency of other Central Asian nations – such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – suggests comparatively less media attention or less intensive engagement by China with these states. Other frequently appearing terms include "development," "cooperation," "economy," "security," the "Belt and Road Initiative," and the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization." These words underline China's strategic emphasis on regional economic integration, infrastructure connectivity, and multilateral security cooperation. Terms such as "energy," "investment," and "project" further reflect China's strategic priority in securing regional resources and strengthening economic linkages. Additionally, the frequent occurrence of geopolitical actors and leaders, notably "Xi Jinping," "USA," and "Russia," underscores the broader international



(a) Chinese (b) English Translation

Figure 3. Most frequent words in Chinese state media coverage of Central Asia.

dynamics shaping China's policy toward Central Asia. The regular usage of words like "stability," "promote," and "strategy" illustrates China's deliberate effort to position itself as a stabilizing force committed to mutual benefit, regional prosperity, and long-term diplomatic engagement.

Table 1 provides an overview of the ten topics identified through the STM, including manually assigned descriptive labels, high-probability words, and words ranked by frequency-exclusivity (FREX) scores. The FREX score, calculated as a weighted harmonic mean of a word's exclusivity and frequency ranks, helps mitigate biases caused by the overrepresentation of highly frequent words, thus allowing for clearer thematic distinctions.[56] All terms presented in the table have been translated from Chinese into English using Google Translate. The identified topics include geopolitical and security dynamics involving external actors such as the United States and Russia (Topic 1);

Table 1. Summary of topic labels.

Topic	Label	Probability	FREX
1	Geopolitics and Security Dynamics	United States, Russia, country, China, issue, West, think, indicate, Afghanistan, India	NATO, Taliban, opposition, military base, Russian army, Chechnya, Crimea, troop withdrawal, hardline, airbase
2	Xinjiang and Ethnic Affairs	Xinjiang, nationwide, China, month born, CPC member, Han ethnicity, awarded, honorary title, work, ethnic group	born, CPC member, Han ethnicity, awarded, lifetime, new position, enlisted, National March 8th Red Flag Holder, merit award, posthumously awarded
3	Historical and Cultural Narratives	China, culture, history, world, civilization, Silk Road, Kazakhstan, life, ethnic group, none	narration, Abay, Xian Xinghai, Xuanzang, Dungan, Genghis Khan, mountain, poetry, pilaf, meteorite
4	Economic and Investment Activities	China, economy, enterprise, country, Belt and Road, project, company, market, investment, oil	OPEC, XCMG, Lanshi, grain price, first trip, export volume, import volume, UnionPay card, CSR, Bitcoin
5	Local Governance and Community Life	street, Ltd., community, family, committee, primary school, CPC, middle school, group, tax bureau	tax bureau, town, village, She ethnic group, United Front Work Department, village branch, elementary school, Tang village, Gou village, Tobacco Monopoly Bureau
6	Regional Cooperation and Multilateral Diplomacy	cooperation, China, development, international, country, economy, world, joint, Belt and Road, chairman	SCO, member states, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, mutual trust, heads of state, strategic partnership, mutual benefit, good-neighborliness, CICA, multilateral
7	Sustainable Development and Environmental Initiatives	development, construction, promote, country, economy, innovation, ecology, advance, energy, international	Yangling, along the Yellow River, intensive, water quality, energy use, soil erosion, peak regulation, forest-field-lake, Kubuqi Desert, main river
8	Journalism and Media Practices	unit, project, editor, author, title, submission, publication, media, news, third prize	title, submission, publication, journalist association, creative personnel, chief creators, client platform, China Journalist Association, special committee, supplement edition
9	Major Events and Sports Coverage	China, pandemic, Beijing, president, competition, indicate, Olympics, chairman, country, people	Chinese team, congratulatory letter, sports team, players, Asian Cup, confirmed cases, Korean team, Japanese team, group stage, Asian Winter Games
10	CPC Leadership and National Governance	China, Xi Jinping, development, work, meeting, country, General Secretary, State Council, construction, socialism	General Office of the CPC Central Committee, party-building, defense budget, strict party governance, first plenary session, quota, Mao Zedong Thought, issuance, CPC Central Committee, Standing Committee

domestic concerns related to Xinjiang and ethnic minority affairs (Topic 2); historical and cultural narratives highlighting shared heritage and connections along the Silk Road (Topic 3); and economic interactions focused on investment, trade, and infrastructure projects linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (Topic 4). Further identified themes encompass local governance and community-level reporting (Topic 5), as well as extensive coverage of regional cooperation and multilateral diplomacy, prominently featuring organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Topic 6). Additionally, sustainable development and environmental initiatives emerge as key themes (Topic 7), reflecting China's emphasis on ecological cooperation and sustainability. The STM also reveals topics addressing internal media practices, journalism awards, and editorial routines (Topic 8), along with coverage of major sporting events and international competitions (Topic 9), indicating the diverse content areas beyond traditional diplomatic and political coverage. Finally, frequent references to the CPC's leadership, particularly General Secretary Xi Jinping (Topic 10), underscore the strategic alignment of media narratives with national governance objectives and political messaging. Collectively, these topics illustrate how Chinese state media narratives systematically integrate domestic concerns with broader diplomatic strategies and interests in Central Asia.

Figure 4 presents the distribution of topics identified through the STM in Chinese state media coverage of Central Asia. The results show substantial variation in topic prevalence, indicating clear priorities within China's media narratives. Topic 6 (Regional Cooperation and Multilateral Diplomacy) emerges as the most prominent, accounting for approximately 25% of the coverage, underscoring China's emphasis on diplomatic engagement and regional partnerships, particularly through mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This empirical dominance is theoretically consequential: it suggests that "multilateralism" is not merely rhetorical decoration but a central organizing frame through which China narrates and legitimizes its regional engagement. In the regionalism literature – especially the "new

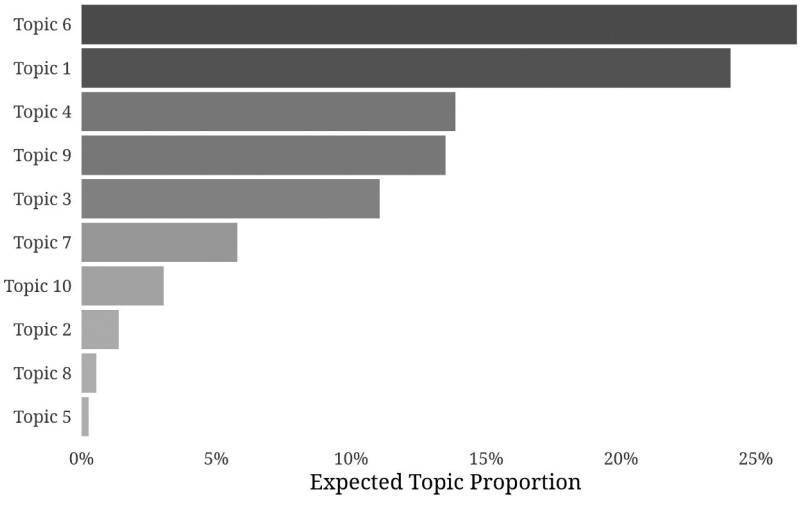


Figure 4. Distribution of topics in Chinese state media coverage of Central Asia.

regionalism" approach – regions are understood not only as geographic spaces but also as political projects built through institutionalization, shared narratives, and routinized cooperation.[57] Read in this light, the prominence of Topic 6 indicates a sustained effort to narrate Central Asia as a governable cooperative space, with institutions and partnership language serving as mechanisms of region-building. At the same time, the keyword profile of Topic 6 points to a distinctive model of regional diplomacy. The recurrent vocabulary of "mutual trust," "mutual benefit," "good-neighborliness," "strategic partnership," and frequent references to the SCO aligns more closely with a sovereignty-centered, state-led form of regionalism than with liberal models of regional integration. This pattern resonates with scholarship on China's multilateral turn, which emphasizes that Beijing's multilateralism has often been strategic and state-centric – aimed at stabilizing the periphery, advancing interests, and shaping rules and expectations without delegating authority to supranational bodies.[58] In this sense, Topic 6 can be interpreted as a narrative infrastructure through which China normalizes a preferred regional order built on state sovereignty, noninterference, and elite-led institutional cooperation.

Topic 1 (Geopolitics and Security Dynamics) is the second most prevalent, indicating sustained attention to China's strategic positioning in relation to major powers like the United States and Russia. Topics 4 (Economic and Investment Activities) and 9 (Major Events and Sports Coverage) follow with similar levels of prevalence, underscoring both China's economic interests in Central Asia and its use of symbolic events and international competitions to support diplomatic messaging. Topic 3 (Historical and Cultural Narratives) and Topic 7 (Sustainable Development and Environmental Initiatives) occupy mid-level positions, reflecting secondary but consistent themes in China's portrayal of the region. In contrast, Topics 10 (CPC Leadership and National Governance), 2 (Xinjiang and Ethnic Affairs), 8 (Journalism and Media Practices), and 5 (Local Governance and Community Life) are considerably less prominent. This distribution demonstrates that Chinese state media prioritize foreign policy, economic engagement, and symbolic narratives in shaping their strategic discourse on Central Asia.

The temporal dynamics of topic proportions were also examined to assess shifts in thematic emphasis over the two-decade study period. While most topics maintained relatively stable proportions, two topics – Topic 1 (Geopolitics and Security Dynamics) and Topic 6 (Regional Cooperation and Multilateral Diplomacy) – exhibited notable changes. As shown in Figure 5, Topic 6 has consistently held a dominant share of coverage since Hu Jintao's second term, reflecting a sustained emphasis on regional integration and institutional cooperation, particularly through multilateral frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In contrast, Topic 1 displays a more variable trajectory. Its proportion declined steadily after 2003 but surged sharply in 2022, likely in response to heightened geopolitical tensions surrounding the Russia – Ukraine War. While both topics have remained central to China's strategic framing of Central Asia, their gradual convergence in recent years suggests an increasing integration of geopolitical and multilateral narratives within Chinese state media discourse on the region.

Finally, to complement the quantitative spike in Topic 1 in 2022, a qualitative reading of representative Topic 1 articles illustrates a shift in the content and tone of

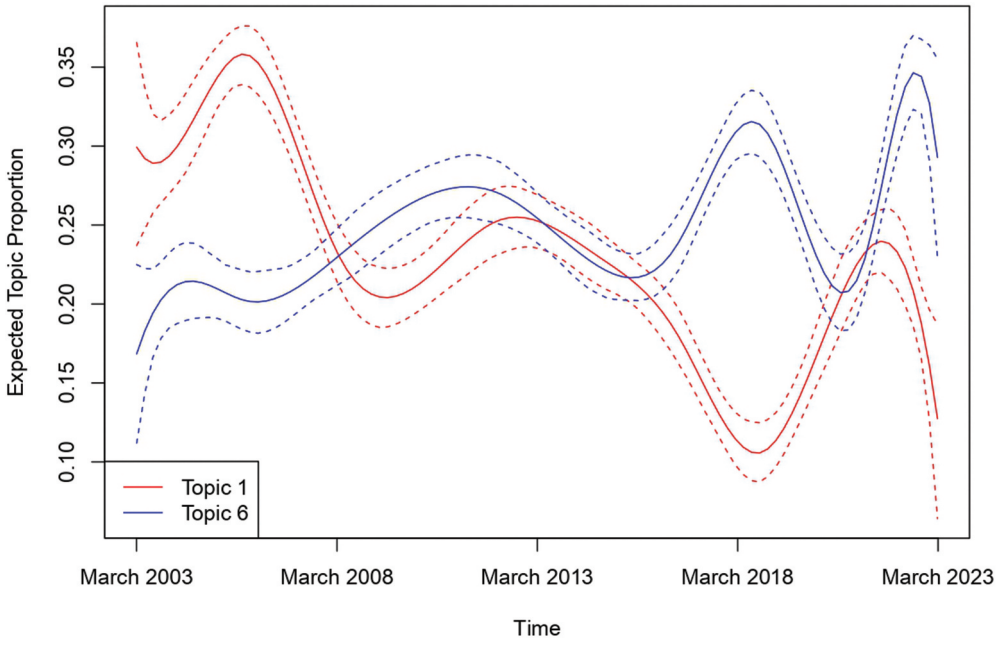


Figure 5. The proportion changes of Topic 1 and Topic 6.

security narratives. A *Global Times* article (25 October 2021) frames "security" in a pragmatic, event-driven manner through the lens of basing politics after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Centering on Kyrgyzstan's refusal to host a U.S. air base, the article foregrounds sovereignty and regional balancing, quoting President Sadyr Japarov's view that "one foreign base is enough for us," that Kyrgyzstan does not want "two foreign military bases," and that it will not "play cat-and-mouse power struggle games." By contrast, a *People's Daily* article (5 September 2022) presents a more systemic and ideologically charged security narrative. It depicts the U.S. as a primary source of global instability and foregrounds "color revolutions" and regime-change operations, using moralized language and a broad historical frame. Rather than focusing on a discrete regional episode, the 2022 narrative embeds security in a wider contest over international order and legitimacy. Together, these examples suggest that the 2022 increase in Topic 1 reflects not only greater attention to security issues, but also a qualitative shift toward more explicit threat attribution and ideological contestation in China's security-related messaging on Central Asia.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how Chinese state media portray Central Asia over the past two decades, offering new empirical insights into the foreign policy logic behind China's regional engagement. By analyzing the content of two influential media outlets—*People's Daily* and *Global Times*—using Structural Topic Model, this research demonstrates that media narratives are not uniform but are structured around a constellation of evolving

themes, including geopolitical rivalry, economic cooperation, regional diplomacy, and soft power projection. These findings support the view that Chinese foreign policy communication is not merely reactive or rhetorical, but reflects a dynamic, state-guided agenda embedded in tightly controlled media outputs.[59]

Among the ten identified topics, regional cooperation and multilateral diplomacy emerge as the most dominant, underscoring China's long-term commitment to shaping a cooperative and institutionally integrated neighborhood – particularly through platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Simultaneously, recurring attention to geopolitical dynamics involving the United States and Russia points to Beijing's growing awareness of great-power competition in Central Asia. The significant presence of economic narratives highlights China's dual-purpose strategy of using regional development partnerships to serve both external influence and domestic growth agendas. In contrast, the marginal visibility of sensitive issues such as ethnic unrest in Xinjiang or internal governance challenges illustrates the state's selective framing and narrative omission under authoritarian media control. Longitudinal analysis further reveals thematic shifts, with diplomatic messaging becoming more pronounced in recent years, while geopolitical discourse has fluctuated in response to external shocks such as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Russia – Ukraine war. This convergence of multilateral and geopolitical narratives suggests an increasingly integrated messaging strategy that fuses China's normative diplomacy with strategic realpolitik.[60]

This study contributes to existing scholarship in several ways. First, it addresses a persistent empirical gap in research on China's Central Asia policy by operationalizing state media as a proxy for foreign policy signaling – an approach particularly valuable in contexts characterized by opaque elite decision-making. In doing so, it extends the work of scholars who have explored the strategic use of propaganda[61] by offering a systematic and scalable method for measuring how the Chinese state articulates and prioritizes foreign policy goals. Second, the findings engage with research on the media's role in authoritarian regimes,[62] showing how Chinese state media not only manage domestic opinion but also function as tools of strategic narrative construction in international arenas. In regions such as Central Asia, where China competes for influence with the West and Russia, state media help legitimize China's presence and diffuse its normative agenda. Third, this study contributes methodologically by demonstrating the value of computational text analysis for identifying discursive patterns in foreign policy communication. The STM approach reveals not only dominant themes but also shifts in salience over time, enabling a richer understanding of how China's regional messaging adapts to changing geopolitical contexts.

At the same time, an important limitation must be underscored. While topic modeling can reveal patterns of issue salience, thematic emphasis, and public framing, it cannot directly recover policymakers' private intentions, internal deliberations, or the causal reasoning behind specific policy choices. This boundary is particularly consequential in the PRC context, where strategic ambiguity and rhetorical "double talk" are widely noted features of foreign-policy communication. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as evidence about the public-facing dimension of policy – what the Chinese state chooses to emphasize, justify, and signal to domestic and international audiences – rather than as definitive proof of underlying motives. Future research can strengthen inference by triangulating these narrative indicators with additional sources, including leadership

speeches and policy documents, elite statements where available, and observable policy behavior (investment patterns, security cooperation, crisis responses), combined with country-specific case studies and qualitative discourse analysis.

More broadly, the study highlights the importance of integrating media analysis into broader debates about power projection and narrative competition in international politics. While quantitative content analysis allows us to detect macro-level patterns in narrative intensity and issue salience, future research could benefit from complementary qualitative approaches. For instance, critical discourse analysis could shed light on the rhetorical strategies and ideological underpinnings embedded in specific representations of Central Asia. Country-specific case studies could also reveal variation in how different Central Asian states are framed according to China's shifting bilateral priorities. Furthermore, comparative work examining how other authoritarian states use media in foreign policy contexts would help situate China's case within a broader analytical framework.

Notes

1. Kassenova, "China – Central Asia Relations."
2. Feng, "China's Strategy toward Central Asia"; and Swanström, "China and Central Asia."
3. Olcott, "The Great Powers in Central Asia"; Rumer, "The Powers in Central Asia"; and McGlinchey, "Leadership Succession, Great Power Ambitions, and the Future of Central Asia."
4. Lo, *Axis of Convenience*.
5. Laruelle and Peyrouse, "The United States in Central Asia."
6. Kerr and Swinton, "China, Xinjiang, and the Transnational Security of Central Asia."
7. Sun, "New and Old Regionalism."
8. Tolipov, "One Belt, One Road in Central Asia."
9. Dave and Kobayashi, "China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative in Central Asia"; Chung, "The Shanghai Co-Operation Organization"; Nogayeva, "Limitations of Chinese 'Soft Power' in Its Population and Language Policies in Central Asia."
10. Chang-Liao, "China's New Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping."
11. Aryal, "Central Asia Region in China's Foreign Policy after 2013."
12. Truex, "Researching China in Hard Times."
13. Roberts, *Censored*; and Stockmann and Gallagher, "Remote Control."
14. Xi, "Zhongguo Meiti Guoji Baodao Zhengce Yanjiu [A Study on China's Media Policy for International Reporting]."
15. Menon, "The New Great Game in Central Asia"; Swanström, "China and Central Asia"; Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*; Fingar, *The New Great Game*; Chen and Fazilov, "Re-Centering Central Asia"; Peyrouse, "China and Central Asia."
16. Clarke, "China's Strategy in 'Greater Central Asia'"; Song, "Feeling Safe, Being Strong."
17. Wu and Chen, "The Prospects for Regional Economic Integration between China and the Five Central Asian Countries."
18. Jardine and Lemon, "In Russia's Shadow"; Liao, "China's Energy Diplomacy toward Central Asia and the Implications on Its 'Belt and Road Initiative'."
19. Chung, "The Shanghai Co-Operation Organization"; Omelicheva, "Competing Perspectives on Democracy and Democratization"; Sharshenova and Crawford, "Undermining Western Democracy Promotion in Central Asia."
20. Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*; Zhou, He, and Yang, "Energy Geopolitics in Central Asia."
21. Melnikovová, "China's Interests in Central Asian Economies."
22. Manish and Behera, "China's Belt and Road Projects in Central Asia."

23. Aris, *Eurasian Regionalism*; Wang and Kong, "Counter-Terrorism Cooperation Between China and Central Asian States in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization."
24. Dadparvar and Azizi, "Confucian Influence"; Exnerová, "China's 'Silk Road' Public Diplomacy in Central Asia"; Nogayeva, "Limitations of Chinese 'Soft Power' in Its Population and Language Policies in Central Asia"; Peyrouse, "An Increasingly Hard Chinese Soft Power in Central Asia?"
25. Swanström, "China's Role in Central Asia."
26. Rolland, "China's 'Belt and Road Initiative'."
27. Kavalski, "Whom to Follow?"
28. Cooley and Heathershaw, *Dictators without Borders*.
29. Chen and Günther, "Back to Normalization or Conflict with China in Greater Central Asia?"; Kazantsev, Medvedeva, and Safranchuk, "Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia."
30. Zhao, "Top-Level Design and Enlarged Diplomacy."
31. Brady, "Plus Ça Change?"; Stockmann and Gallagher, "Remote Control"; Tong, "The Crisis of the Centralized Media Control Theory"; Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China*.
32. Xinhuanet, "Xi Jinping Yanzhong de Xinwen Yulun Gongzuo [Journalism and Public Opinion Work in the Eyes of Xi Jinping]."
33. Jing et al., *Dangdai Zhongguo Zhengfu Yu Zhengzhi* [*Government and Politics in Contemporary China*].
34. See note above 14.
35. Zhao, "Understanding China's Media System in a World Historical Context."
36. Stern and Hassid, "Amplifying Silence."
37. Hassid, "Controlling the Chinese Media."
38. Roberts, *Censored*.
39. Kuang and Wang, "Framing International News in China."
40. Li et al., "Domestic Politics and Editorial Control Over Foreign News Coverage in the People's Daily, 1993–2022."
41. See note above 14.
42. Jin, *Xinwen Gongzuozhe Bidu* [*Essential Reading for Journalists*].
43. Ji and Liu, "State as Salesman."
44. Guan, "Framing the Boundary of Sino-Japanese Conflicts in China's Communication Sphere."
45. Wang, Sparks, and Huang, "Measuring Differences in the Chinese Press".
46. Lu, "Huanqiu Shibao Shi Zenyang Liancheng de [How the Global Times Was Tempered]."
47. The Chinese keywords used for data collection include "中亚" (Central Asia), "哈萨克斯坦" (Kazakhstan), "吉尔吉斯斯坦" (Kyrgyzstan), "塔吉克斯坦" (Tajikistan), "±库曼斯坦" (Turkmenistan), and "乌兹别克斯坦" (Uzbekistan).
48. Carothers and Freedman, "America the Failure?"; Gitter and Fang, "The Chinese Communist Party's Use of Homophonous Pen Names"; Li et al., "Domestic Politics and Editorial Control Over Foreign News Coverage in the People's Daily, 1993–2022."
49. Qin and Wu, "R Package 'jiebaR'."
50. Benoit et al., "Quanteda."
51. Benoit, Muhr, and Watanabe, "Stopwords."
52. Blei, "Probabilistic Topic Models."
53. Roberts et al., "Structural Topic Models for Open-Ended Survey Responses."
54. Grimmer and Stewart, "Text as Data."
55. Mimno et al., "Optimizing Semantic Coherence in Topic Models"; Taddy, "On Estimation and Selection for Topic Models"; Wallach et al., "Evaluation Methods for Topic Models."
56. Airoldi and Bischof, "Improving and Evaluating Topic Models and Other Models of Text."
57. Hettne, "Beyond the 'New' Regionalism"; Hettne and Söderbaum, "The New Regionalism Approach."

58. Johnston, *Social States*; Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia"; Wu and Lansdowne, "International Multilateralism with Chinese Characteristics."
59. Wang and Wang, "Media and Chinese Foreign Policy."
60. Pradhan, "The Rise of China in Central Asia."
61. For example see Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*; Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System."
62. For example see King, Pan, and Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression"; Huang, "Propaganda as Signaling."

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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