

# Chinese Public Diplomacy and Legitimization Strategies: The Case of India

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## Abstract

This article examines China's political communication strategies in the context of Sino-Indian relations during the Xi era, focusing on media diplomacy and strategic narratives. The study addresses a critical research gap by analysing how China adapts its public diplomacy to resonate with the Indian public, particularly through local Indian media and digital platforms. Using critical discourse analysis, this research explores China's legitimization strategies, including emotional appeals, hypothetical futures, and rational arguments, to influence Indian perceptions. The findings reveal China's emphasis on themes such as COVID-19 narratives, Xinjiang-related issues, and shared historical ties, reflecting its efforts to construct favourable discursive power in a competitive geopolitical environment. By examining China's public diplomacy beyond Western contexts, this study contributes to scholarship on media diplomacy and Sino-Indian relations in the Asian Century.

**Keywords:** Chinese Political Communication, Public Diplomacy, China and India

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## Introduction

This study examines the key discursive strategies employed by China towards India, specifically investigating China's media engagement in India as a component of its public diplomacy strategy during the Xi era. Firstly, this article contextualizes China's discourse power struggle within the framework of Sino-Indian relations. Subsequently, it scrutinizes the impetus and objectives of China's political communication, focusing on how Chinese political actors, including officials and Chinese state-controlled media, engage directly with the Indian public through Indian media. The data presented in this article is analysed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (Reyes, 2011) with the intention of examining the legitimization strategies embedded in this communication.

While China's public diplomacy strategies are multi-modal, this article focuses on its strategic communication with the Indian public through local media. Specifically, it examines Chinese diplomats' writings, state-sponsored media publications, and advertorials in Indian media. In order to do so, firstly China's strategic communications towards the Indian public through Indian media in the Xi era are examined and secondly Chinese discursive patterns to legitimize the Chinese stance in the same era are identified.

This study addresses a notable research gap by shedding light on a relatively overlooked dimension of China's public diplomacy: its strategic engagement with India. While extensive scholarship exists on China's diplomatic efforts across Africa, Europe, and Latin America, the Sino-Indian context remains under-investigated, despite its substantial ramifications for regional and global affairs. Given India's democratic fabric and diverse societal landscape, exploring how China, with its authoritarian governance structure, adapts its public diplomacy to resonate within this complex milieu provides critical insights into China's flexibility and localisation strategies. Moreover, the importance of this investigation lies in its potential to uncover the mechanisms through which China seeks to exert diplomatic influence over India by assessing China's legitimization attempts. China and India are the world's most populous countries and two of the world's largest economies. The significance of the study lies in its potential to identify mechanisms of Chinese diplomatic influence on India, and to assess their tools and discursive strategies, thereby adding to our understanding of a bilateral relationship that has huge importance for global security and the global economy. The study contributes evidence to debates about the ability of autocracies (such as China) to win support for their values, policies and development models within more pluralistic regimes (such as India). These debates are of wide theoretical interest within Politics and International Relations, but they also interest many democratic governments, which have their own ambitions to strengthen ties with India and to promote more liberal values and development models. As a consequence, the findings of this research project are likely to have practical relevance to diplomats from

other countries as the article has shed light on how contemporary public diplomacy initiatives are shaped to obtain their objectives.

This article investigates Chinese political communication towards India between 2013 and 2022. The selection of this timeframe is grounded in both strategic and contextual considerations that reflect key developments in Sino-Indian relations and China's evolving public diplomacy. Firstly, this period marks the beginning of Xi Jinping's leadership, during which China launched its "tell China's story well" campaign, aimed at reshaping the global narrative around China's rise and strengthening its international image. In addition, the year 2014 was particularly significant as it marked the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and India, prompting an official visit by President Xi to India. That same year, India witnessed a major political shift with the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who introduced a more balanced and strategic foreign policy approach toward China (Pant 2021; Singh 2024). This decade-long window captures a dynamic phase in bilateral relations, characterized by efforts to deepen cooperation through high-level diplomatic engagements, regional dialogues, and public gestures of goodwill. At the same time, it encompasses moments of significant tension, most notably the recurring border clashes, which often coincided with or followed major diplomatic events. By covering this period, the study is able to analyse the interplay between strategic communication and geopolitical developments, offering a comprehensive view of how China's public diplomacy has been shaped and projected in response to both opportunities and challenges in its relationship with India.

### **Situating the Study: Theoretical Concepts and Literature Gap**

The following subsections outline the key theoretical concepts underpinning this study and review the existing literature to identify gaps that this research seeks to address.

#### ***Public Diplomacy and Political Discourse***

The theoretical framework of New Public Diplomacy (NPD) reflects a significant shift from traditional state-centric communication to a more interactive, people-oriented approach shaped by digital technologies (Hocking, 2005). Grounded in Constructivist International Relations theory, NPD emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, and shared understanding in shaping global engagements (Wendt, 1999). Central to this framework is the concept of Soft Power, where states seek to influence foreign publics through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion (Nye, 2005). The rise of Web 2.0 platforms such as Twitter and Facebook has transformed diplomacy into a networked and relational practice, enabling governments and political leaders to engage directly with both domestic and international audiences (Castells,

2008; Manor, 2019). While these platforms offer opportunities for dialogue and collaboration, scholars note that much of digital diplomacy still operates in a monologic fashion, using interactive tools to broadcast rather than to listen or engage (Resnick, 1998; Zaharna & Uysal, 2015).

The framework also incorporates insights from media studies, public relations, psychology, and sociology, highlighting the emotional and symbolic dimensions of political communication (Fischer & Manstead, 2008; Pamment, 2014). However, the increasing reliance on social media has also introduced challenges, such as the spread of disinformation, the centralization of power, and the potential detachment of digital diplomacy from coherent foreign policy strategies (Bjola, 2016; Walker & Ludwig, 2017). Expanding on the discursive role of public diplomacy, scholars have explored its overlap with media diplomacy by highlighting differences in audience and methods. Rawnsley (1995, 2015) argues that while both share the same intent, public diplomacy targets foreign governments, whereas media diplomacy engages foreign publics. In contrast, Gilboa (2008) differentiates the two based on tools: public diplomacy employs various media to shape opinion, while media diplomacy involves journalists acting as intermediaries to promote dialogue, negotiate, and resolve conflicts. In this context, NPD represents a complex and evolving approach to international communication, marked by the interplay of technological innovation, strategic narrative-building, and shifting power dynamics (Sinha Palit, 2023).

In the broader national project of public diplomacy, communication functions as a central vehicle that facilitates dialogue among diverse publics across national boundaries. As Semenov et al. (2021, p. 566) note, “Diplomatic discourse determines communication of institutions as subjects in the professional and public areas for the attainment of a country’s goals in foreign policy”. Within this framework, diplomats and officials play a pivotal role as they generate diplomatic knowledge through their communicative practices (Neumann, 2012). These actors, serving as agents of strategic communication aligned with national interests, produce reports and messages that are embedded with intentional depictions, descriptions, and representations (Orellana, 2017, p. 111). Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) discourse theory, public diplomacy can be understood as a crucial mechanism for exercising political influence through communicative acts. It involves strategic operations aimed at shaping foreign political discourse to garner support and advance national objectives (Hansen, 2008; Rasmussen, 2009). From this perspective, Malone (1988) emphasizes that public diplomacy constitutes the essential starting point for understanding an actor’s political discourse toward a targeted audience.

### ***Sino-Indian Relations and China's Periphery Diplomacy***

China's peripheral diplomacy, often referred to as neighbourhood diplomacy, was officially articulated as a core component of the country's foreign policy during a dedicated work forum held in October 2013. This event, unprecedented in its exclusive focus on relations with neighbouring states, was organized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and presided over by Xi Jinping (Wang & Hoo, 2019, p. 3). This marked a significant strategic shift in how China approached its neighbourhood, prioritizing regional stability, connectivity, and long-term cooperation over narrow geopolitical interests (Wang & Hoo, 2019). Under the guidance of Xi Jinping, China's peripheral diplomacy has taken on a multidimensional and proactive character. It seeks to advance the concept of a "Peripheral Community of Shared Destiny," operationalized through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and guided by principles such as amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, inclusiveness, and a balanced view of morality and interests (Wang, 2022; Xia & Zhong, 2022; Xing, 2025). By focusing on infrastructure connectivity, trade cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and regional security dialogues, China aims to shape its surrounding environment in a way that supports its peaceful development and reduces external pressure, particularly regional powers (Wang & Hoo, 2019; Li, 2025), where India is considered a pivotal neighbour in China's westward diplomatic outreach (Wang & Hoo, 2019; Xing, 2025)

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on Sino-Indian relations, reflecting their growing strategic significance in China's foreign policy discourse (Liang & Shen, 2020). While this has led to a rise in literature examining the bilateral relationship, interdisciplinary approaches remain limited, and existing studies often leave space for alternative methodologies and paradigmatic critiques (Bhoothalingam, 2013). China's periphery diplomacy has been studied through different perspectives. For instance, Liao (2012) shed light on the broader picture of China's periphery diplomacy in south Asia. Furthermore, a few other scholars took country-specific approach to understand China's periphery diplomacy, for instance, Bhoothalingam (2013) depicted Beijing's relation with the stakeholders of BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) corridor and Manohran (2013) examined the triangle dyad of China-India and Sri-Lanka. This positions India as a significant yet underexplored case within the broader Sino-Indian bilateral context, particularly in examining China's peripheral diplomacy in relation to its public diplomacy strategies.

## ***China's Media Diplomacy and Periphery Diplomacy***

China's neighbourhood policy has also been understood as an apparatus to balance USA's influence in the Indo-Pacific region by Chinese scholars (Cao Wei, 2021; Li Boyi et al., 2021; Wang, 2022). China's neighbourhood policies have been examined through various lenses, such as security perspectives and China's responses to the threat (Lin, 2021), cyber security cooperation between China and the neighbour countries (Wang, 2021), maritime rights and practices (Xu Ping, 2020), even in cultural sectors in relation to China's neighbourhood diplomacy (Yang, 2020), whereas the media remains to be a blind spot.

Stokes (2020) argued that China's media diplomacy and China's periphery diplomacy are linked to each other and remarked that:

Beijing has also revamped its media operations to promote this more ambitious approach... it merged several of its overseas-focused state media outlets into a single organization, the Voice of China... in Xi's words, to "tell China stories well," Those efforts are part of a broader campaign to expand the reach of CCP media influence around the world. Taken together, a better-funded and more bureaucratically agile foreign affairs apparatus provides the institutional support Beijing needs to coordinate and implement its vigorous neighbourhood diplomacy (Stokes, 2020, p. 8).

Furthermore, Shambaugh (2015) noted that no one knows exactly how much China spends on its public diplomacy, but analysts estimated that the annual budget for "foreign propaganda" in the neighbourhood is about \$10 billion a year (Shambaugh, 2015). To put into perspective, the U.S. State Department spent \$666 million on public diplomacy in fiscal year, 2014 (Shambaugh 2015). In addition, Ji et al. (2016) agreed that albeit China and India are the two most populous neighbouring countries labelled as emerging powers with two different social and political structures and tradition, the citizens have long been unfamiliar with each other's countries. Liu identified that the importance of media communication is particularly important in Sino-Indian relations (Liu, 2015). Ji et al. revealed that most of the information about the two countries is disseminated through their media systems, which causes differences and predominant prejudices for each other (Ji et al. 2016).

## ***Legitimization in Media and International Relations***

Legitimation in political discourse refers to the discursive process through which political actors justify social actions, behaviours, or ideological positions, seeking the audience's support and approval (Reyes, 2011). It involves presenting proposed actions as right, appropriate, and necessary within sociocultural frameworks, aligning with shared values and

collective beliefs (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Van Dijk, 2005). In this context, legitimisation is enacted through argumentation, using language as an instrument of symbolic power to maintain or obtain power, social acceptance, or political goals (Bourdieu, 2001; Fairclough, 2003). It is deeply intentional, with politicians employing strategic discursive moves to present decisions as rational and morally justified (George, 2006; Caldwell, 2009; Goddard, 2020), often by appealing to shared narratives, expert voices, and culturally embedded moral frameworks (Reyes, 2011).

Legitimation in political discourse plays a crucial role within the field of international relations, enabling political actors to justify actions on the global stage while aligning them with shared norms and values (Reyes, 2011). Through strategic discursive practices, leaders frame interventions, sanctions, and alliances as necessary and morally justified, constructing legitimacy for foreign policy decisions in ways that resonate with domestic and international audiences (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Van Dijk, 2005). This process aligns with constructivist approaches in international relations, which emphasise the significance of language, norms, and shared beliefs in shaping state behaviour and the international order (Wendt, 1999). Strategies such as appealing to emotions (particularly fear), invoking hypothetical futures, demonstrating rationality, citing expert voices, and framing actions as altruistic are commonly employed to naturalise and secure acceptance for political agendas in the global arena (Reyes, 2011). By constructing ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narratives, political discourse not only delineates allies and adversaries but also legitimises the use of power within the international system, illustrating how symbolic power operates through language to shape perceptions of legitimacy and authority in international relations (Bourdieu, 2001; Fairclough, 2003). Precisely, in the domain of International Relations, analysing legitimization involves unpacking “how political actors justify their policy stances before concrete audiences, seeking to secure audiences’ assent that their positions are indeed legitimate” (Goddard & Krebs, 2018, p. 67).

## **Research Methodology**

This section explores the methods and frameworks employed to analyze Chinese diplomatic discourse targeted at an Indian audience, detailing the data collection process, analytical tools, and theoretical foundations underpinning the methodological foundations of this study.

With reference to the existing literature, in order to understand a country’s official position in specific matters, IR scholars (Hansen, 2008; Mochtak & Turcsanyi, 2021; Oren & Brummer, 2020; Surowiec, 2016) have employed several data collection methods. Neumann highlights that diplomatic communications are “well-planned and rehearsed”, aiming for appreciation through “domestic political values and practices” (Neumann, 2021, p. 24). Semenov

et al. noted that China's diplomatic discourse reflects how its diplomacy communicates, understands, and defines its goals (Semenov & Tsvyk, 2021, p. 566). This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in the interdisciplinary framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and supported by tools from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Reyes, 2011). The article explores how political actors use language to legitimize specific courses of action, particularly within the context of Sino-Indian relations. The methodological approach is grounded in the premise that language is not merely a neutral medium of communication but a powerful instrument of control and symbolic power (Hodge & Kress, 1993; Bourdieu, 2001). Specifically, the present study applies Van Leeuwen's (1996, 2007, 2008) typology of legitimation strategies, which is further extended by Reyes (2011) to identify five discursive strategies commonly used in political discourse. These include: (1) *Legitimization through Emotions*, particularly fear, to construct a binary opposition between "us" and "them" and to mobilize public support; (2) *Legitimization through a Hypothetical Future*, which utilizes conditional constructions to predict adverse outcomes if certain actions are not undertaken; (3) *Legitimization through Rationality*, where decisions are framed as the result of deliberative, evidence-based reasoning; (4) *Legitimization through Voices of Expertise*, involving the citation of authoritative figures and institutions to strengthen claims; and (5) *Legitimization through Altruism*, which frames political actions as moral imperatives aimed at protecting vulnerable populations or ensuring intergenerational well-being.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis Procedure***

To minimize potential bias in the selection of texts, a two-stage process was employed to compile the corpus for this study. In the first stage, efforts were directed toward identifying articles authored by Chinese political actors and published in Indian national English-language print media. This included contributions from Chinese ambassadors, consulate generals, the Chinese Premier, and state-affiliated media outlets such as *Xinhua*. These articles, whether published as editorials or advertorials, were sourced directly from the official websites of the respective media houses. Additionally, the official website of the Chinese Embassy in India, which often republishes these media appearances, was consulted to ensure comprehensive coverage and cross-verification of the collected texts.

The second stage focused on the selection of the 219 articles authored by Chinese political actors followed a clearly defined and purposive set of criteria rather than a random sampling approach. The central objective was to build a coherent and thematically relevant corpus for discourse analysis, ensuring that all selected texts were connected by a shared focus on China's public diplomacy efforts in the Indian context. Accordingly, the selected articles were required to meet two key conditions. First, they had to be authored by recognized



Chinese political figures or institutions, including ambassadors, consulate generals, the Chinese Premier, and state-affiliated media such as *Xinhua*, and had to appear in Indian national English-language print media or official government websites. Second, the content of the articles had to address at least one of the core thematic areas relevant to China's public diplomacy, such as strategic narratives, bilateral relations, regional cooperation, soft power projection, or foreign policy positioning. The inclusion of speeches, press releases, reports, and ministerial statements from official Chinese platforms further contributed to building a diverse but thematically consistent corpus. As Crespy (2015) notes, maintaining a degree of homogeneity across the corpus through shared characteristics enhances comparability and minimizes bias, while the inclusion of a broad set of sources strengthens the representativeness of the sample.

In order to operationalize the legitimization categories following a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, each political speech was subjected to systematic textual analysis, focusing on grammatical, lexical, and rhetorical features that actualize these strategies. Special emphasis was placed on the use of transitivity structures, modality, referential and predicative strategies, in line with the analytical principles of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Reyes, 2011). This framework enabled a detailed examination of how legitimizing discourse functions as a tool of symbolic power in the political domain.

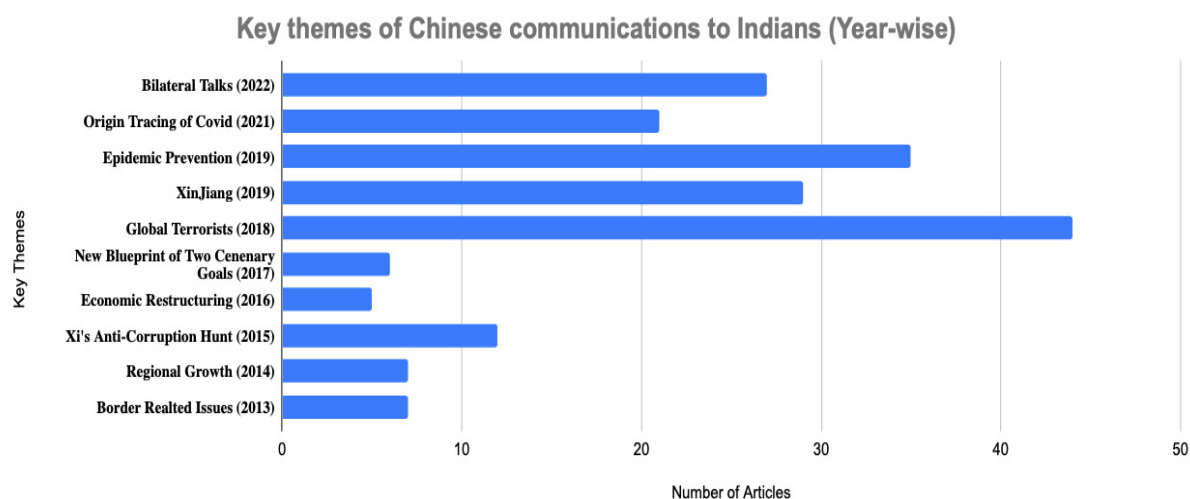
The study employs a multi-step interpretive methodology designed to uncover the discursive mechanisms through which political actors construct legitimacy. The first phase involved a detailed textual analysis through close reading of each speech, aimed at identifying recurring discursive patterns and themes by detecting the keywords. This was followed by a categorization process, whereby speech excerpts were classified according to one or more of the five legitimization strategies outlined by Reyes (2011). Subsequently, linguistic annotation was carried out to detect specific linguistic markers, including evaluative adjectives, modal verbs, verbal processes, and metaphorical expressions that signal legitimation efforts. Finally, a process of contextualization situated these discursive elements within the broader socio-political landscape of Chinese strategic narrative towards India, taking into account the ideological underpinnings that shaped these communicative acts. Together, this layered analytical approach facilitates a nuanced interpretation of how language functions as a strategic tool in political discourse, activating shared cultural meanings, collective memory, and appeals to national identity to justify policy decisions. This holistic discourse analysis approach, as advocated by Parks & Peters (2022), amalgamates qualitative, manual, and computer-assisted text analysis methodologies to ensure comprehensive conclusions, thereby eradicating potential biases (Pashakhanlou, 2017). In order to support the corpus-driven discourse analysis, the NVivo 14 software was adopted, additionally Sketch Engine was

employed to filter out the keywords, this tool compares corpora and identifies what is unique or typical in a focused corpus in comparison with a reference corpus. This corpus of this study consists of year-wise corpora from 2013 to 2022. In order to identify the yearly key words, this study keeps a certain year of corpus as a focused corpus while keeping the entire corpus (from 2013 to 2022) as the reference corpus. For instance, in order to identify the keywords of 2013, the 2013 is the focused corpus while the entire corpus from 2013 to 2022 is the reference corpus.

## Findings

### *Deductive Discourse Analysis*

This section lists the broader themes of Chinese strategic communication in India through the analysis of the keywords. The central theme of any text is understood by employing the hermeneutical discourse analysis. This shares clues on how the main theme of certain texts are interrelated with a broader argument. The hermeneutic encircles a chunk of a discourse within the entire discourse, complementing each other (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1987; Thatchenkery, 1992 & 2001). Ergo, the word frequencies are the device to filter out the theme of the hermeneutic discourse. The following result has been noted.



**Figure 1.** Graphical distribution of the yearly main themes

The prime keywords represent the prime themes on which Chinese political communication towards India was encircled in recent years. This study shows terms surrounding a few topics of importance to the Chinese government: Covid-19, origin of Covid-19 and Xinjiang

followed by Xi's anti-corruption campaign since Xi took office. These topics are chosen by the Chinese government to write about, to legitimize their position in front of the Indian public with the help of Indian media. These findings are aligned with the outcome of recent research conducted by Brookings, this report also confirms the prominence of these topics in Chinese messaging in recent years across the globe (Foreign Policy at Brookings, 2022). This study has also concluded that terms like "Xinjiang debunked" and "Xinjiang terrorism" across all the Chinese propaganda machinery (Foreign Policy at Brookings, 2022).

Except the volume of content produced by China in Indian English media on and surrounding these topics, Xinjiang and Covid-19 issues received the highest amount of attention to legitimize China's stance on the same to the Indian public. The following part discusses the kind of narrative and analogies that are used by most of the Chinese authors to discuss these topics and legitimize their stance.

### ***Legitimization Strategies***

#### ***Legitimization through Emotions***

As social actors, the diplomatic discourse often evokes different types of emotions to legitimize their actions and words. This discursive strategy is used by the actors to set an emotional state, elicit a mental thus behavioural response from the interlocutors (Reyes, 2011). The social actors' strokes to emotions are aimed to construct, debate and impose the actor's perception of the reality on the targeted audience. As a consequence, the reality perceived by actors could be multiplied amongst the targeted audience, which forms a homogeneous vision of the community of social behaviour (Reyes, 2010). Hence, the words to retrieve any emotional experience are used by the actors, through which emotions and meanings are constructed and shaped in a natural manner (Bakhtin, 1981). At times the actor, in their assigned role of character, mixes their personal experience to co-create a relevant narrative (Koven, 2002). For instance,

Together, we not only **defeated the fascists** but also dealt a heavy blow to hegemony and **broke the foundations of colonialism**. Together, we brought about an **awakening in colonial and semi-colonial countries** and ushered in a **new wave of independence movements** (Le, 2013).

See Appendix A, section 1 for more such examples.

To "tell the story of China", China needs to strengthen the audience's awareness and promote the story and image construction of the diplomatic narrative model (Yang & Pan, 2021). The new trend of the development of public diplomacy communication also shows that

the customized and story-oriented communication content guided by the international public information demand has a better communication effect (Yang & Pan 2021). Telling true, vivid and individual emotional stories in a narrative way understood and familiar to foreigners creates a positive image of China. Shaping the good image of China in the international community involves the issue of “what to say”. It is necessary to focus on the analysis of the group psychological and cultural characteristics of different international audiences, carefully select the topics of curiosity and doubts of international audiences and answer the important questions about the Communist Party of China in a targeted way (Yang & Pan, 2021).

Vivid individual and emotional stories coming from Chinese top leadership such as Chinese premier Li Keqiang demand for better efficacy in manipulating public opinion. As mentioned by careful selection of the topics to better connect, Dr. Kotnis, Tagore, Buddhism, and the victimhood of colonialism are the most frequently repeated themes in the Chinese side’s attempts to connect with Indians emotionally. For instance,

**“My heart goes out to the people of China in deep sympathy and in admiration for their heroic struggle and endless sacrifice in the cause of their country’s freedom and integrity against tremendous odds”,** and how Rabindranath Tagore supported the Chinese people’s liberation cause with the power of his pen (Le, 2015).

Fear is the most used emotion to trigger the interlocutors; hence fear is employed in the persuasion process (Reyes, 2011). In a political discourse, fear is mostly developed with demonization of the actor’s enemy, whose athletics and actions are negatively attributed. Besides the actor and targeted people, this process overtly and covertly shows the relevant parties who possess threats to the actor’s positions (Van Leeuwen, 2007; 2018). The following communications exemplify China’s use of fear to legitimize its positions in front of the Indian public. **“China’s interests are endangered, we will hit back resolutely”** (Sun Weidong 2019 - Chinese ambassador to India from 21 July 2019 to October 2022) and **“China and India, having both suffered from the menace of terrorism, share common interests and face similar challenges in fighting terrorism”** (Li Keqiang 2015 - Chinese Premier from 2013 to 2023).

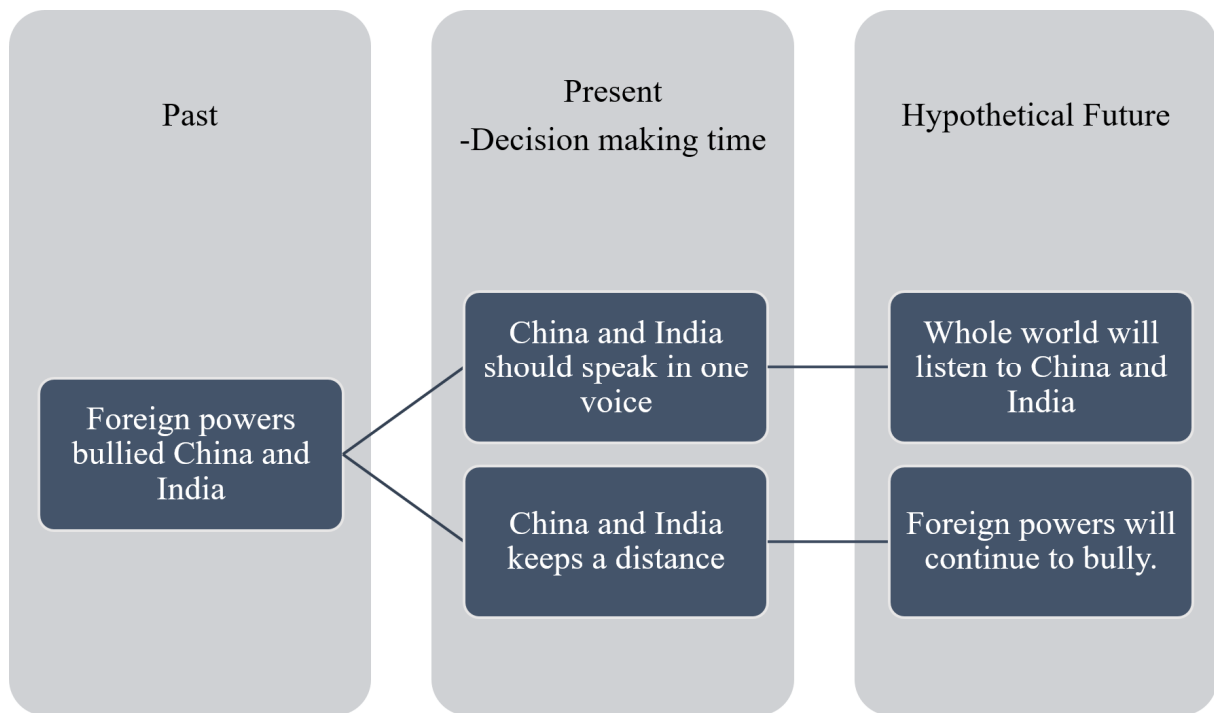
The discursive patterns under this section covertly and overtly indicate a third party, as an origin of threat to instigate the fear. For instance, foreign power, with aggression, looking for colonialism, hegemony etc. The words such as “sacrifice”, “regrettable”, “solidarity”, “accusation”, “prejudice”, “grateful”, “suffer from terrorism”, “tortuous journey” are few of the repeated words from the corpus surfacing in China’s strategic communication. Furthermore, the words loaded with emotions are used to argue that China and India played benevolent

roles to help each other since the ancient civilizational exchanges. Moreover, this narrative has been linked with China and India as the anti-colonial forces, which covertly indicates the West as the colonial force. Promotion of this kind of narrative can be understood as an attempt to legitimize China's stance by provoking Indians' colonial agony, while looking for solidarity for the "torturous journey" caused by a common enemy.

In order to exploit the emotion of fear to legitimize the actor's actions and deeds, the actor tends to create an imaginary situation to instigate fear in the targeted audience by speculations, drawing on extreme examples without mentioning detailed facts and their origin which conforms to the previous studies such as Fairclough (2003). For instance, the Chinese ambassador to India stated "the world...is still far from being peaceful and tranquil. Traditional and non-traditional security threats are intertwined...many global challenges still elude us" (Le Yucheng 2015- Chinese Ambassador to India from 12 September 2014 to 1 April 2016). This kind of phenomenon is termed liquid fear, which is derivative of the actor's interiorization, which is constituted of "a vision of the world that includes insecurity and vulnerability", most importantly, this fear is instigated "even in the absence of a genuine threat" (Bauman, 2006, p. 3). The liquid fear is produced with an expectation of a reaction from the targeted audience, to safeguard them against the threats (Hewer, 2022), which as a result attempts to legitimize the actor's position. Such liquid fear is instrumentalized by the actors to legitimize their words and actions in multiple ways and to create a favourable discursive environment.

### *Legitimization through Hypothetical Future*

Legitimization is often attempted through a timeframe of common past, present and future as well (Reyes, 2011). It has been noted that the political actor tends to emphasize the present situation to take certain decisions for the future and to materialize them through action (Reyes, 2011). These decisions and the respective actions are likely to be related to a cause, which is justified by some occurrence in the past, and a consequence which might occur in the future (Reyes, 2011). In other words, the cause of a present problem is rooted in the past and in order to avoid the same problem in the future, certain decisions and actions are legitimized. In this way, we (the actor and targeted people) enjoy a successful time in a hypothetical future created in the discourse. See Appendix A section 2 for relevant examples of hypothetical future communicated by the Chinese officials with Indians through Indian media.



**Figure 2.** Graphical Representation of legitimization strategy through creation of hypothetical future

Findings reveal that the cause from the past is highlighted through the portrayal of the colonial period as a torturous journey. Consequently, India's favourable view of China is demanded as China and India as the resistant force against the powers seeking hegemony. Under this dynamic of legitimization process, the hypothetical future proposed by the actor is projected as the consequence, only if the other party (India) agrees with the actor. Thus, the actor projects two potential future situations:

1. If we don't go by the actor's words, the torturous journey will repeat itself.

For instance, "China must be fully aware that **if** we stick to the narrow thinking of "India or China", both countries will lose" (Tang Guocai, 2020 - Chinese Consulate General to Mumbai from January 2019 to February 2022). Moreover, "an Asian century that people expect would not come **if** China and India, the two most populous countries in the world, failed to live in harmony and achieve common development" (Li Keqiang, 2013 - Chinese Premier from 2013 to 2023).

2. If we go by the actor's proposal, our future will be bright.

Here, the actor attempts to depict its proposal as the potential solution to get rid of the dark past, and creates legitimization by referring to the discourse of value, which is encapsulated as "moral evaluation" (Van Leeuwen, 2007, pp. 109-110). For instance, "China-India Cooperation Will Help Build a **Bright Future**" (Sun Weidong, 2019 - Chinese ambassador to India from 21

July 2019 to October 2022). In addition, “some western forces won’t drop their colonial mentality” and “divide and rule” strategy. **If** we learn from history, stay united, China and India together **shall** lead in recuperating, stabilizing and rejuvenating our countries, civilizations and the world” (Tang Guocai, 2020 - Chinese Consulate General to Mumbai from January 2019 to February, 2022).

In these cases, the actor prefers to use conditional sentence structures to project a hypothetical future for the targeted audience. From a linguistic lens, these sentences are largely constructed by “protasis ‘If’ + past or present cause, apodosis + would/may/might + infinitive” or words denoting future tense. One of the examples surfaced from the corpus of this study is the hypothetical future created by the aforementioned sentence to show the benefits of a united China and India. In this case, if this appeal is approved by the targeted country’s government, India, the targeted public, Indians, would find themselves rejuvenating their country. Through linguistic choices, this sentence exemplifies the way political actors create hypothetical futures to legitimize their actions. Consequently, the future is articulated as the desirable place to be for the targeted audience, which is a reclamation of the civilizational glory. However, while showing the future as the desirable place for the targeted audience, the actor’s interest plays a significant ideological role as the dominant political actor and the exercise of power and control over the future situation mostly remains covert (Dunmire, 2007, p. 19).

### *Legitimization through Rationality*

Legitimization through rationality refers to the theoretical rationalisation that serves as the modus operandi of a particular society (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Having gone through the primary data, the analysis revealed that the rationality in Chinese strategic communication towards Indians can be understood with the concept by Geertz (1973) between “experience-distant” and “experience-near” (p. 57). Experience-distant concepts are “one[s] that specialists of one sort or another . . . employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims” (Schaffer, 2016, p. 2). The opposite is experience-near concepts, which refers to “one[s] that someone . . . might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others” (Conrad, 1999). The latter way of communication is known as commonplaces, which indicates the shared knowledge or identity amongst the actors and the targeted audience (Wodak et al. 2009). In the process of legitimizing a few statistics along with rational analogies are detected in the corpus, which tries to rationally legitimize Chinese position to India. In this section, the vast size of both markets, as well as their populations and corresponding production and consumption capabilities, are repeatedly emphasized. Additionally, several

statistics from both countries are contextualized by comparing them with global figures. See Appendix A section 3 for examples.

### *Legitimization through Voices of Experts*

‘Voice of expert’ is a process of legitimization through authorization by experts (Van Leeuwen, 2008). The actors tend to highlight experts’ voices in the context of their own communication to authorize their position and proposal. While producing institutional and official discourse, the actors use this discourse strategy to present themselves as authoritative sources of information (Martín Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997, p. 530). In relation to Sino-Indian relations, the words from eminent figures such as Deng Xiaoping, Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore, Rajiv Gandhi, Sun Yet-Sen, Zhou Enlai, are used to be more relatable and credible to the targeted audience, while legitimizing their contemporary stance. Xi Jinping, as the expert voice, tops the list of being quoted in Chinese strategic communication with Indians. In relation to journalistic production, the experts are one of the essential factors (Albaek et al., 2003).

Besides the aforementioned names, the popular subject matter experts are cited to reinforce a certain narrative, credibility and legitimacy (Conrad, 1999; Coleman, 1997), especially in the controversial issues such as geo-politics, such as Chinese educator Tan Yunshan, present Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi. Chinese and Indian leaders from both the past and the present are mentioned in the Chinese strategic communication to legitimize their position. For instance, **“Deng Xiaoping once said, “A true Asian century only comes when China and India are both developed” (Le Yucheng, 2015).** Conforming to the responsibility that comes with the experts’ position, their discourse on Sino-Indian issues is balanced and mostly positive. See Appendix A, section 4 for the examples.

### *Legitimization through Altruism*

Altruism is a discursive practice where the actors legitimize showing others as the beneficiary of their action (Reyes, 2011). In the process of justifying the actors’ actions, if the actions are shown to be done for others, especially for less privileged ones, the innocent and vulnerable, the justification tends to be well-perceived by the mass. Altruism, as a discursive strategy, is mainly used to circumvent judgments on actors’ behaviour while flaunting a particular community as the beneficiary of actors’ generosity (Reyes, 2011). The actor claims the well-being of the target audience as their concern and they expect nothing in return (Reyes, 2011), which gives birth to the idea of the actor’s value system. By projecting an intention of service for the targeted audience, the actor intends to legitimize their actions and words (Kocourek, 2017). Therefore, the legitimization through altruism helps the actor to



highlight the social good over the self-good in front of the targeted audience.

In this section, how Chinese exports to India help the Indian economy, the manufacturing sector of India has been mentioned repeatedly, while no mention of Chinese income from the same exchanges has been detected. Moreover, Chinese actors highlight China's acceptance of India to become a partner in multiple China-led multilateral forums, such as SCO and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). The aforementioned instances promote the narrative that China has assisted India in enhancing its economy and regional stature. However, they do not address the trade deficit that China maintains with India and the investments that India contributes to organizations such as the SCO and AIIB. See Appendix A, section 5 for the examples.

## **Conclusion**

In order to comprehend China's public diplomacy through local media in India, this study collected and analysed 219 communications to the Indian public done by the Chinese side through Indian English media. This study found that the Chinese representatives actively communicate with the Indian public through English Indian media. This article explores the primary themes on which China communicated, and how China sought to rhetorically legitimize its stance to the Indian populace through local Indian media. While Chinese political communication has been widely studied in various contexts, India, despite its complex relationship with China, has not been the focal point of extensive research. This study identifies and addresses this gap in the literature. Employing the analytical framework proposed by Reyes (2011), this study examined the process and various steps of legitimation in the collected data.

In India's case, the lack of competitive counter-narratives is prominent. A group of researchers claimed that Indian media discourse on China is largely consistent with European and American discourse as Indian media outsources China related news to European and American agencies (Ji et al., 2016). Therefore, the Indian public's perception towards China can be encapsulated into three categories, a. reserved and friendly, b. strategic contact c. China's growing military and economic strength as a strategic confrontational challenge (Liu, 2014). Therefore, China's legitimization strategy to the Indian people through Indian media is a way to instil a second perspective within Indian public discourse, which largely aligns with Western ones. This also explains why China wants to tell its story to an Indian audience in order to eliminate what it sees as a "Western bias" in European, American and Indian media reports.

The study's findings suggest that China's legitimization strategies also exhibit incoherence

and self-contradiction. For instance, while China presents itself as a proponent of diverse political structures, it concurrently criticizes Western nations. Furthermore, the findings also reveal that legitimization strategies extend beyond the Sino-Indian context, serving to rationalize China's domestic political positions, including attempts to legitimize its stance on issues like Xinjiang to the Indian public.

While conducting this deductive and qualitative analysis, the study also unearthed evidence conducive to an inductive exploration, which is complementary in nature and therefore calls for a future study. Moreover, as digital diplomacy continues to expand rapidly and traditional media outlets increasingly utilize social media platforms, there is a growing need for a nuanced discursive analysis of China's strategic communication across these channels. Such analysis would require a specialized and concentrated study to effectively capture the multifaceted nature of China's communication strategies in the digital age, while navigating the complexities of online discourse to achieve its diplomatic objectives.

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## ■ Shubham Karmakar

Shubham Karmakar is a PhD candidate at the University of Basel, Switzerland. His research focuses on China's public diplomacy, propaganda, and influence operations, with particular attention to efforts targeting India.

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Shubham's research focuses on the media's role in political communication, with expertise in qualitative and quantitative analysis tools. With academic training in Sinology, Applied Linguistics, and International Relations, he has published and presented research internationally and taught Chinese language and linguistics in India and Ireland.

## Appendix

### *Section 1 : Legitimization through emotions*

*For instance:*

- Together, we not only **defeated the fascists** but also dealt a heavy blow to hegemony and **broke the foundations of colonialism**. Together, we brought about an **awakening in colonial and semi-colonial countries** and ushered in a **new wave of independence movements** (Le, 2013).
- “**My heart goes out to the people of China in deep sympathy and in admiration for their heroic struggle and endless sacrifice in the cause of their country’s freedom** and integrity against tremendous odds”, and how Rabindranath Tagore supported the Chinese people’s liberation cause with the power of his pen.
- “The atmospherics of the visit and **chemistry between the two leaders** was widely reported throughout China. One of many impressive moments that was vividly captured was where **President Xi tried his hands at a charkha** with Prime Minister Modi by his side **at Sabarmati Ashram**. **The depiction connoted mutual bonding**, and the resolve that with trust and sincerity the two neighbours can join hands in weaving a beautiful canvas of **shared friendship and development with trust and sincerity**” (Le, 2014).
- “I can still recall the scene when **President Xi was welcomed** by a sea of smiling and cheering faces **in Gujarat where Xuan Zang had stayed, which touched not only President Xi’s heart but also the hearts of entire 1.3 billion Chinese people.**” (Le, 2014).
- “At present, China-India relations stand at a new starting point and usher in **new opportunities**. We should **draw wisdom from our thousands of years of civilizations** and explore a way for neighboring and emerging major countries to get along with each other in accordance with enhancing mutual trust, focusing on cooperation, managing differences and seeking common development” (Sun, 2020).
- “**The great people of India**, spurred by the new wave and after a strenuous struggle, finally **broke the shackles of colonialism** and became independent in 1947. I’ve been reading the history of the independence movement in India and visited the National Gandhi Museum. **I was deeply inspired and touched by the Indian people’s national spirit and great sacrifice.** There was then, as now, much empathy between our two peoples” (Le, 2015).

- “I learned that the Chinese donor is a newspaper editor, who was born in 1978 in Anhui Province. Asked why he donated his stem cells, he simply said, **“As a father of a 12-years-old, I understand how the Indian boy's parents must feel.”** There are over a million volunteers like him in China” (Le, 2015).
- “This reminds me of another moving story last year, widely reported in both China and India. A little girl from a silk-dyeing worker's family in Shaoxing City, Zhejiang Province, suffered from leukemia and **needed blood donation** every other day to sustain her life. When **an Indian businessman in Shaoxing**, Mr. Neeraj Punhani, heard this cry of help, he used the WeChat App to summon nearly 100 Indian businessmen there. Within 24 hours, 33,800 ml blood **was donated for the Chinese girl**. When the grateful Chinese family expressed their heartfelt thanks to these Indian friends, they just said that **when an Indian businessman in Zhejiang suddenly fell into serious illness in 2013, 76 ordinary Chinese volunteers donated blood for him** without any hesitation” (Le, 2015).
- **“The death of George Floyd, triggering anti-colonial and anti-slavery** waves across the world, exposes **the hypocrisy of Western democracy** and fully demonstrates there is still a long way ahead for mankind to pursue true liberation and freedom. **Both India and China are victims of colonialism**, and border issue is a scar left by the colonialists which should not be a permanent trap for China-India relations” (Tang, 2020).
- “China has actively promoted **global solidarity in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic**. China has provided 1.2 billion doses of finished and bulk vaccines to more than 100 countries and international organizations. China will strive to provide a total of 2 billion doses of vaccines to the world by the end of this year. In addition to donating \$100 million to COVAX, **China will donate another 100 million doses of vaccines to other developing countries in the course of this year**” (Sun, 2021).
- “Under the strong leadership of the Party and the government, China launched a massive people's **war against poverty**, opened a magnificent chapter in history, and **countless touching stories emerged prominently**” (Sun, 2021)
- “When **India fought the second wave of pandemic**, China was not absent or sat back apathetically. Our purpose is to **save every precious life**, and contribute to overcoming the pandemic by mankind at an early date” (Sun, 2021).

*Fear:*

- “The five principles prevailed against specific historical backgrounds. After world war ii, **the global colonial system collapsed** and a large number of national states emerged independent in Asia and Africa. The most urgent task for these countries at the time was **to safeguard national independence and sovereignty, prevent external invasion or interference**, and establish relations with other countries on an **equal footing**, so as to strive for a peaceful international environment” (Wei, 2014).
- “History moves forward in an upward if **tortuous journey**, and progress is the course for human society. In that war, as in previous struggles, justice ultimately prevailed and peace won the day. **The collective victory**, though at great cost, marked a major turning point in the history of the world. **Together, we not only defeated the Fascists**, but also **dealt a heavy blow to hegemony and broke the foundation of colonialism**. **Together, we brought about an awakening in the colonial and semi-colonial countries and ushered in a new wave of independence movement around the globe**” (Le, 2015).
- “**China and India**, having both **suffered** from the menace of **terrorism**, share common interests and **face similar challenges in fighting terrorism**. **China stands ready to deepen counterterrorism cooperation with India** to better safeguard the development and **security interests of our two countries**” (Li, 2015).

## *Section 2 : Legitimization through hypothetical future*

*For instance:*

- “**President Xi pointed out** that as two important forces in the process of multi-polarisation, and as countries of great influence in the world, **if China and India speak with one voice the whole world will listen, and if China and India join hands the whole world will take notice**” (Le, 2013).
- “I believe that **China and India have enough foresight** and ability to join hands to realize “**Dragon-Elephant Tango**”, **create a brilliant future in the next 70 years** and write together a new chapter **in building a community with a shared future for mankind!**” (Sun, 2020).
- “China is more developed than before, but it remains a developing country. **Even if China becomes strong one day, it will never embark on the doomed path of seeking hegemony**. We suffered immensely from foreign bullying, wars and chaos and know so well that the same tragedy should not be allowed to happen to anyone ever again” (Li, 2013).

- **“We hope to combine China’s “Open to the West” with India’s “Look East Policy” to achieve better connectivity with a Sino-Indian railway** apart from the BCIM economic corridor. Economic cooperation between China and India will be enhanced to a new level by closer road and railway connectivity. (Wei, 2014).
- “China aims to accomplish the task of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2020 when the Communist Party of China celebrates its centenary anniversary. Building on this achievement, we will strive for developing China into a **strong modern socialist country by 2050** when the country celebrates its centenary anniversary.” (Luo, 2017).
- “In the future, **China and India** should comprehensively deepen mutual **political trust, economic and trade cooperation** as well as people-to-people exchanges” (Luo, 2019).
- “I believe that **China and India have enough foresight** and ability to join hands to realize **“Dragon-Elephant Tango”, create brilliant future in the next 70 years** and write together a new chapter **in building a community with a shared future for mankind!**” (Sun, 2020).
- “An Asian century that people expect would not come if China and India, the two most populous countries in the world, failed to live in harmony and achieve common development. Asia's future hinges on China and India” (Li Keqiang, 2013).
- “Coming Together on Climate: China-India Cooperation Will Help Build a **Bright Future**” (Sun, 2019).

### *Section 3: Legitimization through rationality*

- “As an old Chinese saying goes, **“it’s better to pass on fishing skills than to hand out fish.”** Developments the golden key to sustainable poverty reduction” (Sin, 2020).
- “Both China and **India are big countries in size and in population.** Together, the populations of our two countries exceed **2.5 billion** and account for nearly **40% of the world’s total.** We are viewed as the two **most important emerging markets**” (Sun, 2020)
- “The world looks to **Asia** to be **the engine driving the global economy.** This would be **impossible without the two powerhouses of China and India.** **Our two countries need to work hand in hand** if Asia is to become the anchor of world peace” (Li Keqiang, 2013).

- “Manufacturing: For China and India, both populous countries, manufacturing is to the economy what the heart is to a human body, serving as the foundation of economic development. The world is at the cusp of a new round of industrial revolution triggered by technological innovation. Manufacturing industry of China and India is facing opportunities and challenges” (Wei Wei, 2014).
- “China’s further opening up to the west echoes well with India’s “look east” policy. China and India should give full play to each other’s advantages, deepen mutually beneficial cooperation, cooperate on the BCIM economic corridor, the silk road economic belt, the 21st century maritime silk road, and establish a China and India double-engine powered “trans-Himalaya economic growth region,” so that our dreams of development and prosperity can interconnect” (Wei Wei, 2014).
- “President Xi pointed out that as two important forces in the process of multi-polarization, and as countries of great influence in the world, if China and India speak with one voice the whole world will listen, and if China and India join hands the whole world will take notice” (Le Yucheng, 2014).
- “China’s newly released strategy of “Made in China 2025” and Prime Minister Modi’s “Make in India” strategy are compatible and complementary” (Le Yucheng, 2015).
- “China is still the main engine driving the world economic growth.”... The good news, nonetheless, is that this year India is still the third largest engine pulling the world economy forward (Cheng Guangzhong, 2016).

#### ***Section 4: Legitimization through voices of expertise***

*For instance:*

- “**Deng Xiaoping** once said, “**A true Asian century only comes when China and India are both developed**”.” In addition, “**Mahatma Gandhi** once observed that as a friend of China, I long for the day when **a free India and a free China will cooperate together in friendship and brotherhood** for their own good and **for the good of Asia and the world**” (Le, 2013).
- “Recently, **Chinese President Xi Jinping** put forward **a five-point proposal to promote China-India relations** which in short is to maintain strategic communication; harness each other’s comparative strengths and **expand win-win cooperation; strengthen cultural ties**; expand coordination and **collaboration in multilateral affairs**; accommodate each other’s core concerns and **properly handle problems and differences** existing between the two countries” (Wei, 2013).

- “During his visit to India, President **Xi Jinping** reached important agreement with Indian leaders on industrial park cooperation in India. **China and India** are the **world's major manufacturer and service provider respectively**. Each with distinctive features, **the two economies have a lot to offer each other**” (Li, 2015).
- “When **Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi** paid a historic visit to China in 1988, I was working in the Asian Department of the Foreign Ministry of China. I still remember what **Deng Xiaoping** said when he met him, “**Only when China and India have developed will a real Asian century emerge**”. I have high hopes and great optimism for the prospects of China-India relations (Luo, 2016).
- Just like **Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi** said, both sides should make sure that China-India relations do not derail, confront, or go out of control, and make the **Himalayan region a new highland for Asia’s development**” (Luo, 2017).
- In modern times, the two countries have furthered their interactions. Chinese revolutionaries like **Dr. Sun Yat-sen** voiced support for the **Indian independence movement**” (Luo, 2019).
- “Famous **Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore** visited China twice, established the **Cheena Bhavan** (China College) at India’s Visva- Bharati University, and called for **spreading Eastern philosophy** alongside **Chinese educator Tan Yunshan**” (Luo, 2019).
- “**Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai** and **Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru** jointly developed the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which have made great contributions to the construction of the new international order. “**Hindi-Cheeni bhai-bhai**” (“Indians and Chinese are brothers” in Hindi) became a **buzz phrase** that has inspired generations of young people to commit to consolidating China-India friendship” (Luo, 2019).

### ***Section 5: Legitimization through altruism***

*For instance:*

- Made in China” tags enjoy a global reputation. China has plenty of resources and experience in manufacturing and we have the **willingness and ability to help our neighbouring countries, including India, to boost their manufacturing sector** (Wei, 2014).
- **China has welcomed** and supported **India** to become a full member in **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)**. We hope the **Indian side would support** China’s

effort to develop relations with South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Le, 2014).

- “China will continue making development the top priority, reform and open up, and promote further integration into the world. It will present a greater opportunity for China to advance mutually beneficial cooperation with India and the rest of the world” (Luo, 2017).
- “The **Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China** and Ministry of External Affairs of India have **made great efforts** in coordination and established the Contact Mechanism **for Indian Pilgrims**. The **government of TAR has undertaken heavy logistics work**. As **Kailash Mansarovar** is located in the **Qinghai-Tibet Plateau**, which is known as **Roof of the World**, the natural conditions over there are harsh” (Chinese Embassy in India, 2019).
- “China's investment to India **offers great opportunities** for “Make in India” and local employment” (Sun, 2020).