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Some Observations on the Chinese Media Coverage of India and the South Asian Region

The Chinese media's reporting on India and the rest of South Asia is generally in conformity with China's national interests and development objectives. Its reportage usually places greater focus on highlighting China's successes and achievements vis-à-vis India and on presenting the latter in a less than positive light as and when the opportunities present themselves.

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In the Western conception, the role of the media is to act as an independent and critical 'estate' of the state and a key player in the society at large – it influences policy makers and the masses, and is expected to encourage diverse viewpoints and critical thinking. In the case of the Chinese media, especially the mainstream newspapers, the primary purpose is not to influence the government. Rather, its main role is to propagate, reinforce and unify the thoughts of Chinese citizenry in a manner that is conducive to the development objectives and perceptions of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) and the government, as well as to promote social stability. The Chinese media also acts as a bulwark against the largely negative perception of China which is propagated by the Western media.

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The Chinese media includes newspapers, television, radio, internet and the new media. The new media refers to all digital media forms. Among the new media, the most important social media platforms in China are Weibo (微博), a microblogging website, and WeChat (微信), an instant messaging application. The Chinese media can be divided into media directly controlled by the CPC and government institutions, and media supervised by the CPC and government institutions. The latter includes private Chinese commercial media and even the foreign media based in China (for supervision purposes). All media in China is expected to work within the framework of the central government's directives and principles. Currently, most of the Chinese media are run commercially. Even the CPC's news media has evolved from being government-funded institutions during the Mao era to a model of "public institutions run commercially". As a result, by 1997, only 10 per cent of the CPC's newspapers, journals and radio stations were funded by the government while the remaining 90 per cent of the party's news media was self-financing.

According to *People's Daily* online research institute's 2016 Index which identifies the top 100 Chinese language newspapers based on their combined diffusion (which includes both the traditional and digital forms), the major newspapers by circulation are *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, *Reference News*, *Guangzhou Daily* and *Yangcheng Evening News*, in that order. The Chinese newspaper industry is divided into three categories. These are the CPC newspapers which are national in character, the professional newspapers such as those pertaining to economic and military affairs, and the city-based or provincial newspapers. The CPC's newspapers constitute 25 per cent of the top 100 newspapers, the professional newspapers account for 22 per cent and the city-based and provincial newspapers together make up the remaining 53 per cent. Currently, while the major newspapers have seen a gradual decline in readership in their printed versions, the apps and websites of these newspapers have increased their coverage exponentially. The major Chinese newspapers also cross-publish many news items.

Reference News, among the most-circulated and most-read newspapers, is unique in its character. *Xinhua*, the official news agency of the Chinese government, which publishes *Reference News*, mainly collects articles from the world media, translates and publishes them for the Chinese audience. It is meant to shape Chinese perceptions of the outside world.

Articles are selected to suit the Chinese official narrative and national interests. A cursory look at the coverage by *Reference News* does reveal contemporary Chinese perceptions of the South Asian region.

In a direct correlation with China's economic and strategic interests, the Chinese mainstream media coverage about the outside world is largely dominated by the news from and related to the United States (US) and East Asia. Compared to the US and East Asia, South Asia, as a region, is seen as low priority. The Chinese media's coverage of South Asia is mainly focused on news on India. This is expected, given its size and dominant position in the region.

The following analysis of the articles published in *Reference News* between 1 and 7 June 2017 can be taken as a quick indicator and reflection of the Chinese media's perceptions of South Asia.

In a translation of a recent article from the *Times of India*, which was originally titled "India to replicate China Model for Railways: Suresh Prabhu", the Chinese version of the headline read "Indian media says Indian railways need 30 years to catch up with China: Past 70 years were filled with mistakes". The translated text quoted India's Railway Minister as having said that, "During the last three years, the government has focused on governance and infrastructure. China has been investing in its railways for quite some time unlike us. We did not invest much in the last 70 years and, wherever we did, we did it in the wrong areas. We have now received investments worth ₹3.35 lakh crore (\$7.2 billion)." He was also cited as emphasising that such major investments would be needed for the coming 30 years to "match China".²

Reference News and the other Chinese media outlets widely reported that India lost the label of the fastest-growing major economy during the fourth quarter of 2016-17 financial year and that China had, once again, become the fastest-growing major economy in the world. In another article related to business and economics, based on the original articles by *Strategy Analytics* and *Press Trust of India*, *Reference News* reported on the success of the Chinese

² "India to replicate China model for railways: Prabhu," Times of India, 1 June 2017; <http://timesofindia.india.com/city/goa/india-to-replicate-china-model-for-railways-prabhu/articleshow/58934960.cms>; "印媒称印度铁路赶上中国需 30 年：过去 70 年都做错了", 《参考消息网》, 2017 年-6 月-04 日, <http://www.cankaoxiaoxi.com/world/20170604/2075978.shtml>. Accessed on 8 June 2017.

smart-phone maker Xiaomi in India. According to the article, Xiaomi has become the most-preferred smart-phone brand in India – it recently opened its first exclusive offline retail store in the Indian city of Bangalore, and is now planning to open another 100 stores in two years. This Chinese newspaper also prominently covered the success of the Chinese internet company Alibaba’s investment in the electronic payment company Paytm. It is currently the market leader in India and has been showing exponential growth since the demonetisation of Indian currency notes of certain denominations.

On the negative side, the Indian government’s efforts to protect domestic companies from Chinese competition are widely reported in the Chinese media. *Reference News* translated the *Economic Times* article titled “‘India First’ policy shuts China bidders out of Gail Pipe Line Projects worth ₹3,000 crore (S\$645 million)”, under a new title with a twist, “To protect Indian companies Indian government meddles in pipe line contract, says ‘will not allow China to take away business’.”³

The selection of such economics-related articles for publication in the Chinese media can be interpreted in several different ways. For instance, the article about the Indian railway’s backwardness can be seen as a not-so-subtle call for the Chinese railway industry to actively court India. The apparent objective is that, if the Chinese industry responds to this call, it can gain short-term and long-term investment and business opportunities in India. Viewed from the perspective of Chinese nationalists and the government, this news serves as an advertisement of the Chinese government’s success in developing and modernising the country’s railway system within a short period of time. It also indirectly praises the Chinese system of government in facilitating the rapid development and modernisation in contrast to the Indian government system which has retarded the growth of its railways. At the same time, the reports on the successes of Chinese companies in India do project a positive image of India as a welcoming market for the Chinese products. However, the reports on India’s protectionist moves depict New Delhi as being suspicious of a closer economic relationship with China.

³ Sarita Singh, “‘India First’ policy shuts China bidders out of Gail pipeline projects worth Rs3,000 crore”, *The Economic Times*, 6 June 2017, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/india-first-policy-shuts-china-bidders-out-of-gail-pipeline-projects-worth-rs-3000-crore/articleshow/59008217.cms>; “印度政府插手管道项目袒护印企 称不能让中国抢走生意”, 《参考消息网》, 2017 年-06 月-07 日, <http://www.cankaoxiaoxi.com/world/20170607/2090285.shtml>. Accessed on 7 June 2017.

In the strategic sphere, *Reference News* alludes to India's global status compared to that of China. It translated the recent Indian media reports that, although India considers Germany as its closest partner in Europe, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Germany in June 2017 was not widely covered by the German media. It was also noted that, in contrast, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Germany, which followed the Indian prime minister's tour, received extensive media attention in Germany.

In line with the nature of reporting by the other Chinese media outlets, *Reference News* also widely reports on the negative aspects of the Indian military, depicting it as an inefficient and corrupt force. For instance, the most recent article focused on India's induction of new artillery guns after a gap of 30 years, and the headline of the Chinese article was titled "Indian military industry refuses to become a laughing stock".⁴ The article also pointed out that, even though India has had the opportunity to shop for weapons all over the world, something which China cannot due to Western-imposed sanctions on it, the Indian military failed to utilise this opportunity because of its corruption and inefficiency.

Reference News selects news items which conform to the Chinese strategic thinking, such as promoting and strengthening the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China officially supports India's and Pakistan's SCO membership. Echoing the official Chinese views, *Reference News* published two news articles recently. One of them was a translation of an article from the Singapore Chinese language newspaper, *Lianhe Zaobao* (联合早报). The original article in Chinese was titled 印巴入上合带来考验 which translates to "India and Pakistan membership will test SCO". This has been translated and titled as "India and Pakistan joining SCO is beneficial to international counter terrorism cooperation."⁵ Another article was based on an interview with two Russian professors titled "Pakistan and India's membership will elevate the status of SCO."⁶

The Chinese strategy in South Asia is also to seek and present equivalence between India and Pakistan, as well as assign equal roles to Pakistan and India in the fight against terrorism.

⁴ “军情锐评：055 大驱护卫航母天空 印度军工拒当笑柄”，《参考消息》2017 年-06 月-01，<http://www.cankaoxiaoxi.com/mil/20170601/2064678.shtml>. Accessed on 7 June 2017.

⁵ “新媒：印巴加入上合组织有利于国际反恐”，《参考消息网》，2017 年-06 月-06 日，<http://column.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2017/0606/2087065.shtml>. Accessed on 7 June 2017.

⁶ 胡晓光：“学者：印巴加入将提升上合组织地位”，《参考消息网》，2017 年-06 月-06 日 14，<http://ihl.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2017/0606/2088301.shtml>. Accessed on 7 June 2017.

China also gives greater prominence to Pakistan's narrative of being a victim of terrorism. As a result of the ongoing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, Pakistan receives more attention in the Chinese media. For instance, *Reference News* quoted a German newspaper article in *Frankfurter Allgemeine* which reported the CPEC in a positive light. The Chinese heading for the translation of the original German article was "Pakistan using OBOR⁷ to realise its 'counter offensive'",⁸ where 'counter offensive' referred to Pakistan's effort to combat negative perceptions about it.

Reports in *Reference News* on the other South Asian countries are scarce, and indeed few and far between. This is also the case with other major newspapers such as *People's Daily* and *Global Times*. Though limited, the Chinese news coverage mainly shows the other South Asian countries in a positive light, the news being dominated by economic issues and China's positive relations with these countries. However, in the reporting on India's relations with other South Asian countries, the Chinese media tends to focus more on India's disputes or difficulties with these countries.

In *Reference News*' reporting, the alterations of the original titles during the translation into Chinese conform to the Chinese views of the region. News related to India increasingly and frequently occupies the front pages, as do news relating to the CPEC.

By and large, the Chinese media reports on India and the other South Asian countries are in conformity with the Chinese national interests and development objectives. The Chinese news media projects South Asia, especially India, as an economic opportunity for Chinese businesses but, at the same time, views India with suspicion and treats it with caution – it is seen as a country which is increasingly trying to limit Chinese economic engagement with the larger South Asian region.

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⁷ OBOR refers to One Belt, One Road – it is the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road development strategy launched by the Chinese government. It seeks to promote economic co-operation among countries along the land and sea routes. See <https://www.iesingapore.gov.sg/Venture-Overseas/Browse-By-Market/Asia-Pacific/China/About-OBOR>. Accessed on 6 June 2017.

⁸ “德媒：巴基斯坦借“一带一路”实现“逆袭”，《参考消息网》，2017年-05月-22日，<http://column.caokaixiaoxi.com/2017/0522/2023130.shtml>. Accessed on 7 June 2017.