

Research on the Coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative and a Community with Shared Future for Mankind by Mainstream Media in the United States——Taking the three major mainstream media in the United States as an example

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Abstract: Since China put forward the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind, mainstream media in the United States such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* have given continuous reports. As the world's superpower, the United States has a developed media system and a wide range of influence. The study extracted 173 valid texts from May 2015 to March 2020, among which only 5 reports were on a community with shared future for mankind. American media mainly reported from five aspects including economy, politics, cultural, security and environment, although there is no lack of certain sounds, there was more negative reports. It can provide a reference basis for our accurate response and creating a positive international public opinion environment that grasping the reporting trends on the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind accurately.

Keywords: The Belt and Road Initiative; A community with shared future for mankind; Mainstream media in the United States; Research on public opinion

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1 Introduction

The United States as a superpower in the world, its mainstream media exerts great influence on itself as well as the Western countries and even the world. The mainstream media in the United States have paid constant attention to the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind. By subscribing to the accounts of *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, obtaining a total of 173 valid texts, this study extracted the reports on the Belt and Road Initiative and a community of shared future for mankind from May 2015 to March 2020, of which expressions used by the US media include the Belt and Road Initiative (Chinese official); One Belt One Road; The Belt and Road; (China)'s New Silk Road; Belt and Road Projects/Plan (B&R/BRI) and "Community of Common Destiny"; a Community of Common Destiny; A Community of/with Shared Future for Mankind/Humanity, among which only 5

were related to the thought of “a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind”. The study combed the reports of mainstream media in the United States from five dimensions on economy, politics, security, culture and environment. In view of the shaping and guiding role of the American mainstream media in the world public opinion field, to create a positive international public opinion environment in China, it’s conducive to grasp the coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind by the American mainstream media.

2 Economic dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind under American mainstream media’s coverage

In the economic field, American media mainly reported the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind from the three aspects of motivation, feasibility and influence:

2.1 Reports on economic motivation

First, alleviating domestic overcapacity and expanding overseas markets. American media believes that by improving infrastructure in countries along the route and expanding markets outside China, the Belt and Road Initiative aims to promote China’s industrial development which has been flagging in recent years. *The Washington Post* pointed out in a long article that China is seeking overseas markets to cope with the pressure of domestic economic slowdown, and the Belt and Road Initiative may help alleviate overcapacity in industries such as steel and cement^[1]. The Belt and Road Initiative focuses on infrastructure because Chinese construction companies need business^[2]. *The New York Times* also indicated domestic overcapacity in heavy industry as a big driver behind the plan^[3]. In the face of the increasingly mature domestic market, the desire to find new markets is the core objective for Chinese enterprises so as to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative^[4]. The Belt and Road Initiative also aims to expand the Chinese market beyond China’s borders. In other words, Eurasia will become an important market for China, which was from *The Wall Street Journal*^[5].

Second, establishing a sphere of influence centered on China and pulling developing countries into the so-called “debt trap”. According to the reports from American media, the Belt and Road Initiative forces countries along the route into a “debt trap” via providing loans. Some governments, including the United States, Japan and India, are concerned that Beijing is trying to

create a China-centric sphere of influence that would pull developing countries into a so-called “debt trap”, *The Washington Post* said in a report^[6]. *The New York Times* emphasized that China is saddling poor countries bear unsustainable debt economically unfeasible large-scale infrastructure projects^[7]. *The Wall Street Journal* also pointed out that providing unsustainable debt to developing countries is a usage of the Belt and Road Initiative^[8].

Third, enhancing China’s economic influence. American media hold the view that China is attempting to expand its economic influence, weaken the United States leadership advantage, maintain and enhance its status as a regional power in Eurasia through the Belt and Road Initiative. *The New York Times* pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative has made China as the new center in the world’s economic geography^[9]. Massive infrastructure projects constitute the backbone of China’s ambitious geo-economic agenda, and Xi Jinping is creating new markets for Chinese construction companies and exporting China-led development models^[10]. *The Washington Post* highlighted that the Belt and Road Initiative as an attempt to use Chinese-funded infrastructure which to expand its economic influence^[11]. *The Wall Street Journal* not only believed that to build new east-west trade links, Xi Jinping is positioning China as a champion of global trade through the Belt and Road Initiative^[12]. But also thought that in the wake of the global financial crisis, the Belt and Road initiative is a strategy to reduce China’s dependence on the US-led world economic order^[13].

2.2 Reports on economic feasibility

The mainstream media not only pay attention to the economic motivations, but also show doubt on the feasibility of the Belt and Road Initiative. According to the reports from media, countries along the route will face economic risks if they participate in the Belt and Road initiative. *The Washington Post* noted that countries along the route felt the initiative left them too indebted and would not provide jobs for local residents^[14]. The international airport, cricket ground and port built under the Belt and Road Initiative put Sri Lanka in debt, and China has already controlled this port^[15], which is to make countries along the route depend on China in economic area, the newspaper quoted an expert as saying^[16]. In the face of the recent outbreak of COVID-19 in Hubei, China, the newspaper quoted an observer as saying that the Belt and Road Initiative would be in a state of chaos, given the large number of Chinese workers employed by the belt and road Initiative, who would not be able to return to

work normally, or even face isolation after returning to work^[17]. *The New York Times* took a similar view, arguing that the Belt and Road Initiative could become a debt-laden quagmire for countries along the route^[18]. The newspaper also cited critics who says the funded program would bury recipients in debt^[19]. About 70 countries have participated in the Belt and Road Initiative, many of them are in debt trouble, from *The Wall Street Journal*^[20]. China is trying to gain global influence through lending to countries that can't afford these projects what critics called "debt trap diplomacy"^[21].

2.3 Reports on economic impact

First, increasing trade between Asia and Europe and promoting economic development. *The Washington Post* pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative has effectively stimulated intra-Asian trade growth^[22]. In addition, the paper believed that China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's "eastern action" policy can greatly accelerate the process of economic integration in the Indian Ocean region and the western Pacific^[23]. *The New York Times* also noted that the Belt and Road Initiative gradually expanded to the Middle East, Europe and East Africa, and plans to invest hundreds of billions of dollars in roads, railways, ports, power stations and other infrastructure^[24]. The Belt and Road Initiative could increase economic trade and create jobs, *The Wall Street Journal* said in a report^[25]. In a separate report, the paper quoted Ms. Schake, an observer, saying that the Belt and Road Initiative plans to build a China-centric global trade network that will extend to Western Europe, North Africa and Australia^[26].

Second, increasing the influence of the RMB. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, the Belt and Road Initiative is important for China to enhance its economic strength and increase the influence of its currency. The newspaper said that China has provided a route to Europe for the use of RMB by setting up its Union-Pay financial payment network abroad^[27]. "The use of RMB is likely to grow, driven by foreign investment in China's huge bond market," the newspaper quoted an economic expert's saying^[28].

3 Political dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind under American mainstream media's coverage

In the political field, American media reported on the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind from three aspects: motivation,

feasibility and influence.

3.1 Reports on political motivation

Geopolitical motivation. *The Washington Post* pointed out that China will use the Belt and Road Initiative to bring Eurasia into its development track, consolidate its influence in the entire Eurasian continent and build a series of alliances, which is a masterpiece of geopolitical strategy. The newspaper hold the view that the Belt and Road Initiative is a way for China which seeks to achieve global dominance in politics^[29], so as to set up a new world order which is dominated by China^[30]. The newspaper quoted an official of the United States Foreign Relations Commission as saying, "The Belt and Road Initiative is the most ambitious infrastructure investment effort in history and a disturbing extension of China's rising power^[31]." With regard to the concept of a community with shared future for mankind, the newspaper said China hopes that every member of the international community would share the responsibility for global governance^[32]. Building partnerships to make countries treat each other as equals^[33]. Meanwhile, the newspaper cited critics who argued that the push for a community with shared future for mankind masked China's pursuit of global dominance^[34]. *The New York Times* pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative is at the core of China's foreign policy and is causing geopolitical pressure. So countries are increasingly worried about becoming too dependent on China^[35]. *The Wall Street Journal* pointed out that as the United States retreats from its leading role on the world stage, Xi Jinping is exporting China's development model to countries along the route through the Belt and Road Initiative to fill this gap^[36]. In addition, in view of the signing of the Belt and Road Initiative agreement memorandum between Italy and China, the newspaper believes that Rome is helping China to expand its geopolitical influence^[37]. However, through *The Wall Street Journal*, the real political purpose of the Belt and Road Initiative is to establish high-level relationships that can lead to true military, diplomatic or trade alliances between countries^[38].

3.2 Reports on political feasibility

Political risk for participating countries. According to the media, the countries along the route face political problems such as political corruption, economic recession and power transfer of national leaders. As a result, investing in infrastructure in these countries is politically risky. Referring to the signing of the Belt and Road Initiative memorandum of understanding with China, *The Washington Post* pointed out that the

deal would bring no benefits to the Italian people and could make Italy a “client state”^[39]. There is not any democracy and transparency about the Belt and Road Initiative, and its top-down authoritarian nature means it is likely to fail to achieve its goals^[40]. BRI’s investment has also sparked a surge in local protests against China, where some funding priorities have been at the mercy of domestic politics, the paper quoted observers as saying^[41]. *The Wall Street Journal* also believes that China is being criticized for financing authoritarian regimes and countries with unsustainable debts, such as Venezuela^[42].

3.3 Reports on political influence

First, reshaping the geopolitical environment. According to the mainstream media in the United States, the Belt and Road Initiative has increased the geopolitical risk for participating countries. Responding to Italy’s decision to sign a memorandum of understanding with China, *The Washington Post* noted that Italy has formally joined China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, which is steadily reshaping the global geopolitical environment^[43]. Signing a memorandum of understanding with Italy makes it easier for Beijing to gain influence and trade goods in Western Europe^[44]. *The New York Times* argued that Rome failed to weigh geopolitical risks, failed to consult with western partners and underestimated China’s growing global ambitions^[45].

Second, reducing American political influence. In terms of the influence of the Belt and Road Initiative on the United States, *The Washington Post* pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative used economic advantages to compete for influence, and used its influence to take over African ports and national industries, and established a military base in Djibouti. The initiative undermines the leadership of the United States in transatlantic and global institutions that have helped maintain global stability since World War II^[46]. China’s construction of its first railway in Pakistan is destined to be an attempt by China to replace the United States in Pakistan, *The Wall Street Journal* said in response to China’s railway construction in Pakistan^[47].

Third, new colonialism. In terms of the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on participating countries, *The Washington Post* quoted critics who emphasized that the Belt and Road Initiative would bring negative effects to the host country, such as debt traps, land expropriation, corruption and environmental degradation. The newspaper quoted a warning from an Indian commentator, that is, a country caught in a debt quagmire with China may lose its most precious natural

assets and sovereignty^[48]. As for the “Pakistan economic corridor” project, the newspaper believes that the Belt and Road Initiative may have serious consequences for Pakistan’s financial and territorial sovereignty^[49]. In view of the increasingly serious debt crisis in Africa, *The Wall Street Journal* believes that China’s funding for a series of infrastructure projects through the Belt and Road Initiative has aggravated this problem, and even accused Beijing of pursuing colonial exploitation in Africa^[50].

Fourth, enhancing China’s political influence. In terms of the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative, *The Washington Post* thinks that China has strengthened its control over the South China Sea through the Belt and Road Initiative. China’s growing influence in countries along the route could make it a new partner in South Africa, Africa and the Middle East^[51]. In view of Sri Lanka’s government’s inability to repay China’s \$6 billion loan, the newspaper quoted critics as saying that China is engaged in “creditor imperialism” in the 21st century^[52].

4 Security dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind under American Mainstream media’s coverage

In addition to paying high attention to the economy and politics, the mainstream media in the United States also pay attention to the military and security. The whole is spread out according to the logic of motivation, feasibility and influence.

4.1 Reports on safety motivation

Building overseas military and achieving the purpose of military expansion. *The Washington Post* pointed out that most infrastructure can be used for both commercial and military purposes, which could benefit China’s military expansion^[53]. China aims to expand its presence in the indo-pacific through the Belt and Road Initiative, many of its projects can be regarded as military strategies rather than purely commercial^[54]. *The Wall Street Journal* also noted in a report that Beijing has established its first military logistics base in Djibouti, and that more bases are likely to follow in other countries. Chinese naval vessels and submarines have visited several of the bases^[55]. *The New York Times* argued that China’s infrastructure initiatives are actually aimed at fulfilling its military ambitions. Military projects such as China’s security assistance to Pakistan are part of the Belt and Road Initiative, which is explicitly tied to its military ambitions^[56].

4.2 Reports on safety feasibility

According to *The Washington Post*, the Belt and Road Initiative is more talk than reality. To be precise, it is a repackaging of the original project. The core countries in Europe believe that China's cash supply to poorer European countries through the Belt and Road Initiative will affect European cohesion. Therefore, European countries should be more cautious about this^[57].

4.3 Reports on safety impact

The Washington Post hold the view that China has increased its naval presence in the Indian Ocean region through the Belt and Road Initiative^[58]. The newspaper also pointed out that the "digital Silk Road" built by Chinese communications companies is a way for Chinese intelligence agencies to obtain overseas intelligence^[59]. *The New York Times* considered that China's seaports in Pakistan are of great strategic significance. Not only do they provide China with a faster route to the Arabian Sea, they also give Beijing a strategic card to play against India and the United States^[60]. In addition, regarding the signing of the Belt and Road Initiative memorandum of understanding between the Italian government and China's, the newspaper stressed that the Washington government is concerned about the involvement of its allies in the Belt and Road Initiative program and believes that the agreement may be a Trojan horse for China to destroy Italian industry. The United States is also concerned that China's growing international influence will lead to strategic penetration of the communications sector^[61], and has urged allies not to use products made by Huawei because they enable Chinese state espionage^[62].

5 Cultural and environmental dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind under American mainstream media's coverage

The reports of culture and environment on the Belt and Road Initiative are less than the first three fields. In the field of the environment, mainstream media in the United States focused on the negative environmental impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative for participating countries. In the field of culture, the mainstream media in the United States have focused their attention on China's increasing cultural influence.

Environmental dimension. *The Washington Post* said that many Latin American countries have criticized China for not doing enough to protect the environment in the investment sector, which could leave participating

countries facing growing water shortages^[63]. The newspaper also believed the AIIB's support for green projects will not alleviate China's dire state of environmental pollution^[64]. With regard to the concept of a community with shared future for mankind, *The Washington Post* hold the view that China hopes to play a leading role in the global climate issue, calling for the establishment of new major-country relations and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind^[65].

Cultural dimension. According to *The Washington Post*, China has set up Confucius Institutes in participating countries to export Chinese culture and expand its social services in local education by training local workers in skills^[66]. The Belt and Road Initiative used high-tech surveillance of physical and virtual space to create an authoritarian government^[67]. *The Washington Post* also pointed out that the communication technology services Huawei is providing to Bangladesh and other countries along the route may be beneficial to the surveillance of Chinese intelligence agencies^[68]. As for the concept of a community with shared future for mankind, *The Washington Post* stressed that this concept is based on "coexistence in harmony" in ancient Chinese rule^[69].

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of the number of texts extracted in this study, there are only 5 reports related to a community with shared future for mankind via American mainstream media, a very small number, all of which were published in *The Washington Post*, while the other two newspapers have not reported. This may be related to the purpose and characteristics of *The Washington Post's* tendency to report politics. On the other hand, the thought of a community with shared future for mankind has strong scientific rationality and is more likely to attract academic attention. The media is mainly targeted at the general public, who tend to read short, concise and time-sensitive reports, while the thought of a community with shared future for mankind emphasizes science, may be difficult to attract the attention of the general public. Therefore, it is also common sense that the mainstream media in the United States pay little attention to it. Moreover, due to the limited space and other conditions, it is difficult for media to clearly explain important theoretical issues such as the thought of a community with shared future for mankind.

Although the mainstream media in the United States have timeliness in the selection of news sources and news materials, generally speaking, the mainstream

media's negative reports on the Belt and Road Initiative are mostly, which may be related to the fact that some media put economic efficiency, market interests and the principle of "political correctness" above truth and justice. Or it may be related to the inherent pride and prejudice in the ideology of the media and writers; or to the long-standing stereotypes about China and the Belt and Road Initiative; or it may be closely related to the influence of the media by mainstream social trends of thought such as liberalism and cultural environment. At the same time, China's economy has grown rapidly in recent years, becoming the world's second largest economy, and its technological and military capabilities have also improved significantly. Hence, some developed countries, led by the United States, regard socialist China as a potential threat, and the so-called "Thucydides trap" between rising and established countries has become a fait accompli in the eyes of some Western politicians. As Duncan Snidal has put it: "A declining hegemon is particularly sensitive to changes in relative power between itself and a rising power, especially as the rising power's constant growth makes the world transition from a unipolar system to a bipolar one." The Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind have deepened the uneasiness and anxiety of some American politicians and media, making them unable to view some of China's important propositions and BRI practices objectively. The realism theory with zero-sum game and "social Darwinism" as the core of the United States foreign policy and the "America First" principle proposed by the Trump administration have had a negative impact on the mainstream media in the United States.

In essence, views of American mainstream tend to think that the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind are the latest means for China to enhance its economic and political influence and gain the dominance of the global order. In view of the global dissemination effect and strong public opinion guiding role of American media reports, its evaluation orientation should arouse our attention. Analyzing and grasping the reports of American mainstream media on the Belt and Road Initiative and a community with shared future for mankind will provide reference for these aspects: removing obstacles related the Belt and Road Initiative, embarking on a new journey of stability and far-reaching, promoting the construction of a community with shared future for mankind, and creating a positive international public opinion environment.

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