

Analysis of Reporting Characteristics of Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* on Belt and Road Initiative

Yuling Zhang

Department of Foreign Languages, China Foreign Affairs University, Beijing, China
zhangyuling@cfau.edu.cn

Abstract: Belt and Road Initiative, proposed in 2013, aims to promote shared development and prosperity by enhancing economic cooperation and connectivity among countries along its route. Japan's *Asahi Shimbun*, as an influential media outlet, has provided extensive and in-depth coverage of the initiative. The newspaper emphasizes an international perspective, considering Belt and Road's impact on Japan, the Asia-Pacific region, and the broader global landscape. It offers a comprehensive and insightful analysis of this significant strategy.

Keywords: *Asahi Shimbun*, Belt and Road Initiative, Reporting Characteristics

1. Introduction

Since its proposal in 2013, Belt and Road Initiative has gradually become a key topic in global economic cooperation and geopolitical development. The initiative aims to promote infrastructure construction and economic exchanges between Asia, Africa, and Europe, fostering international trade and regional development. It has had a profound impact not only on the countries along its routes but also on the global economic landscape. Against this backdrop, international media have paid close attention to the progress and effects of Belt and Road, with Japanese media being no exception. As one of Japan's well-known mainstream media outlets, *Asahi Shimbun* offers valuable insights through its coverage of Belt and Road. By analyzing its stance, discourse, and reporting angles, we can discern how the Japanese media approaches an international cooperation project led by China, revealing Japan's concerns and attitudes. These reports also reflect the complex emotions and practical considerations in Japanese society regarding China's rise and its influence on the global economy.

2. Research Subject

Founded in 1879, *Asahi Shimbun* is one of the largest-circulation newspapers in Japan. Its coverage is extensive, spanning politics, economics, culture, sports, and more, with numerous columns and special reports[1]. As a mainstream media outlet, *Asahi Shimbun* reports on China across various fields, including politics, economics, society, and culture. Its reporting style primarily focuses on in-depth and exclusive stories, with content that is relatively objective and neutral. This paper selects *Asahi Shimbun* reports from 2018 to 2023 as the research subject, conducting a textual analysis of news related to Belt and Road Initiative. By exploring multiple dimensions such as politics, economics, culture, and diplomacy, and using Belt and Road as the core keyword for retrieval, the results are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Statistics on the Number of Reports from *Asahi Shimbun* (2018–2023)

Keywords	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total Reports
Belt and Road	181	198	120	128	156	180	963

From 2018 to 2023, *Asahi Shimbun*'s coverage of Belt and Road Initiative showed a fluctuating trend. 2018 and 2019 were peak years for reporting, with 181 and 198 articles, respectively. This surge in coverage likely coincided with the initial expansion of Belt and Road and the rising global discussions around it. The reporting hit its highest point in 2019, indicating widespread global attention at the time, especially as the initiative's potential impact on Japan and neighboring countries became a focal point for media discussion.

In 2020, the number of articles dropped significantly to just 120, a change likely tied to the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic disrupted international economic cooperation and

infrastructure projects, shifting the global focus to the public health crisis and leading to a decline in coverage related to Belt and Road Initiative. Nevertheless, from 2021 onward, the number of articles gradually recovered, with 156 in 2022 and 180 in 2023. This rebound may be due to the global economic recovery post-pandemic, as well as the restart and progress of Belt and Road projects, which once again drew media attention.

From 2018 to 2023, *Asahi Shimbun* published a total of 963 articles on Belt and Road Initiative, demonstrating the ongoing news value of Belt and Road in Sino-Japanese relations and in the context of the global geopolitical and economic landscape. Despite fluctuations, the overall trend reflects Japan's media's sustained focus on Belt and Road, particularly as the initiative's strategic importance becomes more pronounced against a backdrop of increasing global economic uncertainty.

3. Analysis of “Belt and Road” Initiative Reports

Belt and Road Initiative aims to promote shared development and prosperity by enhancing economic cooperation and connectivity among participating countries. Proposed in 2013, the initiative has received positive responses and widespread support from countries along its routes[2].

Asahi Shimbun has extensively covered various themes related to China's Belt and Road Initiative, including its development motives, vision, and the goals the Chinese government hopes to achieve. The coverage also focuses on the countries participating in the initiative, not just China. It discusses the cooperation between these countries and the agreements they reach as part of the initiative. Additionally, the articles frequently explore the Belt and Road's economic impact, including its potential effects on trade growth, job creation, and economic expansion in the participating countries. The geopolitical and international relations aspects of the initiative are another key focus, including China's relationships with other countries and the geopolitical disputes and opportunities for cooperation that may arise.

3.1 Reporting on China's foreign relations under Belt and Road Initiative

Asahi Shimbun closely follows the geopolitical and economic significance of this initiative. The newspaper asserts that Belt and Road is not merely an economic plan for China to strengthen infrastructure and promote regional connectivity, but also a strategy to enhance its international influence and reshape the global economic order. The coverage analyzes how China, through Belt and Road Initiative, has strengthened its ties with countries along the route, particularly expanding its influence in the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Africa. In the Asia-Pacific region, China's economic links with Southeast Asian countries have deepened further, a development that has raised concerns in Japan.

Asahi Shimbun has provided comprehensive reports on Belt and Road and China's bilateral relations, pointing out that China's strategy goes beyond economic cooperation and involves extending its geopolitical influence. The newspaper views Belt and Road as not only a plan for promoting regional connectivity but also as a tool for elevating China's international standing and constructing a new global economic order. Through this initiative, China has strengthened ties with countries in the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Africa, with particularly deepening cooperation with Southeast Asian nations in the Asia-Pacific region—a trend that has garnered significant attention in Japan.

On the geopolitical front, *Asahi Shimbun* emphasizes China's efforts to strengthen relations with countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Russia, thus expanding its influence in the Middle East and Eurasia. The newspaper reports that Iranian President Raisi's visit to China in February 2023 underscored the growing closeness between the two countries in areas such as economic and security cooperation, and that this relationship now includes Iran's decision to join the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Similarly, China's relations with Saudi Arabia have strengthened since China's visit to the country in December 2022.

Regarding Sino-Russian relations, *Asahi Shimbun* points out that despite Russia's international isolation due to the Ukraine war, China has signaled its support by increasing trade cooperation with Russia. This partnership was further showcased at Belt and Road Forum, where China seized the opportunity to solidify its leadership role in international affairs.

The newspaper also covered China's diplomatic efforts in the Americas, particularly mentioning the visit of Honduran President Xiomara Castro to China and the rapid development of bilateral relations. Honduras' decision to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan and establish relations with China signified China's strategy of weakening Taiwan's international support through economic cooperation.

In East Asia, *Asahi Shimbun* also reported on China's bilateral relations with South Korea, noting that despite President Yoon Suk-yeol's close ties with the United States, South Korea is seeking to improve relations with China to balance the pressures from North Korea and the strengthening of its ties with Russia. Myanmar has also caught the attention of *Asahi Shimbun*, with the military government seeking China's mediation to resolve conflicts with ethnic armed groups, indicating that China's influence in Southeast Asian affairs is gradually increasing.

3.2 Reports on the contribution of Belt and Road Initiative to the global economy

Since its inception, Belt and Road Initiative has become a major platform for global infrastructure development, economic cooperation, and cultural exchange. Japanese media outlet *Asahi Shimbun* has paid considerable attention to this initiative, particularly regarding the progress of infrastructure projects, the impact on regional economic connectivity, and the outcomes of cooperation among various countries. This article will analyze how Belt and Road-related content is presented in *Asahi Shimbun*, focusing on its reporting style.

Asahi Shimbun has closely followed the achievements of Belt and Road in the field of infrastructure development in Southeast Asia, particularly highlighting projects like the China-Laos Railway, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail, the China-Thailand Railway, and the East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia. These railways are not only symbolic results of economic cooperation between China and these nations but also key drivers of regional economic development [3]. In its coverage of Indonesia's Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail, *Asahi Shimbun* emphasized the competitive backdrop of the project, where China and Japan fiercely vied for the contract, with China eventually winning and successfully carrying it out. This angle reveals the geopolitical competition over international infrastructure projects within Belt and Road framework, while also highlighting China's technological edge and growing influence in this sector. Although the project faced challenges like land acquisition difficulties and cost overruns, its successful completion and operation underscore China's persistence in overcoming obstacles and Southeast Asian countries' recognition of Chinese railway technology.

Asahi Shimbun offered detailed coverage of the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail inauguration ceremony, where Indonesian President Joko Widodo expressed high expectations for the project, giving it the distinctive name "Whoosh." This name not only evokes the speed of high-speed rail but also incorporates expressions from the Indonesian language, reflecting Indonesia's desire to reduce spatial and temporal distances and improve economic efficiency through the rail project. From this detail, it's clear that *Asahi Shimbun* emphasizes local characteristics in its reporting, showing how Belt and Road adapts to local contexts and brings tangible benefits to its partner countries.

The paper also explores the broader impact of Belt and Road on ASEAN nations. With the construction of these railway networks, countries like Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia are not only improving domestic transportation but also enhancing economic ties with neighboring countries, fostering closer regional economic cooperation [4]. This connectivity is crucial for ASEAN's economic integration, especially as global economic uncertainties increase. Through cooperation with China, ASEAN nations are better positioned to integrate into global supply chains and strengthen their economic resilience[5].

From a broader perspective, *Asahi Shimbun* also analyzed the impact of Belt and Road Initiative on the global economy. In its coverage of the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, *Asahi Shimbun* pointed out that representatives from over 140 countries attended the forum, highlighting the wide influence of Belt and Road in the international community. Over the past 10 years, the initiative has expanded to over 150 countries across five continents, with more than 200 cooperation agreements signed and over 3,000 projects launched, driving investments worth trillions of dollars. The report also emphasized the Belt and Road's focus on cooperation in areas such as rules and standards, indicating that it is not just an infrastructure initiative but also plays an active role in shaping global governance and international cooperation frameworks.

However, it is worth noting that *Asahi Shimbun* also expressed some cautious views about Belt and Road Initiative, especially concerning the sustainability and economic viability of certain projects. For instance, during the construction of the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway, land acquisition difficulties and budget overruns caused a four-year delay, raising concerns among the local community about project costs. The report mentioned that despite these delays, the Indonesian government remains confident in the project's future economic benefits. This suggests that while Southeast Asian countries may face challenges in their cooperation with China, they still recognize the long-term value of Belt

and Road.

3.3 Reports on the prospects of China-Japan cooperation under Belt and Road Initiative

In its coverage of Belt and Road Initiative, *Asahi Shimbun* highlights the complex relationship between China and Japan within the context of this global strategy, emphasizing the dynamic of both competition and cooperation between the two nations. Through an in-depth analysis of Belt and Road, *Asahi Shimbun* reveals Japan's cautious stance toward the initiative, as well as its strategy to explore opportunities for economic cooperation, particularly in third-party markets where potential collaboration with China exists.

Asahi Shimbun places particular focus on the competition and cooperation between China and Japan in the context of Belt and Road. The publication notes that the two countries are beginning to seek common interests in certain areas of international multilateral cooperation. The report specifically mentions markets in Southeast Asia and Africa—regions where China is prioritizing infrastructure investment through Belt and Road, and where Japanese companies are also paying close attention. Southeast Asia, especially countries like Indonesia, is a key area of focus for infrastructure projects, such as the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail and the China-Thailand railway. These projects represent China's cooperation with Southeast Asia and are also a focal point of competition between China and Japan in the infrastructure sector. *Asahi Shimbun* points out that in these competitive projects, Chinese companies, with strong financial backing and technical advantages, are in some ways outpacing their Japanese counterparts. This is particularly true in high-speed rail projects, where Japan, despite once leading in high-speed rail technology, is seeing its market share eroded by China's expansion under the Belt and Road framework.

The newspaper also reports on the involvement of Japanese companies in Belt and Road. While Japanese firms have faced competition with Chinese companies in certain regions, they are gradually becoming more involved in Belt and Road. *Asahi Shimbun* provides a detailed analysis of the motivations behind this involvement. Japanese companies have realized that completely decoupling from China or staying out of Belt and Road could result in missed opportunities to participate in global infrastructure development and economic growth. Particularly in third-party markets, cooperation between Japanese and Chinese companies allows both sides to jointly tap into emerging markets while adhering to international standards and sharing economic benefits. For example, in these third-party market collaborations, Japanese firms can leverage their strengths in high-end manufacturing and technology, while Chinese companies offer financial resources and project management capabilities. This complementary cooperation allows both sides to achieve mutual benefit and win-win outcomes.

The *Asahi Shimbun* further pointed out that the Japanese government's attitude towards Belt and Road Initiative has gradually evolved. Initially, Japan took a rather negative stance, viewing China's expansion of international influence through Belt and Road as a potential threat to Japan's regional interests[6]. However, in 2017, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sent a government delegation to attend the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, where Japan expressed conditional support for the initiative. This marked a significant shift in Japan's policy towards China. The Abe administration realized that completely avoiding or resisting the BRI might put Japan at a disadvantage in global economic cooperation. Therefore, it set some preconditions, stating that Belt and Road projects must adhere to principles of transparency and fairness, and should contribute to the economic development and fiscal health of the countries involved.

In its report, *Asahi Shimbun* offered a detailed analysis of Prime Minister Abe's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy, which was Japan's response to China's global expansion through the BRI. Abe proposed the FOIP strategy in 2016, aiming to establish a rules-based international order to safeguard peace and prosperity across the region from Asia to Africa. The *Asahi Shimbun* noted that while the FOIP strategy is in part seen as a countermeasure to Belt and Road, the Abe administration did not completely rule out cooperation with China. On the contrary, Abe believed that as long as both sides were aligned in direction, Japan and China could collaborate in certain areas. This open stance laid the groundwork for cooperation between the two countries in third-party markets.

The *Asahi Shimbun* also paid special attention to the cooperation model between China and Japan in third-party markets. During Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Japan in 2018, the two countries' leaders reached a consensus to promote economic cooperation between their companies in third-party markets, and established the China-Japan Third-Party Market Cooperation Forum. The creation of this forum marked a new phase in Sino-Japanese cooperation, with both countries working together on joint

projects in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Eurasia, offering fresh momentum for the development of these regions. Notably, during Abe's visit to China in October 2018, 52 memoranda of understanding were signed between Chinese and Japanese businesses, amounting to a total of \$18 billion. This model of cooperation not only highlighted the balance between competition and collaboration between China and Japan in the global economic arena, but also reflected Japan's efforts to push Belt and Road Initiative towards greater alignment with international standards through cooperation with China.

Asahi Shimbun also explored the impact of China-Japan cooperation on the global economic landscape. The report pointed out that in the context of escalating U.S.-China trade tensions, deepening China-Japan cooperation could help ease tensions between the two countries and provide opportunities for collaboration in the restructuring of global supply chains. By working with China in third-party markets, Japan hopes to steer Belt and Road Initiative toward better alignment with international standards, particularly in terms of transparency, fairness, and economic sustainability. This cooperative model not only benefits Japanese companies by helping them secure a larger share of Belt and Road market, but also contributes to enhancing the initiative's global recognition.

That said, *Asahi Shimbun* noted that Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy still has a degree of opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Especially in the geopolitical and security spheres, Japan's alliance with the United States keeps it somewhat distanced from China's global expansion strategy. However, the newspaper emphasized that cooperation between China and Japan remains an important aspect of future global economic collaboration. Particularly in third-party markets, the complementary nature of the two economies offers broad potential for future cooperation.

4. Conclusions

Asahi Shimbun, a newspaper with a long history and considerable international influence, is known for its relatively rational and objective reporting style [7]. However, in its coverage of Belt and Road Initiative, there are still subtle signs of concern for Japan's national interests. Although *Asahi Shimbun* highlights the economic benefits of this large-scale international cooperation project led by China—such as the boost in infrastructure development and investment—it also expresses concerns about China's growing political and economic influence. This attitude is often reflected in its questioning of China's strategic intentions, especially when it comes to security issues in the East Asian region, where Japanese media show heightened vigilance. In its reports, *Asahi Shimbun* frequently analyzes the potential geopolitical impacts of Belt and Road Initiative on Japan, reflecting considerations from a national interest perspective.

Asahi Shimbun's coverage of Belt and Road is not limited to China-Japan relations but also adopts a broader international perspective. It not only focuses on interactions between China and Japan but also provides in-depth reporting on the attitudes and reactions of countries along Belt and Road route. By citing comments from international experts, scholars, and government officials from these countries, *Asahi Shimbun* aims to provide readers with comprehensive background information and showcase the complex responses to Belt and Road in the international community. For instance, some developing countries welcome China's large-scale investments, viewing them as opportunities to boost their economies, while certain Western countries and regions remain cautious, even questioning the political motives behind China's global economic strategy. This diverse reporting allows *Asahi Shimbun* to interpret Belt and Road's multifaceted impact from a global viewpoint.

Asahi Shimbun demonstrates its professionalism and ability to analyze issues from multiple perspectives as a news organization. While there are critical voices regarding Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), *Asahi Shimbun* also provides objective coverage of its achievements. For instance, the paper has repeatedly highlighted the tangible outcomes of Belt and Road, such as improvements in infrastructure, increased trade, and investment stimulation in participating countries, through case studies, economic data, and third-party analyses. This fact-based reporting goes beyond surface-level evaluations, delving into the long-term impact of Belt and Road on the international economic system.

Overall, *Asahi Shimbun*'s reporting on Belt and Road reflects its diverse perspectives and in-depth analysis as a leading Japanese media outlet. While emphasizing the opportunities and challenges posed by China's rise, it also showcases the rationality and caution with which Japanese media approach major international issues. This reporting style, which balances national interests with a global outlook, provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of Belt and Road and further reveals the complex attitudes within Japanese society as it grapples with China's rise and global strategy.

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