

Debunking Biases: A Critical Analysis of Western Media Reports about China's Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: This paper will examine and debunk some of the negative claims that many US and Western media outlets made regarding the Belt and Road Initiative (One Belt One Road, or BRI). There are plenty of articles published by news organizations in the US that claim China has used unfair measures to take advantage of the host countries, including the debt-trapping of Sri Lanka. This paper will seek to examine and debunk some of the claims that are prejudiced or factually incorrect. To prove the argument of this paper, articles from US and Western newspapers have been examined. After recording the claims of these articles, these claims will try to be corroborated or debunked by looking at how media from the host countries regard and respond to the issue. After the examination, the claim of the debt-trap of Sri Lanka in the Hambantota Port Deal has been proven as improbable. This is because a large number of their domestic media and studies about Sri Lanka reveal that the project actually benefited Sri Lanka by creating a large number of jobs and funding. In addition, the deal seems to have been initiated by Sri Lankan politicians, removing the fault completely from China. Media in other countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia and Pakistan have also been analyzed, proving a majority positive public opinion towards the BRI.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), news and media, host countries, debt trapping, biases

1. Introduction

1.1. Motivation

The Belt and Road Initiative (One Belt One Road, or BRI) is a massive project inspired by the Silk Road that China started in 2013. With this ambitious project and trillions of US dollars in budget, China plans to invest in foreign countries, mainly in Southeast Asia, Africa, and some European regions. This plan has already seen some projects such as the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, created hundreds of thousands of jobs around the world, and benefited countries' economies in general [1]. However, doubts have arisen in many countries, especially propelled by their media. Many news sites in the US, for example, claim the BRI to be harmful, having ulterior motives such as debt trapping countries or building military bases in these countries after setting up deals that the host country could not meet [2,3]. However, many of these claims are misleading to an extent, which can limit the potential benefits that the BRI could bring. This paper will serve to (1) debunk some of the beliefs that certain media from Western countries want their audience to adopt, (2) explain the current

situation of the BRI, and (3) provide some explanations as to why misinformation on the BRI could harm international relations between a multitude of countries.

1.2. Importance of Research

Misinformation regarding the BRI is counterproductive and damaging to the BRI project. This is because, most importantly, the information released by the media can cause massive changes in public opinion, which in turn puts significant pressure on the governments, especially in democratic countries, to act with the desires of the people [4]. Therefore, misinformation regarding the BRI could cause host countries to refuse Chinese investments due to the public dislike of Chinese influence. In addition, the bad reputation of the BRI could deter foreign investors from certain countries that are influenced by the BRI, which is counterproductive to the goals that the initiative would hope to achieve [5].

1.3. Summary of Argument and Evidence

This paper will primarily focus on China's BRI in Southeast Asian Countries. It will specifically examine the effects of biased media reports about Chinese BRI and then debunk some of the false claims with evidence. I take into consideration diverse new articles from a representative geographical proportion of the globe. Many of these articles represent different perspectives from various countries, such as China, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia. In addition, I consulted and examined scholarly articles from Western countries such as the US and Australia. Through analysis, I find many of the claims about China's BRI, such as the debt trapping of Sri Lanka, are not completely factual, and many Southeast Asian recipient countries of the BRI have mostly positive public and elite attitudes towards the BRI project. Such positive sentiments are also seen in other countries like Pakistan, Cambodia, and even Sri Lanka, which was supposedly subjected to debt-trap diplomacy according to some insubstantial media reports.

2. Argument

Western and US media's bias is no myth in the modern age. The problem of media bias is that it can cause people's opinion to change to being more extreme, which can cause government decisions to change and roadblocks in the investment rounds within the BRI project of China. With the quitting of Italy from the BRI project [6], for example, the possibility looms larger such that more countries could leave the BRI umbrella. Against this backdrop, I posit that news and modern media could play a key role in deterring or facilitating this trend.

2.1. Possible Reasons of Bias from Media Sources

Current Western media provide biased claims is already a proven idea [7-8]. In addition, biased media in the Western world is a complex issue that is due to a variety of factors. One of the factors is geopolitical interests. Western media outlets may be influenced by geopolitical interests and agendas, which can shape their coverage of certain countries. For example, China has increasingly become a regional geopolitical hegemony that has the potential to stand against the US globally, which leads Western media sources to project biased claims that align with the US and speaks negatively about China.

Another reason that Western media could be biased is due to the reliance on click baiting and sensationalism to gain more views for their articles. Granted, all digital media require click baiting and sensationalism to gain viewership.

Since modern media requires views to generate revenue, it is better for them to make exaggerated titles, which often lead to biased titles. This factor, in combination with the previous, only makes the portrayal of China and the BRI worse.

In addition, modern Western media faces competition from other news outlets. As mentioned, , and the many different news sources available in countries such as the US could make certain news outlets rely further on clickbait or attention-grabbing content. Since strategies such as biased content and opinionated titles are better suited towards taking the attention of readers, it will be frequently used by the media sources. Each of the media outlets competing to gain more attention would eventually enlarge the influence of Western media as a whole, and it is within reason to infer that the negative messages of the BRI will also follow.

The third reason why Western media is biased toward China's BRI is due to their limited access to sources from different perspectives, and their reliance on sources they already have, incurring "self-confirmatory bias". Western media outlets have limited access to certain intimate sources, especially those with censorship in China. This can result in a narrow perspective that is only sourced from their perspective instead of others [9].

Furthermore, cultural and historical perspectives can play a role in the bias in Western media. Journalists and employees' opinions in Western media can be heavily influenced by its readers and their socio-cultural and ideological preferences. The cultural and historical perspective can lead to major biases and misunderstandings [10].

2.2. The Effect of News Sources on People's Beliefs

News sources also very much impact people's beliefs or perceptions about a country. First, more news coverage regarding a country could make it seem much more significant than others. In addition, people tend to pay attention to the negative aspects rather than the positive aspects, thought to have evolved from a human instinct to protect us. In real life, this is shown when many people's impression of China is the lack of freedom of speech rather than the major innovation that it had in the past 3 decades. In today's world, many media sources have already used this by portraying China very frequently and in a negative light as seen in the balloon incident and the more recent hacking incident [11].

2.3. The Effect of Misinformation on the BRI

The success of the Belt and Road Initiative relies on the willingness and effectiveness of the host countries to cooperate and take foreign direct investment from the likes of China. Biased media that gives negative information will only lower the willingness of the host countries to cooperate with the BRI. For example, if the population in a country saw news articles about Sri Lanka being put through the debt-trap diplomacy of China, then it is unlikely that they accept China since they would now have reason to believe that China would do the same to them. The misinformation spread by this could be accepted not only by average citizens, but also government officials since outside newspapers could be a way to access information, and even large companies [12], making it an unpleasant experience for both the Chinese side and the host country's side.

In addition, the negative media coverage of the Belt and Road can influence the decisions of the foreign investors. By spreading negative information about the BRI to the masses, the attitude will eventually get into everyone's mind. Foreign investors could buy into this attitude and reduce the foreign investment into BRI influenced countries [12,13]. Foreign investors may be deterred by negative news coverage of the BRI's economic and political challenges [14]. Negative news coverage can highlight the risks and challenges of investing in the BRI, which discourages investors from investing in the Initiative or countries that are affected by it [15].

3. Evidence

3.1. Sri Lanka

A quick Google search about Sri Lanka and the BRI will land anyone with numerous articles about China's attempt to use the debt-trap diplomacy on Sri Lanka [3-16-17]. A majority of these articles claim that Sri Lanka's economy is not very powerful compared to China, and because of that, China is attempting to seize control of important regions in Sri Lanka such as the Hambantota Port by making deals to offer them money to build the infrastructure or other similar benefits. According to the articles, China would then threaten to take back areas such as the Hambantota Port if they do not fulfill their end of the deal, which is almost impossible to fulfill. Thus, China would have guaranteed control of areas such as the Hambantota Port, and with the control, China would then go on to create trading hubs, military bases, or use it for other selfish purposes. In this situation, many of Sri Lanka's public rightfully dislikes China's BRI projects.

However, after looking into local news sources, it was found that public opinion in Sri Lanka is quite positive. For example, one of the largest private news sources, The Island, stated that that "China had been a friend when it counts" [18]. In addition, China is actively helping with debt-trap and other financial situations [19]. Some of the projects started by China, such as the development of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, will generate more than 140,000 jobs and \$13 billion per annum. Despite such a promising future, some Sri Lankan local critics still question the true intention of China, but these doubts appear to be largely due to misconceptions about such projects [1]. Most prominently, some Sri Lankan nationals are afraid that China could be taking control of Sri Lanka economically, even going as far as to say "Every time I return to Colombo, the government has sold a bit more of the nation to China" [1]. Such a narrative appears untrue when taking into consideration the fact that the Hambantota Port initiative, the biggest project in Sri Lanka, was proposed by Sri Lankan developmentalists, not Chinese strategists [20].

To further support this side of the narrative, China denies the allegations of debt trapping and harming Sri Lanka through the BRI by citing the fact that Sri Lanka already went into bankruptcy on their own. One reason that the Chinese articles explain is the ban on fertilizers and many pesticides in hopes for a rapid transition to a better agricultural system. However, Chinese news sources described that this change ended up destroying their agriculture, one of their largest and only sources of exporting and income. This forced them to also spend large amounts of money to import more agricultural products. One other Chinese source states that Sri Lanka never fully recovered from the 2008 Economic Crisis, and continued to run a deficit ever since, even to hoping that a debt would somehow increase its economic growth.

3.2. Myanmar

In comparison to Sri Lanka, Myanmar is one of the few countries involved in the BRI that does not seem to view it positively. In Myanmar, one of the biggest news sources, Myanmar Now, demonstrates that Western countries such as the US and those in Europe are causing issues in Myanmar by sustaining conflict and violence in Myanmar [21]. Myanmar citizens are also concerned about falling prey to debt trap because of large loans from Chinese infrastructure projects [22]. As a result, the Myanmar's government is also worried about China having too much of a hand in Myanmar's economy and states that Myanmar has already forced China to reduce the investments from \$7 billion to just \$1.3 billion in certain economic zones to attempt to avoid such a situation, and impose regulatory requirements to prevent excessive activities of target companies [21,22]. However, judging from these news sources, Myanmar is still taking investments, meaning that they have not planned to completely shut out the Chinese influence within the country.

3.3. Pakistan

However, other countries such as Pakistan do not think negatively about the effects of the BRI. In Pakistan, the BRI has been received quite positively across every level. First, Pakistan was and is China's most loyal ally, having long time relations. During the BRI, Pakistan has asked China many times for help with its economy, which led to the forming of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015, 2 years after the start of the BRI, currently serving to get China a better access to the Middle Eastern oil industry, and in return for Pakistan, a slew of areas that China will support it in. Some bilateral mutual benefits include agriculture development, tourism, financing, food procurement, Foreign Direct Investments, and other forms of economic cooperation in general (see the official CPEC website at cpec.gov.pk). Recently, Pakistan called for a shift in the CPEC for more aid towards the lower class and the population living in poverty, calling for more resources to those groups of people [23]. Thus, judging from the current level of cooperation between the two countries, we can conclude that Pakistan is receiving the BRI very positively.

3.4. Cambodia

Another country that treats the BRI positively is another ally of China, Cambodia. Recently, Cambodia has substantially increased its volume of trade with China, with signing major deals in agricultural products [24]. In addition, news sources in Cambodia praise China for being incredibly helpful in their economic development, citing GDP growth that the BRI brought to their country [25]. From the perspective of China, news sources describe the relationship between the two countries as “unbreakable”, “ironclad friendship” and much more [26]. In addition, data shows that ever since the BRI-related projects were happening in Cambodia, more than 1 million jobs have been created in the garment industry alone [27].

4. Conclusion

As mentioned above, the BRI is an ambitious project started by the Chinese government in 2013. It entails nearly a trillion dollars in funding, which is used to invest in infrastructure projects in countries all over the world, from Southeast Asia to Africa. Numerous other ambitious projects, such as a large railway system and more, would make China become more intertwined economically and politically with a large number of other countries around the world. In the end, the initiative hopes to create a new Silk Road. However, an ambitious and benevolent project like this has attracted much criticism from the West, including the US. News sources have criticized the project for having ulterior motives such as debt-trapping the receiver country or exerting military influence over them.

Negative media influence could greatly detriment the BRI project. Since the media is widely known for changing people's opinions on a deep level, any opinion news articles provide about the BRI can penetrate into people's perspectives and gradually change public opinion on it. This could prove to be difficult to the BRI because of its nature relying on other countries' active participation. In addition, the media could also adversely influence the attitude of the masses towards the BRI projects, which could also deter foreign investors, further worsening both the projects themselves and foreign investment in countries where the BRI has been implemented.

In order to prove this point, herein, portrayal of the BRI in Western news has been analyzed. One of the common claims is the one about the debt-trapping of Sri Lanka. Many Western news sources state that China has effectively debt-trapped Sri Lanka by investing in their Hambantota port, which Sri-Lanka supposedly isn't able to pay back. This, according to some new sources, made Sri Lanka lease the port to China for 99 years, making it a loss for Sri Lanka.

However, many of the findings presented in this article are contrary to the claims made about debt-trapping. Most Sri Lankans do not oppose the BRI, and the Hambantota project has generated huge

sums of revenue as well as 140,000 jobs [1]. In addition, it has also been found that it was the Sri Lankans that wanted China to invest in the Hambantota port in the first place [20].

Additionally, this article also investigates public and news opinions on the BRI in other national contexts. Among those countries, only Myanmar is found to be wary of China, while Pakistan and Cambodia are quite accepting of the BRI and its projects, including the CPEC. Therefore, it could be concluded that most of the countries in the BRI welcome the benefits that it offers, in contrast to the agenda pushed forward by biased reports of Western media.

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