

Framing the Belt and Road Initiative in News Coverage: The Case of Malaysian's New Straits Times

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HOW TO CITE:

Xian Qi, Adamu Abbas Adamu ,
Normaliza Abd.Rahim , Somia Abdul
Same'e , (2026). Framing the Belt
and Road Initiative in News
Coverage: The Case of Malaysian's
New Straits Times
International Journal of Special
Education, 41(20s), 1241 - 1254

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ABSTRACT:

The Belt and Road Initiative is one of the most influential transnational development strategies of the 21st century, and Malaysia serves as a key partner country. This study applies framing theory to examine 38 news articles on the Belt and Road Initiative published in The New Straits Times between January 1, 2023, and June 30, 2025. The analysis identifies five major frames: development cooperation/economic opportunity, geostrategic/competition, debt trap/risk, national strategy/policy alignment, and symbolic/narrative frames. The findings reveal that the development cooperation/economic opportunity frame dominates the coverage, emphasizing the benefits of trade, investment, and infrastructure brought by the Belt and Road Initiative to Malaysia, while also acknowledging concerns over debt trap/risk and geostrategic/competition. Notably, the identification of the “national strategy/policy alignment” and “symbolic/narrative” frames expands the analytical dimensions of previous Belt and Road Initiative media studies, illustrating how the media incorporate the Belt and Road Initiative into Malaysia's national development narrative and endow it with symbolic significance. This study offers a new perspective for understanding media framing of the Belt and Road Initiative. Future research may extend this study by incorporating comparative analyses of Chinese-and Malay-language newspapers or exploring audience interpretations of Belt and Road Initiative-related media discourse.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Malaysia, New Straits Times, Framing theory, Media representation

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative was proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 and encompasses both the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Over the past decade, it has evolved into the world's largest infrastructure cooperation project,

engaging more than 150 countries and channelling approximately one trillion USD into transportation and energy development (Komakech & Ombati, 2023). Scholars generally agree that the initiative plays a significant role in addressing the global infrastructure gap and promoting regional connectivity (Schulhof et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024), while also contributing to

the economic growth of participating countries and enhancing China's international influence (Simonov, 2025). However, its motivations, risks, and geopolitical implications remain widely debated (Ni, 2024; García-Herrero, 2024). In Southeast Asia, Malaysia was among the earliest countries to join the initiative, serving both as a key gateway for China to engage with ASEAN due to its geographical and multicultural advantages, and as a state maintaining a flexible strategic balance between China and the United States (Chin, 2025; Ren & Salleh, 2025). The development of flagship projects such as the East Coast Rail Link demonstrates strong cooperation potential, yet it has also experienced fluctuations due to political transitions and public discourse (Chong et al., 2024; Wang, 2023). Meanwhile, with the development of new media and social media, the channels through which the public access information about the Belt and Road Initiative have become increasingly diverse (Jiaqi, 2023; Puxiu, 2025). Therefore, examining how Malaysian media portray the Belt and Road Initiative not only helps to understand the reporting logic of traditional media but also provides insights into the potential influence of new media and public opinion on perceptions of the initiative.

Although existing studies have analysed international media coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative from political, economic, and security perspectives (Afzaal et al., 2022; Morante & Wu, 2023), research focusing specifically on Malaysian English-language media remains relatively limited. Previous studies have shown that Malaysian media tend to emphasize economic cooperation, while topics such as cultural exchange are often marginalized, resulting in a lack of diversity and balance in news agendas (He et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2025). As one of Malaysia's most representative mainstream English newspapers, the New Straits Times not only serves a multiethnic readership but also exerts significant influence in regional and international public discourse (Cheong et al., 2024). Therefore, it is necessary to further examine how the newspaper employs different frames to shape issue salience and narrative logic

in its coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative. Drawing on framing theory, this study analyses the New Straits Times' reports on the Belt and Road Initiative from 2023 to 2025, aiming to reveal the reporting characteristics and discursive strategies of Malaysian English-language media and to provide empirical insights into the media representation and communication patterns of the Belt and Road Initiative.

1.1 The Belt and Road Initiative in Malaysia

As one of the key countries along the Belt and Road Initiative, Malaysia holds a strategic advantage in attracting Chinese investment and advancing regional connectivity. Ren and Salleh (2025) point out that Malaysia's multicultural and open society has provided a favourable environment for the implementation of Belt and Road Initiative projects, positioning the country as an important gateway for China's entry into the ASEAN market. Ken (2024) further emphasises that, as one of the earliest participating nations, Malaysia has benefited from substantial Chinese investment, which has contributed to its domestic economic growth. Similarly, Ramadhan et al. (2022) argue from the perspectives of economic recovery and geopolitics that the revival of the Belt and Road Initiative has enhanced Malaysia's strategic position in regional development.

However, scholars have also highlighted significant political, institutional, and social risks associated with the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in Malaysia. Ngeow (2021) observes that frequent political transitions and policy uncertainties have led to the inconsistent progress of certain projects, while Chong et al. (2024) further note that political instability and market competition continue to pose challenges to the initiative's implementation. Wang (2023) adds that Malaysia's complex decision-making structure has, to some extent, undermined policy coherence. Meanwhile, Cheng and Fok (2024) raise concerns over debt sustainability and loan transparency, and Tham (2024) questions the diversity of Chinese investment as well as its long-term technological spillover effects. Overall, existing studies have largely focused on empirical analyses at the project and policy levels, while

systematic investigations into how Malaysia's mainstream media frame the Belt and Road Initiative—and how these representations connect national development agendas with public perception—remain limited.

1.2 The Belt and Road Initiative in Media

Since the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative, global media coverage of the initiative has increased significantly, and academic attention has gradually turned to how media in different countries and regions represent and interpret this global cooperation agenda. Existing studies generally indicate that media portrayals of the Belt and Road Initiative vary considerably across regions, reflecting divergent national positions rooted in geopolitical interests, economic priorities, and ideological orientations. Overall, Western media tend to frame the Belt and Road Initiative through lenses of strategic competition and risk, thereby constructing a sceptical and cautious public discourse. For example, He (2023) found that BBC News frequently uses negative language and emphasizes doubt in its reporting; Apirakvanalee and Zhai (2023) observed that although BBC podcasts include some positive elements, the overall tone remains predominantly critical; Hassan (2024) noted that The New York Times and the Associated Press often link the Belt and Road Initiative with issues such as “neo-imperialism” and “debt traps”; Afzaal et al. (2022) further found that U.S. media commonly adopted a “political agenda” frame, with narratives shifting gradually from neutral to negative. Vila-Seoane (2023) highlighted that under the influence of Western discourse, Argentine media employed a dual framing strategy that emphasized both “opportunities” and “threats.” Similarly, Hu (2025) revealed a growing negativity in European media's portrayal of the Belt and Road Initiative. In contrast, media in developing countries tend to emphasize economic cooperation and development opportunities, portraying the Belt and Road Initiative in a more positive, cooperative, and mutually beneficial tone. For instance, Ittefaq et al. (2023) found that many reports highlight China's investments and partnerships; Wang (2024) observed that

Nigerian media focus on the development opportunities created by the Belt and Road Initiative; and Asamoah and Ndzendze (2025) noted that African media generally convey positive messages centred on mutual benefit and shared growth. Overall, global media coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative reflects differing geopolitical stances and national development priorities.

Against the backdrop of regional variations in global media coverage, Malaysian media reporting on the Belt and Road Initiative reflects the country's political, economic, and social context while exhibiting distinctive contextual and narrative features as well as dynamic and diverse evolution. Huang et al. (2025) found that from 2018 to 2023, New Straits Times steadily increased its reporting on the Belt and Road Initiative, covering economic, political, and social dimensions, reflecting the diversity of news content. In contrast, He et al. (2024), analysing the Malay-language mainstream newspaper *Berita Harian*, observed that its coverage emphasizes economic cooperation and “win-win” narratives, strongly influenced by state-led discourse and shifts in the international environment. He and Luo (2023) further note that although the media generally acknowledges the development opportunities offered by the Belt and Road Initiative, it also objectively presents project delays, political controversies, and social challenges. Shi (2023), in a comparison of Chinese-language media coverage in Southeast Asia before and after the pandemic, found that these outlets often draw on Chinese official media discourse and pay particular attention to Chinese community dynamics, thereby acting as a bridge in shaping relations between the Chinese diaspora and China. Shi and Jin (2021) also highlight that during the 2019 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, New Straits Times emphasized the Malaysian government's support for the initiative and the consolidation of strategic partnerships. Overall, existing research reveals differentiated reporting patterns among Malaysian media in various languages: English-language media tend to adopt diversified and internationalized narratives,

Malay-language media emphasize economic cooperation and policy orientation, while Chinese-language media foreground the perspective and cultural identity of the Chinese community. However, existing studies have mainly focused on the quantity and valence of news, with limited research on how Malaysian English-language media use framing to shape public perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative across international and local contexts.

1.3 Framing Theory

Framing theory originally emerged from social psychology to explain how individuals understand complex social realities through specific “schemata of interpretation” (Goffman, 1974). In the field of communication studies, Gitlin (1980) further suggested that frames constitute the principles of news selection, emphasis, and presentation, enabling the media to define what is important and why it is important. Subsequently, Entman (1993) defined framing as a process of “selection and salience,” in which the media highlight certain aspects of reality to make them more prominent in public perception. In recent years, framing theory has been widely applied in studies of international and political communication. Yang and Van Gorp (2021) employed a cultural framing perspective to analyse Belt and Road Initiative coverage across multiple countries, revealing frame competition under different political contexts; Pratt and Isine (2023) applied framing analysis to African media, demonstrating how coverage reflects national positions and ideological tendencies; Yu et al. (2024) used framing theory to examine Indian online media coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative, showing the role of frames in international relations discourse.

This study adopts framing theory as its analytical lens to examine how the Malaysian English-language newspaper, *The New Straits Times*, portrays the Belt and Road Initiative. It aims to uncover the newspaper’s framing mechanisms and implicit discursive meanings, supplement existing research on Malaysian English-language media, and provide a new perspective for understanding the portrayal of the Belt and Road

Initiative in regional and international communication.

Based on the above literature review and identified research gap, this study proposes the following research objectives:

RO1: To identify the news frames used by the *New Straits Times* in the Belt and Road Initiative coverage.

RO2: To discuss the news frames used by the *New Straits Times* in the Belt and Road Initiative coverage.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data Collection

To examine the framing of China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Malaysian English-language mainstream media, this study selects the *New Straits Times* as the analytical sample. The study period is set from 1 January 2023 to 30 June 2025, which holds both practical and symbolic significance: 2023 marks the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative, and 2024 commemorates the 50th anniversary of China–Malaysia diplomatic relations—both serving as critical moments for observing shifts in media discourse and the reconstruction of national images. News articles were systematically retrieved from the Nexis Uni® database using the keywords “Belt and Road” OR “BRI” OR “One Belt One Road” OR “一帶一路” to ensure coverage of all relevant variations in phrasing. After an initial screening, a total of 58 articles were obtained.

2.2 Sampling

The *New Straits Times*, one of Malaysia’s oldest and most influential English-language newspapers, has wide readership and significant public impact in political, economic, and international affairs (Cheong et al., 2024; Hoong et al., 2021). Its coverage often reflects national policy discourses, making it suitable for analysing media framing of the Belt and Road Initiative. This study employed purposive sampling to ensure selected texts closely align with the research objectives. Using Nexis Uni®, 58 articles

were retrieved, then refined in two steps: first, 9 unrelated articles were removed; second, 11 articles mentioning the initiative only incidentally were excluded. The final sample consisted of 38 articles containing explicit narratives, evaluations,

or arguments related to the Belt and Road Initiative, providing a solid empirical basis for framing analysis.

2.3 Coding Procedure

Table 1. Example of Frame Coding from the New Straits Times

Sample	Text Excerpt	Frame Category	Explanation
Sample 8	“We must continue to implement the Belt and Road Initiative flagship projects, which will produce development and job opportunities in local areas.” (NST, 25 April 2023)	Development Cooperation / Economic Opportunity	This frame presents the Belt and Road Initiative as a driver of economic growth, investment, infrastructure development, and job creation, emphasizing cooperation and mutual benefit.
Sample 20	“China's expanding naval presence and its Belt and Road Initiative, which includes significant investments in ports and infrastructure in the region, are seen as direct challenges to this principle.” (NST, 15 July 2024)	Geostrategic Competition /	This frame views the Belt and Road Initiative as a strategic tool for China to expand regional influence and reshape the international order, highlighting the power dynamics embedded in its geopolitical context.
Sample 2	“It's also against Beijing's interest to use its activities in the South China Sea or 'debt-trap diplomacy' by including huge loans in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that could push Asean closer to the US.” (NST, 26 July 2023)	Debt Trap / Risk	This frame highlights concerns that Malaysia and other participating countries may face debt burdens or financial dependency through their involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative, questioning its sustainability and security.
Sample 18	“Both sides will continue to further synergise the BRI and the Madani Economy Framework; keep strengthening cooperation in trade, investment and infrastructure connectivity; and promote key projects, such as the ECRL and the Two Countries, Twin Parks.” (NST, 1 July 2024)	National Strategy / Policy Alignment	This frame highlights the alignment between the BRI and Malaysia's national economic transformation plans, emphasizing its functional role and legitimacy within the country's overall development strategy.
Sample 34	“At the heart of China's economic diplomacy lies the Belt and Road Initiative. Few projects symbolise this vision more clearly than the East Coast Rail Link.”	Symbolic/ Narrative	This frame presents the Belt and Road Initiative as a symbol of unity, progress, and regional integration, emphasizing its broader diplomatic and connective significance beyond

(NST,14 April 2025)

concrete economic outcomes.

All collected news articles were imported into ATLAS.ti for systematic management and coding. The researcher conducted a close reading to identify keywords, narrative patterns, and arguments related to the Belt and Road Initiative. Open coding was then used to label potential themes, focusing on recurring concepts and issue presentation. Through constant comparison, similar themes were integrated and abstracted into distinct thematic categories, forming the main frame types in the coverage. The coding process followed iterative validation and cross-text comparison, ensuring systematic frame identification and analytical credibility.

2.4 Analytical Framework

This study employs qualitative framing analysis to systematically identify recurring core frames in The New Straits Times. These frames are examined within the broader context of the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative and the fiftieth anniversary of Malaysia–China diplomatic relations, analysing how the newspaper constructs interpretations and evaluations of the initiative. This approach reveals the media’s narrative logic, ideological orientation, and communication strategies.

Table 2. Distribution of Frames in the New Straits Times

Frame	Number	Percentage
Development Cooperation/Economic Opportunity Frame	16	42.11%
Geostrategic/Competition frame	10	26.32%
Debt Trap/Risk Frame	7	18.42%
National Strategy/Policy Alignment Frame	3	7.89%
Symbolic/Narrative Frame	2	5.26%

3. Results

As shown in Table 2, this study conducted a framing analysis of 38 New Straits Times articles related to the Belt and Road Initiative published between January 1, 2023, and June 30, 2025, identifying five main frame types: the Development Cooperation/Economic Opportunity frame, the Debt Trap/Risk frame, the Geostrategic/Competition frame, the National Strategy/Policy Alignment frame, and the Symbolic/Narrative frame. In terms of overall distribution, the Development Cooperation/Economic Opportunity frame accounted for the largest proportion (42.11%), highlighting the coverage’s emphasis on the economic benefits and development potential that the Belt and Road Initiative bring to Malaysia.

The Geopolitical/Competition frame ranked second (26.32%), reflecting media attention to regional power dynamics and international relations. The Debt Trap/Risk frame was also relatively prominent (18.42%), indicating that the reporting balanced external criticism and potential risks. The National Strategy/Policy Alignment frame (7.89%) and the Symbolic/Narrative frame (5.26%) appeared less frequently, serving more as supplementary discourse emphasizing policy coordination and symbolic meaning. Overall, the New Straits Times coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative demonstrates a pattern of “development-focused, while also addressing competition and risks.”

Development Cooperation / Economic Opportunity Frame

The Development Cooperation/Economic Opportunity frame is the most prominent in New Straits Times coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative. Reports generally portray the initiative as a key platform for promoting economic growth, attracting investment, facilitating infrastructure development, and generating employment opportunities, emphasizing its cooperative and mutually beneficial nature. Although individual news items focus on different aspects, they collectively use positive discourse to construct the Belt and Road Initiative as a symbol of mutually advantageous cooperation and shared prosperity. For example, Sample 3 states: "Solidarity and cooperation was best exemplified in the realisation of the Belt and Road Initiative." This emphasizes the Initiative as a concrete practice of regional solidarity, highlighting its implementation beyond diplomatic rhetoric. Sample 8 notes: "Flagship projects... will produce development and job opportunities in local areas." This directly links the Belt and Road Initiative to local development and employment opportunities, addressing grassroots expectations for economic improvement. Sample 13 emphasizes: "Both countries are now enjoying the sweet fruits of high-quality co-construction of Belt and Road projects." The metaphor of "sweet fruits" concretizes the benefits of cooperation into tangible economic gains, further reinforcing a positive narrative of collaboration. Narratively, these reports cover multiple levels from macro to micro perspectives: on one hand, they stress intergovernmental cooperation and strategic alignment, highlighting the Belt and Road Initiative's importance to Malaysia's overall economic agenda; on the other hand, they focus on livelihoods and local development, using specific benefits to enhance reader identification. This study finds that New Straits Times further employs metaphorical and outcome-oriented language strategies to shape China's international image as a "development partner." This not only strengthens the positive perception of China–Malaysia economic complementarity but also, to some extent, downplays potentially controversial issues, framing the Belt and Road Initiative as a cooperative model aligned with Malaysia's

national interests and social concerns.

Geostrategic / Competition Frame

In contrast to narratives emphasizing cooperation and development, some New Straits Times reports highlight the power competition logic behind the Belt and Road Initiative through the "Geostrategic/Competition" frame. This frame interprets the Initiative not merely as an economic cooperation platform, but as a key strategic tool for China to enhance regional influence and reshape the international order. By nesting economic narratives with security and geopolitical concerns, the reports reveal the strategic significance of the Belt and Road Initiative within regional power dynamics. For example, Sample 20 notes: "China's expanding naval presence and its Belt and Road Initiative, which includes significant investments in ports and infrastructure in the region, are seen as direct challenges to this principle." Here, the Belt and Road Initiative is presented alongside China's "expanding naval presence," emphasizing its complementarity with military expansion and linking infrastructure investments to security threats. This narrative blurs the line between economic and military dimensions, highlighting potential challenges to regional security. Similarly, Sample 21 states: "India also plays a strategic role, looking to secure its own maritime interests in the Indian Ocean and counter China's Belt and Road Initiative." By introducing India's response, the report frames the Initiative as a strategic variable considered in the security calculations of other major powers, transforming it from a regional cooperation project into a key issue of Indo-Pacific strategic competition. Furthermore, Sample 29 observes: "China is expanding its Belt and Road Initiative, using infrastructure diplomacy and investment projects to lock in long-term dependencies across Asia, Africa and beyond." The Initiative is described as "infrastructure diplomacy," emphasizing the creation of structural dependencies through long-term investments. This depiction presents the Belt and Road Initiative as a subtle yet far-reaching strategic tool, achieving geopolitical objectives through economic means. Similarly, Sample 37 notes: "Belt and Road aren't just about

trade; it's a hedge against naval strangulation.” The phrase “a hedge against naval strangulation” securitizes the Initiative, portraying it not only as a development strategy but also as a mechanism to counter potential blockades and containment. Overall, reports framed under the Geostrategic/Competition lens reveal two complementary narrative logics: on one hand, they highlight the security threats and competitive aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative through juxtaposition with military presence or strategic rivals; on the other hand, they expose its long-term strategic intentions through keywords such as “dependency” and “diplomacy.” This study further finds that New Straits Times does not fully adopt the confrontational narratives common in Western media; instead, it situates the Belt and Road Initiative within Southeast Asia’s regional strategic interactions. This reporting approach reflects Malaysian society’s sensitivity to great power competition and demonstrates the media’s balanced positioning between national interests and regional order.

Debt-Trap / Risk Frame

In some reports, the New Straits Times presents the potential negative effects of the Belt and Road Initiative through the “Debt-Trap/Risk” frame. In particular, critiques of “debt-trap diplomacy” emphasize that Malaysia and other participating countries may incur significant debt burdens or financial dependencies, raising questions about the Initiative’s sustainability and security. For example, Sample 2 notes: “It’s also against Beijing’s interest to use its activities in the South China Sea or ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ by including huge loans in the Belt and Road Initiative that could push ASEAN closer to the US.” The term “debt-trap diplomacy” explicitly conveys concerns about China expanding its influence through loans and extends the discussion to the geopolitical level, implying that excessive reliance on Chinese funding could alter Southeast Asia’s strategic landscape. This statement transcends purely economic considerations, placing the Belt and Road Initiative within the broader context of US-China strategic competition. However, the New Straits Times does not adopt a unidimensional critical

stance under the risk frame; it balances public opinion by incorporating clarifying and conciliatory discourse. For instance, Sample 7 states: “ECRL is part of the BRI... it should not be seen as a debt trap by China. We have to be wise and optimise the project.” While acknowledging that the East Coast Rail Link, as a Belt and Road project, could be labelled a “debt trap,” the report immediately emphasizes that “we have to be wise and optimize the project,” framing the issue as one of governance and management rather than questioning China’s intentions. This rhetorical strategy shows that the media, when presenting controversies, simultaneously conveys external criticisms while granting local authorities’ agency, preventing the discourse from becoming entirely negative. Moreover, Sample 31 notes: “While China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) flood the region with infrastructure projects, Japan offers a counterbalance — high-quality investments in rail, energy and digital connectivity, all without the debt-trap concerns.” By contrasting Japanese investment with China’s, the report adds complexity to the frame. Japan’s “high-quality investments” are juxtaposed with the Belt and Road Initiative, which is implicitly associated with “debt burden.” This regional comparison not only intensifies the Initiative’s controversial nature in public discourse but also provides Malaysian readers with an alternative evaluative reference. Overall, the risk frame in these reports functions both as a representation of external critical voices and as a reflection of regional competitive dynamics. This study further finds that the New Straits Times does not simply replicate Western negative narratives; instead, it constructs a more localized and multidimensional discourse of risk by oscillating between criticism and clarification. This discursive approach reflects Malaysian society’s sensitivity to financial risks and sovereignty issues and demonstrates the media’s nuanced positioning of the Belt and Road Initiative within the geopolitical context.

National Strategy / Policy Alignment Frame

In the New Straits Times, the Belt and Road Initiative is not portrayed solely as a China-led international project; it is frequently situated

within the context of Malaysia's national strategy and policy vision. This National Strategy / Policy Alignment Frame emphasizes the compatibility of the Belt and Road Initiative with Malaysia's economic transformation blueprint, regional development policies, and recent economic strategies, thereby highlighting its functional role and legitimacy within the country's overall development agenda. For example, Sample 18 explicitly mentions "synergise the BRI and the Madani Economy Framework," demonstrating both the institutionalized trend of China–Malaysia cooperation and the framing of the Belt and Road Initiative as an external resource that can be integrated into Malaysia's core economic strategies. This narrative aligns with Sample 16, which states "seize opportunities provided by the signing of the Belt and Road Cooperation Plan," collectively showing how the reports elevate the Initiative to a strategic-level bilateral cooperation framework through policy-oriented and institutionalized language, rather than portraying it as a collection of discrete projects. Meanwhile, Sample 19 links the Belt and Road Initiative with Malaysia's regional development corridors, emphasizing its concrete role in local economic revitalization. Unlike frames that emphasize economic opportunities or geopolitical competition, the policy alignment frame uniquely situates the Initiative within the national strategic context, reinforcing its legitimacy and sustainability. This narrative addresses domestic concerns—whether China's initiative aligns with Malaysia's development agenda—while mitigating potential external controversies by embedding it within local strategies. Overall, the National Strategy / Policy Alignment Frame continuously underscores alignment, synergy, and institutionalized cooperation, transforming the Belt and Road Initiative from an international initiative into a policy instrument that serves Malaysia's development blueprint. This framing not only enhances the Initiative's narrative legitimacy but also allows the media to construct an image of complementary and mutually beneficial cooperation, thereby reducing perceived external risks and highlighting its strategic significance for national development.

Symbolic / Narrative Frame

The core of the Symbolic / Narrative Frame lies in portraying the Belt and Road Initiative not through concrete economic benefits or project outcomes, but through symbolic and narrative expressions that elevate it as an emblem of unity, progress, and regional integration. Within this frame, individual projects are imbued with significance beyond their material attributes, serving as symbolic carriers of China's diplomatic vision and regional connectivity. In the *New Straits Times*, this frame is manifested in two main ways. First, reports often equate the Belt and Road Initiative directly with certain values or symbolic meanings. For instance, Sample 3 states: "Solidarity and cooperation was best exemplified in the realisation of the Belt and Road Initiative." This does not emphasize tangible construction achievements but, through abstraction and symbolic transformation, imbues the Initiative with a sense of cohesion and a narrative of community. This contrasts with the pragmatic logic of the National Strategy / Policy Alignment Frame: the latter focuses on policy alignment and institutionalization, whereas the symbolic frame elevates the Belt and Road Initiative to a cultural emblem of regional unity. Second, the symbolic frame is reflected in the "narrative enhancement" of projects. For example, Sample 32 mentions: "Landmark Belt and Road Initiative projects, such as the China-Laos Railway, Jakarta-Bandung Railway and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, were spotlighted as symbols of Asia's connectivity and progress." Here, projects are no longer merely infrastructure works but are narrativized as symbols embodying regional progress and interconnectivity. Similarly, Sample 34 notes: "At the heart of China's economic diplomacy lies the Belt and Road Initiative. Few projects symbolize this vision more clearly than the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL)." The ECRL is thus elevated as a symbolic vehicle of China's economic diplomacy, with its significance extending beyond material dimensions. From a theoretical perspective, the Symbolic / Narrative Frame gives Belt and Road reporting a grand narrative characteristic: it positions the Initiative not only as an economic cooperation platform

but also as a symbol of regional community building and China's diplomatic vision. This frame confers cultural and ideological legitimacy to the Belt and Road Initiative while addressing Malaysian public perceptions of regional identity and future development. Compared to the National Strategy / Policy Alignment Frame, the symbolic frame does not rely on policy alignment; instead, it enhances the universal value of the Belt and Road Initiative through symbolic narrative, thereby exerting a stronger transnational cultural influence on public perception.

4. Discussion

This study conducted a framing analysis of New Straits Times coverage on the Belt and Road Initiative and identified five primary frames: Development Cooperation / Economic Opportunity Frame, Debt-Trap / Risk Frame, Geostrategic / Competition Frame, National Strategy / Policy Alignment Frame, and Symbolic / Narrative Frame. These frames do not exist in isolation; rather, they collectively construct a complex image of the Belt and Road Initiative in Malaysian media discourse.

First, the prominence of the Development Cooperation / Economic Opportunity Frame indicates that the media generally associates the Belt and Road Initiative closely with Malaysia's economic interests. This narrative is consistent with the findings of He et al. (2024), who observed that Malay-language media predominantly adopt a positive frame centred on economic cooperation, emphasizing the discourse of "mutual benefit." Furthermore, Huang et al. (2025) note that within the contexts of partner countries, the Belt and Road Initiative is often constructed as a key mechanism for promoting national development. This perspective resonates with the findings of the present study: by repeatedly highlighting issues such as investment, employment, and infrastructure development, Malaysian media have reinforced the image of the Belt and Road Initiative as a platform for driving economic growth, attracting foreign investment, and creating job opportunities. At the same time, they portray China as a trustworthy "development

partner," thereby underscoring the economic cooperation-oriented framing characteristics of their reporting. Within the Geostrategic / Competition Frame, reports further underscore the Belt and Road Initiative's strategic significance in great-power competition. This interpretation links China's infrastructure investments with its geopolitical ambitions, particularly in contrast to the regional strategies of the United States, Japan, and India. Such narratives align with Afzaal et al. (2022), who observed that media tend to adopt a "political design" frame, and with Morante & Wu (2023), who describe an authoritarian narrative trajectory. This indicates that Malaysian media, when reporting on the Belt and Road Initiative, do not confine themselves to economic cooperation but introduce securitized and strategic perspectives, embedding the initiative within global power competition. The Debt-Trap / Risk Frame reveals another layer of tension in the coverage. Although positive economic narratives dominate, terms such as "debt-trap diplomacy" recur, signalling that the Belt and Road Initiative is not an uncontroversial cooperation model. This aligns with Vila-Seoane (2023), who emphasizes the dual-frame characteristic of "opportunity" and "threat," wherein positive narratives coexist with concerns about dependency and sovereignty risks. He and Luo (2023) similarly found that Malaysian media, while acknowledging the Belt and Road Initiative's economic growth and development opportunities, also objectively present its potential challenges. Notably, New Straits Times does not merely replicate the unidimensional criticisms prevalent in Western media; instead, it exhibits a "coexistence of critique and clarification" logic. This ambivalence demonstrates that Malaysian media seek to balance foreign dependency concerns with national interests when reporting on the Belt and Road Initiative. In contrast, the National Strategy / Policy Alignment Frame emphasizes the alignment of the Belt and Road Initiative with Malaysia's domestic strategic agenda. This frame presents the initiative not only as China-led but also as integrated with Malaysia's policy visions, such as the Madani Economy Framework. As Tan (2025) notes, Malaysia emphasizes policy

coordination with its development plans when advancing the Belt and Road Initiative, while Abd Rahman (2022) highlights that the initiative is regarded as a tool serving national governance and economic development goals. This narrative enhances the political legitimacy of the Belt and Road Initiative, portraying it to Malaysian readers not merely as an external strategy but as a cooperative platform serving national development. Complementing the economic narratives of the Development Cooperation Frame, this shows a dual construction: the Belt and Road Initiative is both an economic opportunity and a policy resource. Finally, the Symbolic / Narrative Frame reveals yet another dimension of coverage: the Belt and Road Initiative is narrated as a symbol of regional unity and civilizational progress. Projects are transformed into “symbols,” endowed with meaning beyond their utilitarian value. Compared to pragmatic frames, this “grand narrative” lends the Belt and Road Initiative greater cultural and symbolic significance in public perception. This aligns with Vreese (2005), who argues that news frames shape collective memory and public imagination, and demonstrates that media coverage of China is not confined to material aspects but is reinforced through symbolic expression. Fellbrich et al. (2025) similarly note that the Belt and Road Initiative acquire symbolic value in media and public discourse, serving as an important resource for strategic and social narratives.

Overall, the interplay of these five frames constructs a nuanced portrayal of China as a “development partner” while simultaneously introducing perceptions of geostrategic competition and potential risks. This multilayered presentation reflects the Malaysian media’s multidimensional considerations when reporting on the Belt and Road Initiative: responding to domestic economic and policy needs while also incorporating competitive narratives from regional and international public spheres. Such complexity indicates that China’s international image in Malaysia is not unidirectionally

constructed but is instead a dynamic process encompassing both cooperation and controversy. Theoretically, the findings support the core argument of framing theory regarding selective emphasis and meaning construction (Entman, 1993) and contribute to regionalized studies of Belt and Road Initiative media representation. The interaction and competition among frames reveal Malaysian media’s mediating role in representing the initiative: it neither fully replicates Western criticism nor uncritically adopts China’s official discourse but reinterprets it within the local context. This “frame hybridity” expands our understanding of the media’s role in international image construction.

5. Conclusion

This study’s framing analysis of New Straits Times coverage on the Belt and Road Initiative reveals its multi-dimensional representation in Malaysian media. The Development Cooperation/Economic Opportunity frame dominates, emphasizing infrastructure, investment, and employment, while the Debt Trap/Risk and Geostrategic/Competition frames reflect cautious regional perceptions. The National Strategy/Policy Alignment and Symbolic/Narrative frames indicate that the Belt and Road Initiative is not only an economic tool but also aligns with Malaysia’s national development priorities and cultural narratives. These findings provide empirical evidence of region-specific media framing, enriching transnational communication and framing theory research. For policymakers and media practitioners, the results highlight the importance of balancing the promotion of economic opportunities with awareness of potential risks to achieve more nuanced international communication. Future research could compare Belt and Road Initiative coverage across different language media in Malaysia or examine audience responses to assess how these frames influence public perception, further elucidating the relationship between media discourse and international image construction.

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7. Acknowledgements (Optional)

The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to all individuals who provided valuable guidance and support during the preparation of this manuscript.

8. Author Declaration

The authors declare that this manuscript is an original work and has not been published elsewhere or submitted simultaneously to another journal. All sources used in this study have been properly acknowledged. The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, or publication of this manuscript.