

ANALYZING INDIAN MEDIA DISCOURSE ON INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS IN LIGHT OF SCO MEETING

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Pakistan successfully hosted the 23rd meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Council of Heads of Government (SCO-CHG) in Islamabad on 15-16 October 2024. The meeting was attended by the Prime Ministers of China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Belarus, as well as the first Vice President of Iran and the External Affairs Minister (EAM) of India. The meeting concluded with the signing of 8 key documents focusing on SCO's working, regional connectivity, and counter-terrorism efforts.

The catchiest development that attracted policy analysts in South Asia was the participation of EAM Dr. S. Jaishankar. This was the first visit of an Indian External Affairs Minister to Pakistan in almost a decade. In 2015, he had accompanied the then EAM Shusma Swaraj, as Foreign Secretary, to attend a conference on Afghanistan.¹ Contrary to the previous SCO meeting in Goa last year, where Dr. Jaishankar and then Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, had exchanged harsh statements, with no handshakes, in the latest meeting, Jaishankar had a brief exchange of pleasantries and a handshake with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. Media sources also reported

¹ 'S. Jaishankar to Travel to Pak, Last Foreign Minister Visit was in 2015,' NDTV World, October 4, 2024, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/s-jaishankar-to-travel-to-pak-last-foreign-minister-visit-was-in-2015-6715527>.

about a brief exchange between Dr. Jaishankar and Deputy PM of Pakistan Ishaq Dar, at the dinner hosted by PM Sharif.²

In the wake of these developments, there was a buzz in India and Pakistan, speculating that the brief reported exchange could be an 'ice-breaking' moment. Prior to the meeting, both sides had confirmed that there would not be any discussion on bilateral relations. However, the media in both countries dwelt at length on whether the two sides could move together with the existing political will.

The media in the two countries plays a significant role in shaping mutual perceptions, contributing to policy debates. The government in any state justifies its policy outlook with the help of the media. Therefore, analyzing media discourse can provide background as well as the context of the issue under discussion. Amidst the diverse perspectives regarding any improvement in India-Pakistan relations, it is significant to analyze how Indian media looks at the issue. For this purpose, the study analyzes the discourse of six prominent Indian electronic media channels including *NDTV*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Print*, *Firstpost*, *The Indian Express*, and *India Today*. The study explores the news coverage, editorials, and opinion articles published on the sites from 8 to 25 October, using the keyword 'SCO'. Further, the study has subcategorized the discourse into two themes 'SCO' and 'India-Pakistan relations'.

SCO and China's Role

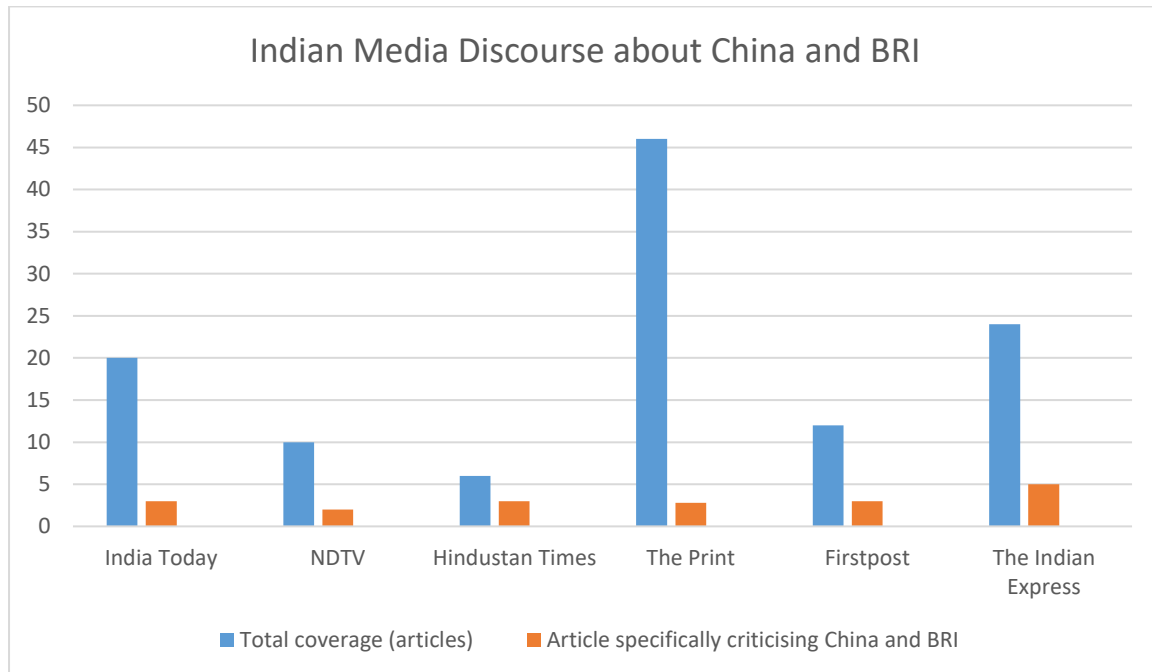
Organizing the CHG meeting was significant not for just Pakistan, but for SCO as well. Leader of the member countries held sideline meetings also. Indian media discourse on the meeting covered two aspects related to SCO and its agenda. Firstly, the background of the organization was highlighted and how the major stakeholders were driving it. Secondly, the media critically stressed China's role in the organization and in the recent meeting. In light of Dr. Jaishankar's statement, "Cooperation must be based on mutual respect and sovereign equality. It should recognize territorial integrity and sovereignty. It must be built on genuine partnerships, not unilateral agendas. It cannot progress if we cherry-pick global practices, especially in trade and transit," Indian media criticized BRI and CPEC.³ Surprisingly, objectively covering PM Shraif's remarks about the expansion of BRI and enhancing connectivity, the discourse rather focused on China's stakes in development in emerging

² Farooq Abbas, "Jaishankar had informal talks with Shehbaz, Dar: India," *The News International*, October 19, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1241696-jaishankar-had-informal-talks-with-shehbaz-dar-india>.

³ "As India Opposes China's Belt and Road Initiative, Pakistan says, don't look through narrow political prism," *The Indian Express*, October 16, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/india-china-belt-road-initiative-sco-summit-pakistan-9623568/>.

countries. Dr. Jaishankar's refusal to endorse the expansion of BRI was portrayed to be reflecting India's actual policy towards China's connectivity projects in South Asia. The discourse further criticized CPEC, accusing the project of violating Indian sovereignty and raising security concerns. The graph-1 shows the frequency of channels' criticism of China in comparison to the overall coverage:

Graph-1



Source: Author's Research

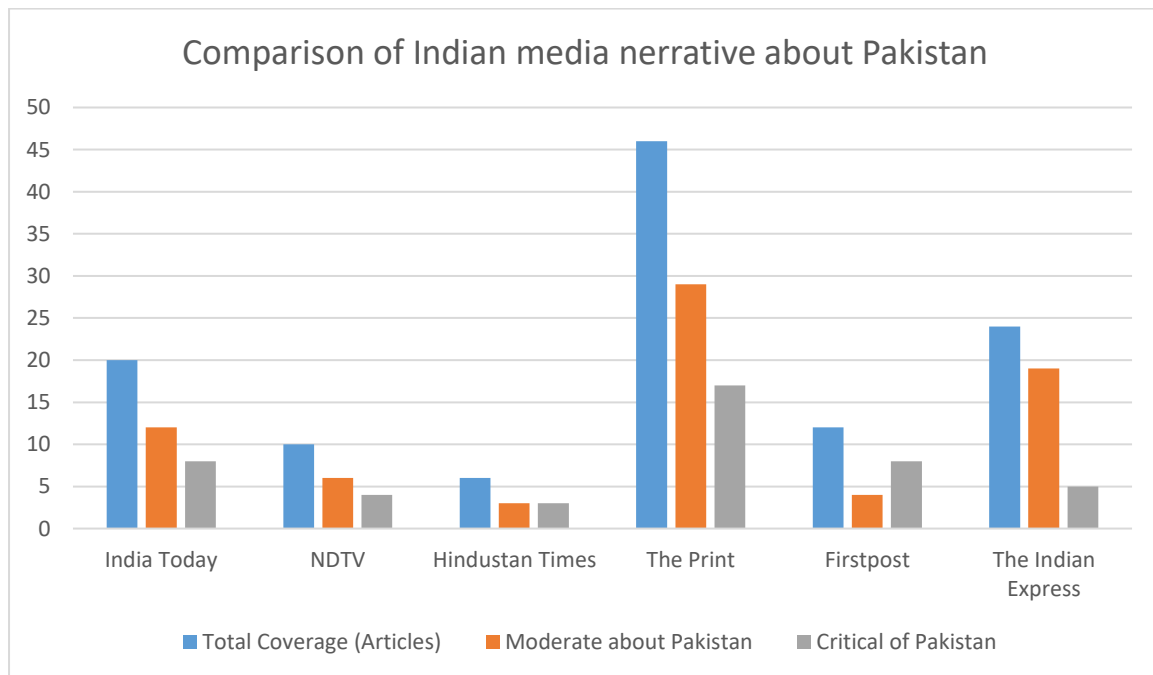
Some news coverage also highlighted the aspect of alleged 'debt trap' that is associated with China's investment policy in developing countries.

Pakistan-India Relations

Indian media is known for its anti-Pakistan stance, especially under the BJP when the whole focus of media channels revolved around linking Pakistan with alleged 'cross-border' terrorism. The media coverage in relation to India-Pakistan relations remained rather moderate. The majority of the Indian news channels that were selected, refrained from using their traditional language of associating terrorism with Pakistan. Instead, they appreciated Pakistan officials who welcomed Dr. Jaishankar at the airport. Although the language was a bit 'speculative' about the security arrangement for deploying so many security personnel around and locking the capital city, the media looked satisfied with the overall arrangements.

Most of the focus of the Indian media remained on four aspects of the meeting in the context of India-Pakistan relations as Jaishankar meeting the Pakistani officials; his veiled reference to cross-border terrorism; Nawaz Sharif's statement about bilateral engagements; and the future of bilateral relations. The Indian media discourse positively presented Dr. Jaishankar's handshake with PM Sharif and Vice PM Dar at the dinner. The majority of the channels hoped it to be an 'ice-breaking' moment, in context to the Jaishankar-Bilawal interaction in 2023. The media largely refrained from relating terrorism with Pakistan and only referred to the statement of Jaishankar during his speech at SCO forum. The graph-2 quantifies the narrative of Indian media about Pakistan.

Graph-2



Source: Author's Research

Usually, the Indian media builds a context, accusing Pakistan of supporting terrorism in India, to support the statements coming from government officials. However, they restricted to just Jaishankar's statement and moved on to the other developments discussed during the meeting. Moreover, the discourse highlighted the recent statements of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif about reviving bilateral talks, and his hope that the two countries can have a better future.⁴ They quoted Mr. Nawaz Sharif and Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz and portrayed their hopes as representing a policy shift in Pakistan. So, the overall Indian media discourse remained moderate,

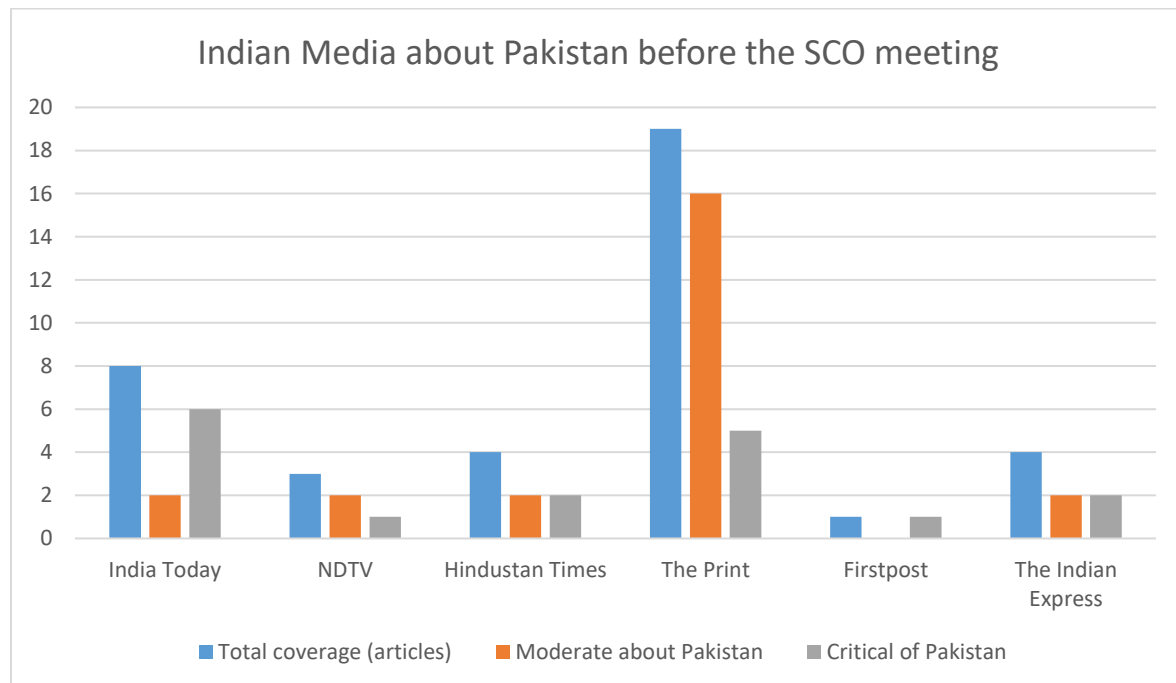
⁴ "Time to Move On? Nawaz Sharif Urges India and Pakistan to Bury the Past and be Good Neighbors," The Economic Times, October 18, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/time-to-move-on-nawaz-sharif-urges-india-and-pakistan-to-bury-the-past-and-be-good-neighbors/articleshow/114332503.cms?from=mdr>.

evinced positivity that could also be interpreted as depicting India's changing policy outlook towards Pakistan, in the context of its challenged position in South Asia.

Analysis

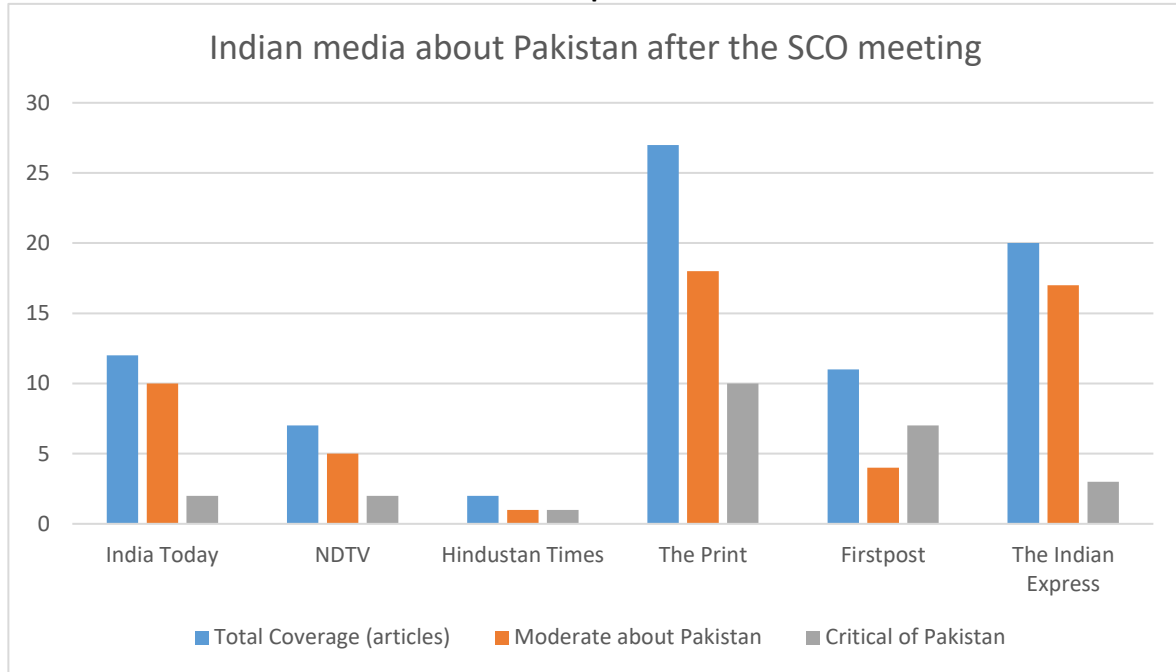
The Indian media was slightly aggressive prior to Dr. Jaishankar's visit to Pakistan. Before the SCO meeting, the editorials and opinion articles were more critical of Pakistan and often highlighted the terrorism issue. However, in the post-meeting period, the discourse became moderate and futuristic. One channel, *Firstpost* among the aforementioned, remained stuck to its traditional agenda of projecting negativity about Pakistan. It severely criticized the legitimacy of CPEC and blamed Pakistan for the soured relations. Swaran Singh, a Professor of International Relations at Jawaharlal Nehru University argued in his article that the ball is in Pakistan's court. India must not go easy on its relations with Islamabad. The graph-3 and 4 compares the Indian media narrative about Pakistan before and after the meeting:

Graph-3



Source: Author's Research

Graph-4



Source: Author's Research

The overall narrative of all media channels sought to project the view that the policy shift in Islamabad that caused the overall moderate environment. However, it was a positive development that the news channels, which under the BJP rule have been used as a state-instrument against Pakistan, were calm while describing a crucial meeting in Pakistan and its relations with India. The prominent Indian journalists who came to Pakistan for the SCO summit including Barkha Dutt, Suhasini Haider of *The Hindu*, Uma Shankar Singh of *NDTV*, and Geeta Mohan of *India Today*, remained overall moderate in their tone and suggestive that both countries must work to resolve the issues that have halted the dialogue process. They also referred to the meeting with former PM Nawaz Sharif as a goodwill gesture that can lead both countries towards peace in the coming future.

Conclusion

Overall the SCO meeting was a success for Pakistan. The Indian journalists who were critical and skeptical about the security situation in Islamabad took a positive image of Pakistan. This is the one factor that caused the discourse to shift to a very moderate approach after the SCO meeting. Pakistan and India must collaborate on a 'media exchange program' in which journalists from both countries can visit each other and present the real picture, besides the traditional propaganda.