



DOI: 10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-3-566-573

EDN: LWZBLR

UDC 070:32.019.51

Research article / Научная статья

Coverage of the One Belt, One Road Initiative by Russia Today TV channel as a way of understanding Russian-Chinese relations

Keke You¹, Marina G. Shilina^{2,3}✉, Yuanbo Qi⁴

¹*Tsinghua University,*

1 Shuangqing Rd, Haidian District, Beijing, 100084, People's Republic of China

²*Plekhanov Russian University of Economics,*

36 Stremyanny Pereulok, Moscow, 117997, Russian Federation

³*Lomonosov Moscow State University,*

9 Mokhovaya St, bldg 1, Moscow, 125009, Russian Federation

⁴*Donghua University,*

1882 West Yan'an Rd, Shanghai, 200051, People's Republic of China

✉ marina.shilina@gmail.com

Abstract. The authors conduct a comparative analysis of how Russia Today (RT) report on China's One Belt and Road Initiative (OBOR). Focused on the question of how this state-owned media reflect the bilateral relations between Russia and China, the study reveals that RT serve as mirrors of their governments' attitudes towards China's geopolitical strategy. While only English language coverage by RT is considered, this focus offers a unique insight into Russia's portrayal of the OBOR. The work fills a significant gap in understanding this dynamic and offers new insights through a blended methodological approach. Utilizing quantitative content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis, this pioneering research evaluates the coverage of OBOR by RT (2013–2022), uncovering a previously unexplored interplay between state-owned media narratives and governmental geopolitical relations. It provides a novel perspective on understanding the complex relations between China and Russia through the lens of media reporting. It underscores the role of state-owned media as a tool to shape perceptions and inform the narrative surrounding global initiatives such as OBOR. The study's findings offer insights into the broader discourse around OBOR and its global implications, contributing to the scholarship on international relations, media studies, and Chinese foreign policy.

Keywords: media, state-owned media, international relations

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Article history: submitted May 5, 2023; revised June 3, 2023; accepted July 5, 2023.

For citation: You, K., Shilina, M.G., & Qi, Y. (2023). Coverage of the One Belt, One Road Initiative by Russia Today TV channel as a way of understanding Russian-Chinese relations. *RUDN Journal of Studies in Literature and Journalism*, 28(3), 566–573. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-3-566-573>

© You K., Shilina M.G., Qi Y., 2023



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>

Освещение инициативы «Один пояс, один путь» телеканалом Russia Today как способ понимания российско-китайских отношений

К. Ю¹, М.Г. Шилина^{2,3}✉, Ю. Ци⁴

¹Университет Цинхуа,

Китайская Народная Республика, 100084, Пекин, р-н Хайдянь, шоссе Шуанцин, д. 1

²Российский экономический университет имени Г.В. Плеханова,
Российская Федерация, 117997, Москва, Стремянный пер., д. 36

³Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова,
Российская Федерация, 125009, Москва, ул. Моховая, д. 9, стр. 1

⁴Университет Дунхуа,

Китайская Народная Республика, 200051, Шанхай, р-н Сунцзян, шоссе Вест Яньань, д. 1882

✉ marina.shilina@gmail.com

Аннотация. Проведен сравнительный анализ того, каким образом государственное российское СМИ Russia Today (RT) освещает глобальную инициативу Китая «Один пояс, один путь» (One Belt, One Road Initiative, OBOR). Основной исследовательский вопрос: «Как оценка российскими СМИ проекта OBOR проявляет взаимоотношения России и Китая?». Утверждается, что RT в контексте проблематики OBOR служит своеобразным зеркалом, отражающим геополитическую стратегию КНР. Несмотря на то, что рассматриваются материалы RT на английском языке, результаты дают сравнительно полное представление о медийной презентации OBOR в России. Исследование восполняет пробел в понимании этой проблематики. В качестве методов применялись количественный анализ содержания и качественный тематический анализ эмпирических источников (материалы RT 2013–2022). Предложен новый ракурс для понимания сложных отношений между Китаем и Россией через призму сообщений СМИ. Подчеркивается роль государственных медиа как инструмента информирования о глобальных проектах, раскрывается взаимосвязь между нарративами RT и геополитическими отношениями правительств. Дается представление о более широком дискурсе вокруг OBOR, что способствует исследованиям в области международных отношений, медиа и внешней политики Китая.

Ключевые слова: медиа, государственное СМИ, Россия сегодня, международные отношения, Китай

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

История статьи: поступила в редакцию 5 мая 2023 г.; отрецензирована 3 июня 2023 г.; принята к публикации 5 июля 2023 г.

Для цитирования: You K., Shilina M.G., Qi Y. Coverage of the One Belt, One Road Initiative by Russia Today TV channel as a way of understanding Russian-Chinese relations // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Литературоведение. Журналистика. 2023. Т. 28. № 3. С. 566–573. <http://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9220-2023-28-3-566-573>

Introduction

China's One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR, also Belt and Road initiative, BRI) has evolved from a plan for a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road to a project embodying China's economic statecraft in accordance with the PRC's current global geo strategies (Maçães, 2018). The project has passed through a number of geopolitical representations (Mayer, Zhang,

2020) and has evolved through the construction of a set of transport corridors with specific local manifestations and implications (Ghossein et al., 2021). In crisis times this initiative becomes a project to solve problems in economy (Yu et al., 2020), international relations (Shah, 2023), even in the Ukrainian crisis (Mendez et al., 2022). The BRI mainly focuses at the relations with the CIS countries, e.g. Kazakhstan (Bolaev, 2023), and Russia (Aksenov et al., 2023).

In totally mediated and media transgressive world (Shilina, 2022), such projects have to be media-driven. The researchers give special attention to this problem, analyzing it in global (Yang, van Gorp, 2021) and local (Jiang, 2022) frameworks.

There is a few research on the topic in the Russian media (i.e., one of the latest is devoted to politics of narratives, images, and metaphors) (Kuteleva, Vasiliev, 2020; Van Noort, Chatterje-Doody, 2023).

This research for the first time focuses on Russia's views of OBOR as conveyed by its leading state-owned media – Russia Today (RT) – from 2013 to 2022.

Our research questions are:

RQ 1: What themes, genres, and unique traits surface in Russian media's portrayal of OBOR and China's role in it?

RQ 2: How does media coverage on OBOR in RT contribute to shaping OBOR's and China's public image?

Methods and materials

This paper dissects Russia Today's coverage of the OBOR initiative, summarizing its viewpoints, biases, and the depiction and evolution of China's image.

The study comprises two stages: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative phase categorized articles based on their sentiment towards OBOR – positive, negative, or neutral. Recurring themes, discourse patterns, and linguistic nuances then analyzed.

Our subject matter includes various media formats of OBOR coverage in RT. Given RT's global reach, it provides a broader perspective on China's international image. We employed the keywords “Belt and Road”, “New Silk Road”, and “China” to fetch all relevant RT reports from December 2017 to May 2022. These reports then analyzed using content analysis and SPSS for quantitative evaluation. We confirmed the correlation between variables using a chi-square test.

RT news programs are concurrently updating on its official website, ensuring comprehensive sample selection. Our initial search yielded 221 news stories, which reduced to 62 news reports (22,360 words) after omitting unrelated pieces.

In the qualitative phase, we delved into how national interests and diplomatic ties with China are portraying. We paid particular attention to China's supposed intentions behind BRI and its global impact.

While the study only analyzes English language coverage by RT, this focus offers a unique insight into Russia's portrayal of the BRI.

Results and discussion

The analysis of the reports of RT on OBOR

First, we focus on analysis of Russian Today materials, as Russia's most influential international media digital television company and channel, owned by the state-owned Russian news agency Russia Today (former Novosti News Agency).

It plays an essential role in governmental position reflection and media images of foreign countries formation, China and OBOR in particular.

We analyze RT materials, and try to solve the key research questions by using the comparative and content analysis and SPSS methods analyzing Russia Today reports about OBOR. We summarize the views and tendencies of RT, other-shaping factors, as well as the characteristics and transformations of China's image, to make some effective references for cooperation with Russia in various aspects.

RT has a global audience that allows it to have a broader impact on reporting about China. Therefore, choosing RT as the research object is of great reference significance to the study of China's international image.

RT TV news programs are updating on the official website simultaneously, so the comprehensiveness and operability of the search samples can be ensured. Then all the news reports were put into Word for editing and a self-built database.

We analyze the theme and tendency of the report according to the paragraph meaning group of a report as the research unit, and finally determine 98 meaning group units and 6 kinds of report topics.

The categories of RT report topics about OBOR

The first category: RT mainly reported the cooperation and investment between China and other countries under the framework of OBOR (Number of reports is 21).

The second category: RT mainly reported the development of China-Russia relations under the OBOR initiative, as well as the exchange of visits between Chinese and Russian leaders, bilateral economic and trade cooperation, and mutual investment between enterprises of the two countries (Number of reports is 13).

The third category: RT mainly reported the influences of One Belt and One Road on China (Number of reports is 10).

The fourth category: RT mainly reported One Belt and One Road threats to the United States (Number of reports is 8).

The fifth category: RT mainly reported China-Russia trade volume and investment, as well as the two countries' discussions on investment and trade facilitation (Number of reports is 7).

The sixth category: RT mainly reported the nature and purpose of OBOR. Referred to the nature definition of OBOR in Russia or other countries, that is, what this initiative is, what it is used for and what purpose it has (Number of reports is 3).

There are significant differences in the different topics. The topic most reported by RT is cooperation in OBOR between China and other countries except Russia, as well as the views of other countries on OBOR. It can be seen that Russia attaches great importance to the participation of other countries. The second most reported topics are the nature and purpose of OBOR, and the influence of OBOR on China, these topics are basically not directly related to Russia. By ranking the number of reports, we found that although RT attaches great importance to the cooperation between China and Russia, it is contradictory to the initiative. On the one hand, RT is inclined to BRI to boost the Russian economy. On the other hand, RT is concerned that other countries are cooperating too closely with China, which will diminish Russia's geostrategic position in Central Asia. The dilemma is evident in RT reports.

Emotional tendency of RT reports

In terms of the emotional tendency of the reports, this study analyzed each meaning group unit from three tendencies: positive, neutral and negative, and then we comprehensively evaluated its reporting tendency according to the tone and keywords of the texts.

Positive reports mainly report the achievements of OBOR in the tone of praise, advocacy, expectation and encouragement, and the enthusiasm and expectation of the countries to participate in China's OBOR.

Neutral reports mainly report OBOR in an objective, direct and calm tone. The news is composed of intuitive data, interviewees' direct quotes or plain narration of facts. There are no words that indicate a clear attitude and position.

Negative reports mainly reveal the possible impact of OBOR on other countries in a tone of opposition, criticism, focusing on negative issues.

By analyzing RT reporting tendency in the past four years, we found that RT focused on the middle neutral (65%) and positive (35%) ground in its coverage of OBOR, with very few negative reports (5%).

Keywords analysis in RT reports

Russia actively strengthens the OBOR cooperation with China. Based on 81 reports of Wang Xia from 2013 to 2017 and 62 reports in the past four years, this paper found that “cooperation” appeared 263 times and “partnership” appeared 89 times through text analysis.

In addition, “Xi Jinping” appeared 328 times, indicating that the Chinese president played an important role in the process of putting forward the initiative and carrying out strategic communication to the outside world.

Among the newsmen involved in the report, “Vladimir Putin” is a high-frequency word, appearing 183 times in total. At the same time, there are some senior officials of the Russian government, such as the foreign minister, the defense minister, the Russian ambassador to China, and leaders of some countries along the routes. It can be seen that political power has an impact on news discourse.

RT is striving to create an image of a close, friendly and mutually beneficial China-Russia relationship, which the China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination has reached a new historical high, they share the same development goals and a series of cooperation serves the common interests of both sides.

RT pays a lot of attention to Central Asian countries with strong geographical relations with Russia, especially Kazakhstan, the largest country in Central Asia and an important node of the Silk Road Economic Belt. It had close diplomatic relations with China in recent years, which undoubtedly attracts high attention from RT. In our research text, the occurrence of Kazakhstan for 42 times, Turkey for 38 times, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Czech Republic and other countries appeared several times, but the frequency was very low.

In addition, the occurrence of India for 128 times, which shows that RT pays high attention to India's attitude towards OBOR, indicating RT concerns about India's strategic position.

The form of expression in RT reports

The choice of the form of discourse expression not only reflects the style of the media, but also conveys the position and attitude of the media.

RT, as a TV media, mainly adopts the official discourse when describing the events about OBOR. The narration is serious and elitist by quoting embassies, officials, and it rarely uses the easy-to-understand language to present the cooperation issues of OBOR. Even if Russia maintains a neutral and positive attitude towards OBOR, it does not mean that it will consider the transmission power of OBOR and international public opinion all the time. China is applying its aesthetic power to Russian journalists and politicians; RT obtains some commercial benefits, but the Russian state's aesthetic power is ceded to China.

As can be seen from the above research results, RT has deep doubts about China's geopolitical considerations behind OBOR, and RT worries that China will seek regional hegemony and influence Russia's regional interests with the help of OBOR initiative.

Therefore, RT will use harsh and derogatory words to express objective story in this part. For example, the word "allege" is used to show that China's sovereignty over islands and reefs in the South China Sea is not recognized. RT used the phrase "no holds barred" to indicate that China is promoting its own initiative regardless of other countries, and the word "ambitious" are used to explain that OBOR is a strategy. Russia is a "bridgehead" built by OBOR, etc. These military words will increase the sense of coercion about this issue and cause panic in the hearts of the audience.

The positive and negative tendencies of comment reports are higher than news reports. RT mainly adopts a pragmatic and countermeasure framework for OBOR, indicating Russia hope to develop its own economy with the help of OBOR. Although the focus of RT coverage is on China-Russia cooperation and China's cooperation with other countries, and the coverage is framed in a constructive manner, when it comes to geopolitical issues, RT is full of worry.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of RT's coverage of China's OBOR initiative, it can be concluded that RT's portrayal is largely determined by Russia's national interests, with shifts in domestic and international dynamics playing a significant role in shaping the tone and content of the coverage.

The Tone: RT's coverage of the OBOR initiative has been primarily neutral to positive, indicating a relatively balanced view of the project. This reflects Russia's complex relationship with China, marked by a blend of cooperation and competition. Russia's engagement with the OBOR initiative is influenced by its own strategic interests and its geopolitical positioning vis-a-vis China and the wider international community. Therefore, RT's coverage does not extensively highlight negative aspects of the initiative.

The Agenda Setting: The neutral and positive tone maintained by RT seems to be more prevalent when reporting on aspects like bilateral relations, policy formation, capital investment, trade, infrastructure development, and public sentiment. These areas are of mutual interest to both Russia and China, contributing

to their broad strategic partnership. However, when addressing geo-strategic issues, RT's tone tends to shift towards negativity, reflecting the geopolitical competition and underlying strategic mistrust between the two countries.

Geopolitical Considerations: Despite the generally positive coverage, there remains a strong undercurrent of suspicion towards China's geopolitical intentions behind the OBOR initiative. This indicates a degree of wariness about China's potential pursuit of regional hegemony through OBOR, which might jeopardize Russia's regional interests. Without doubt, the OBOR is a transformative geopolitical project. Hence, even as Russia engages with the initiative, it remains wary of China's increasing influence in Eurasia.

In conclusion, RT's coverage of the OBOR initiative mirrors Russia's nuanced approach to China – a blend of engagement and wariness. While acknowledging the benefits of OBOR in terms of economic cooperation and regional connectivity, RT's reporting also reflects Russian anxieties about China's rising geopolitical clout. This underscores the intricate dynamics of China-Russia relations in the context of the OBOR initiative.

In summary, this paper provides a novel perspective on understanding the complex relations between China and Russia through the lens of media reporting. It underscores the role of state-owned media as a tool to shape perceptions and inform the narrative surrounding global initiatives such as OBOR. The study's findings offer insights into the broader discourse around OBOR and its global implications, contributing to the scholarship on international relations, media studies, and Chinese foreign policy.

References

- Aksenov, G., Li, R., Abbas, Q., Fambo, H., Popkov, S., Pankratov, V., Kosov, M., Elyakova, I., & Vasiljeva, M. (2023). Development of trade and financial-economical relationships between China and Russia: A study based on the Trade Gravity Model. *Sustainability*, 15(7), 6099. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15076099>
- Bolaev, A.V. (2023). The Eurasia canal project in the context of the China's Belt and Road initiative. *Russian Law Journal*, 11(10), 623–633. <https://doi.org/10.52783/rj.v11i10s.1763>
- Ghossein, T., Hoekman, B., & Shingal, A. (2021). Public procurement, regional integration, and the Belt and Road Initiative. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 36(2), 131–163. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkab004>
- Jiang, Y. (2022). *Framing the Belt and Road Initiative: Australian mainstream media narratives from 2013 to 2020* (thesis for Doctor of Philosophy). Queensland University of Technology.
- Kuteleva, A., & Vasiliev, D. (2020). China's Belt and Road Initiative in Russian media: Politics of narratives, images, and metaphors. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 62(5–6), 582–606. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1833228>
- Maçães, B. (2018). *Belt and Road: A Chinese world order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mayer, M., & Zhang, X. (2020). Theorizing China – World Integration: Sociospatial reconfigurations and the modern silk roads. *Review of International Political Economy*, 28(4), 974–1003. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2020.1741424>
- Mendez, A., Forcadell, F.J., & Horiachko, K. (2022). Russia – Ukraine crisis: China's Belt Road Initiative at the crossroads. *Asian Business & Management*, 21(4), 488–496. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41291-022-00195-1>
- Shah, A.R. (2023). Revisiting China threat: The US' Securitization of the 'Belt and Road Initiative'. *Chinese Political Science Review*, 8, 84–104. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-021-00179-0>

- Shilina, M.G. (2022). Mediatization in the context of the global crisis: Temporality as a research modality. *Russian School of Public Relations*, (24), 45–57. (In Russ.)
Шилина М.Г. Медиатизация в контексте глобального кризиса: темпоральность как модальность исследования // *Российская школа связей с общественностью*. 2022. № 24. С. 45–57.
- Van Noort, C., & Chatterje-Doody, P.M. (2023). China's Belt and Road Initiative on RT (Russia Today): From infrastructural project to human development. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 64(4), 431–459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2021.2005650>
- Yang, H., & van Gorp, B. (2021). Frame analysis of political-media discourse on the Belt and Road Initiative: Evidence from China, Australia, India, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 36(5), 625–651. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2021.1968794>
- Yu, L., Zhao, D., Niu, H., & Lu, F. (2020). Does the Belt and Road Initiative expand China's export potential to countries along the Belt and Road? *China Economic Review*, 60, 101419–101421. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chieco.2020.101419>

Bio notes:

Keke You, research assistant, Department of Journalism and Communication, Tsinghua University, 1 Shuangqing Rd, Haidian District, Beijing, 100084, People's Republic of China. ORCID: 0000-0002-0433-1558. E-mail: kelcey@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn

Marina G. Shilina, Dr. Sc., Professor, Professor of the Department of Advertising, Public Relations and Design, Plekhsnov Russian University of Economics, 36 Stremyanny Pereulok, Moscow, 117997, Russian Federation; Professor of the Department of Advertising and Public Relations, Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University, 9 Mokhovaya St, bldg 1, Moscow, 125009, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0000-0002-9608-352X. E-mail: marina.shilina@gmail.com

Yuanbo Qi, lecturer, Department of Communication, School of Humanities, Donghua University, 1882 West Yan'an Rd, Shanghai, 200051, People's Republic of China. ORCID: 0000-0001-9541-8220. E-mail: y.qi@dhu.edu.cn

Сведения об авторах:

Ю Кеке, научный сотрудник, факультет журналистики и коммуникаций, Университет Цинхуа, Китайская Народная Республика, 100084, Пекин, р-н Хайдиан, шоссе Шуанцин, д. 1. ORCID: 0000-0002-0433-1558. E-mail: kelcey@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn

Шилина Марина Григорьевна, доктор филологических наук, профессор, профессор кафедры рекламы, связей с общественностью и дизайна, Российский экономический университет имени Г.В. Плеханова, Российская Федерация, 117997, Москва, Стремянный пер., д. 36; профессор кафедры рекламы и связей с общественностью, факультет журналистики, Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова, Российская Федерация, 125009, Москва, ул. Моховая, д. 9, стр. 1. ORCID: 0000-0002-9608-352X. E-mail: marina.shilina@gmail.com

Ци Юаньбо, преподаватель, факультет коммуникаций, Школа гуманитарных наук, Университет Дунхуа, Китайская Народная Республика, 200051, Шанхай, р-н Сунцзян, шоссе Вест Яньань, д. 1882. ORCID: 0000-0001-9541-8220. E-mail: y.qi@dhu.edu.cn