



Narrative Strategies of Mainstream Media in ASEAN Countries on Issues Related to the South China Sea and Their Communication Effects

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Abstract

In international relations, the role of media public opinion dissemination is not only the transmission of information, but also the carrier of power games and ideological competition. As a highly sensitive geopolitical issue, the dissemination of public opinion on the South China Sea not only influences the policy choices of countries inside and outside the region, but also profoundly shapes the international community's perception and attitude towards the South China Sea issue. As important participants in the South China Sea issue, the mainstream media of ASEAN countries, through specific differentiated narrative strategies, choose the angle of reporting, construct narrative frameworks and specific discourses, which directly affect the public's understanding of and attitudes towards the South China Sea issue, and indirectly play a role in the policy interactions between the countries, thus influencing the public opinion environment and the policy direction of the South China Sea issue. Taking mainstream media in ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore as samples, this study constructs a "media narrative-geopolitics" linkage analysis framework to systematically explore their narrative frameworks, discourse characteristics and dissemination effects on the South China Sea issue.

Subject Areas

International Relations

Keywords

South China Sea Issues, Geopolitics, International Communication, ASEAN

1. Introduction

As one of the most controversial geopolitical issues in the Asia-Pacific region, the

South China Sea has long attracted the attention of the international community. The South China Sea is not only rich in natural resources, but also an important global maritime transport route, and its strategic position has led to the involvement of neighbouring countries and extraterritorial powers, thus complicating the situation. As important stakeholders in the South China Sea, ASEAN countries' positions and actions have an important impact on the development of the situation in the South China Sea. In recent years, with the escalation of the South China Sea disputes, ASEAN countries' attitudes towards the South China Sea issue have gradually diverged, with some advocating the resolution of the disputes through peaceful dialogue and some inclined to resort to external forces to check and balance China. Against this background, the media, as an important tool for information dissemination and public opinion guidance, has become a key force in shaping public perception and influencing international public opinion. The mainstream media in ASEAN countries not only reflect the position of their governments on the South China Sea issue, but also influence the public's perception and attitude towards the South China Sea issue to a certain extent. By analysing the narrative strategies of mainstream media in ASEAN countries, we will reveal how they shape the public image of the South China Sea issue by means of discourse construction and frame selection, thereby influencing the direction of public opinion in the region and beyond. This study attempts to answer the following key questions: What narrative strategies do mainstream media in ASEAN countries adopt when reporting on the South China Sea issue? How do these narrative strategies affect public perceptions and attitudes toward the South China Sea issue? What are the characteristics of the communication effects of mainstream media in ASEAN countries in the context of the complex and changing international public opinion environment? Through an in-depth investigation of these questions, we hope to provide new ideas and grounds for understanding the communication phenomenon of the South China Sea issue in the ASEAN region, as well as the formulation of China's international communication strategy on the South China Sea issue [1].

2. South China Sea Issues and the Narrative Role of International Media

2.1. Geopolitical Importance of the South China Sea Issue

The South China Sea, located in the south-eastern part of China, is an important sea route connecting the Pacific Ocean with the Indian Ocean. Due to its strategic importance and the economic and security importance of its rich natural resources, the South China Sea has a long history of sovereignty disputes involving China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and many other countries. Among them, China and some ASEAN countries have big differences in the attribution of islands and reefs in the South China Sea and the division of maritime rights and interests. In recent years, the South China Sea issue has become increasingly complicated with the gradual emergence of the development potential

of the resources in the South China Sea and the involvement of extra-regional powers. In particular, the South China Sea issue has become the focus of international public opinion after the announcement of the ruling results of the South China Sea arbitration case in 2016. The South China Sea issue has become not only a regional issue but also an important venue for global geopolitical games.

2.2. Role and Position of ASEAN Countries in the South China Sea Issue

The roles and positions of ASEAN member states on the South China Sea issue show significant differentiation and complexity, both in terms of divergent positions due to divergent internal interests, and also affected by the state's alliance with extra-territorial powers, especially its relationship with China and the United States. ASEAN, as the core of the regional cooperation mechanism, tends to maintain stability in the South China Sea through multilateral dialogue and rule-making, but policy coordination is difficult due to the differences in each country's needs for the South China Sea and the positioning of the South China Sea in its national interests. The majority of ASEAN countries take a neutral stance in pursuit of regional peace and stability, and support the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the promotion of consultations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC), which they consider to be the key framework for managing differences and avoiding conflicts. The hardliners, the Philippines and Vietnam, as countries directly involved in the South China Sea, actually control more islands and reefs in the South China Sea and are located closer to China, and have repeatedly confronted China over the South China Sea issue, adopting confrontational and aggressive South China Sea policies. The Philippines frequently conducts military exercises with the United States and other extra-territorial countries in an attempt to counter-balance China through external forces, while Vietnam has set up various maritime military defence bases in an attempt to balance its sovereignty claims with the need for regional cooperation. The moderates, Malaysia and Brunei, advocate the peaceful resolution of disputes and dialogue through the ASEAN-formed platform. Thus, the divergence in internal attitudes directly affects ASEAN's collective action on the South China Sea, which also reveals the inherent flaws of the ASEAN mechanism.

2.3. The Media's Narrative Role in the South China Sea

The media is the core carrier of international public opinion, and the different narratives of national media on the South China Sea issue have profoundly shaped the direction of international public opinion and public perceptions, and their functions are reflected in multiple dimensions, such as public opinion guidance, public mobilisation, and interaction with multilateral mechanisms. Firstly, as a guide to public opinion, the media directly influences the international narrative of the South China Sea issue through frame construction and rhetorical strategies.

For example, the New York Times deliberately mixed up the “tribunal” and the “court” in the South China Sea arbitration case, blurring the difference in legal effects, so as to strengthen China’s “non-compliance with international law”. This is to reinforce China’s negative image of “non-compliance with international law” and to serve the U.S. strategic goal of “returning to the Asia-Pacific”. Chinese mainstream media, on the other hand, have focused their coverage on signalling the peaceful resolution of disputes, such as Xinhua News Agency and People’s Daily, which have emphasised the path of diplomatic negotiation in the South China Sea disputes, reducing the likelihood of an escalation of the crisis. This difference in narratives not only reflects national interest orientation, but also exacerbates the polarisation of international public opinion. Second, social media has gradually become a new front in the public opinion war on the South China Sea issue. By supporting local Philippine idol groups and planning online activities, the United States bundles the South China Sea sovereignty dispute with the culture of the rice circle, uses the emotional stickiness of the youth group to spread specific political narratives, transforms international disputes into everyday topics, and subtly influences the perception of the younger generation in the Philippines. This strategy reveals that social media is not only a tool for information dissemination, but also a channel for ideological infiltration. At the same time, China broadcast a South China Sea-themed propaganda film in New York’s Times Square to reinforce the legitimacy of its sovereignty claim through visual symbols and high-frequency communication, directly responding to the bias of Western media.

3. Overview of Mainstream Media Coverage of South China Sea Issues in ASEAN Countries

3.1. Analysis of Coverage Issues

Issue analysis is a key part of understanding media narrative strategies and their communication effects. By categorising and sorting out the issues in the sample reports, we find out how South China Sea issues are presented in the media and the political, economic and cultural motives behind them. The core issues of the South China Sea revolve around sovereignty disputes, resource exploitation, and regional security and cooperation. Media reports usually start from these core issues and construct different narrative frameworks. Sovereignty disputes are the most controversial issue in the South China Sea, and the media tend to support their national positions by emphasising historical grounds, international law or national sentiments. The issue of resource exploitation focuses more on oil, gas and fishery resources in the South China Sea, and the media stimulate public concern for national interests by reporting on the potential economic benefits of resource competition. The topic of regional security and cooperation reflects the complexity of ASEAN countries’ positions on the South China Sea, with some media outlets emphasising the peaceful resolution of disputes through multilateral mechanisms, while others may highlight the impact of the involvement of extra-

regional powers on regional security. In addition, the trend of internationalisation of the South China Sea issue is often addressed in media reports, particularly how the involvement of extra-regional powers has exacerbated regional tensions. By analysing these topics, it is possible to reveal how the narrative strategies of the media in ASEAN countries on the South China Sea issue serve national interests, and at the same time to observe the differences in the choice of topics and the way they are presented by the media in different countries. This logic of issue analysis not only helps to understand the complexity of the South China Sea issue, but also provides an important basis for further research on the impact of media narratives on public perception and international public opinion [2].

3.2. Reporting Tendencies and Characteristics

Mainstream media in ASEAN countries show clear tendencies in their coverage of South China Sea issues. Claimant media tend to adopt confrontational narratives to strengthen sovereignty claims, non-claimant media maintain regional stability through balanced reporting, and economically dependent countries seek a compromise between security and economy. These differences not only reflect the divergence of geo-interests within ASEAN, but also reveal the complex role of the media as an “ideological vehicle” in the South China Sea issue, which has a profound impact on public perceptions of the South China Sea issue and the direction of international public opinion. The tendency of reporting is mainly reflected in the emphasis on national sovereignty and interests. For example, when reporting on the South China Sea, the media in Vietnam and the Philippines often highlight their own sovereignty claims and reinforce the legitimacy of their positions by citing historical evidence and international law. This tendency is often accompanied by criticism of China’s behaviour, portraying China as an “expansionist” or “threat to regional stability” actor. Second, some ASEAN media tend to use external forces (e.g., the U.S. and Japan) to balance China’s influence, a tendency that is particularly evident in the media reports of the Philippines and Vietnam, which often emphasise security cooperation with extra-territorial powers in order to strengthen their own voice on the South China Sea. On the other hand, the media in countries such as Singapore and Indonesia show more neutrality and balance, focusing more on regional cooperation and peaceful settlement of disputes in their reports and emphasising ASEAN’s mediating role in the South China Sea issue. This tendency reflects the pragmatic stance of these countries on the South China Sea issue, which is to maintain regional stability through multilateral mechanisms.

4. Narrative Strategies of Mainstream Media in ASEAN Countries on the South China Sea Issue

4.1. Narrative Structure: The Dichotomy of Conflict and Cooperation

The narrative structure of the mainstream media in ASEAN countries on the South China Sea issue shows a significant “conflict-cooperation” dichotomy. The reports of the direct claimant countries tend to construct a “conflict framework”,

reinforcing the logic of escalating conflicts through linear narratives. For example, the Manila Times of the Philippines, in the case of the Sino-Philippine Xianbin Reef conflict, described the details of the collision between the two sides' vessels in chronological order, highlighting the urgency of the "Chinese threat". Non-claimant media, on the other hand, have adopted a "balanced framework" to maintain an image of regional stability by juxtaposing the positions of multiple parties. For example, when reporting on China and ASEAN's promotion of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, they acknowledged the progress of the consultations while also mentioning the Philippines' reservations. In addition, some media have linked the South China Sea issue to other geopolitical issues (e.g., the U.S.-China game and the Ukraine crisis) through multi-threaded narratives. For example, when reporting on the Sino-Vietnamese joint patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin, Vietnamese media deliberately downplayed the South China Sea dispute and emphasised bilateral economic cooperation instead, forming a narrative strategy of "separating sovereignty issues from economic cooperation".

4.2. Narrative Theme: The Game of Sovereignty, Security and Regional Order

The narrative themes of the South China Sea issue can be summarised into the following three categories: first, sovereignty and historical legitimacy: the Vietnamese and Philippine media build up the "legal legitimacy" of sovereignty-claiming countries through high-frequency references to historical documents and international law terminology. For example, Vietnam's People's Daily has repeatedly referred to the concept of "ancestral waters", tying the South China Sea issue to the history of national independence and reinforcing the public's recognition of sovereignty. Second, security threats and external alliances: Philippine media highlight the military involvement of extra-territorial powers, describing the joint military exercises as "a necessary move to maintain freedom of navigation", and exaggerating security crises through symbolic events. Third, regional cooperation and multilateral mechanisms: Singaporean and Indonesian media focused on the consultation process of the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, stressing the centrality of ASEAN.

4.3. Narrative Perspectives: National Interest Orientation and Great Power Balance

The narrative perspectives of the media in ASEAN countries are distinctly orientated towards national interests: from the perspective of direct claimant countries, such as Viet Nam and the Philippines, the media position themselves in the role of "victim-resistant" and take the initiative to portray themselves as weak so as to arouse sympathy from international public opinion. In the South China Sea issue, the Philippine media uses a victim frame and a tragic narrative to portray itself as weak, violated, bullied and aggrieved. From the perspective of non-claimant countries, such as Singapore and Indonesia, the media adopt a "third-party observer" perspective, emphasising the interests of ASEAN as a whole. For example, in its

coverage of the China-Philippines conflict, Indonesia's Jakarta Post called for "avoiding regional division" and criticised the intervention of extra-territorial forces. The great power balance perspective, such as the split stance of some media on economic and security issues—emphasising cooperation with China in economic coverage, while cautiously criticising China on security issues—reflects a dual-track strategy of "security detachment and economic proximity" [3].

4.4. Narrative Language: Affective Rhetoric and Metaphorical Construction

The media in ASEAN countries have the following linguistic strategies: firstly, emotive rhetoric: the media in direct claimant countries arouse public emotions through nationalistic discourses (e.g., "defending sovereignty", "sacred territory") and moral accusations (e.g., "undermining peace"). The media of the direct claimant countries stimulate public emotions through nationalistic discourses (e.g. "defence of sovereignty", "sacred territory") and moral accusations (e.g. "breach of peace"). The Vietnamese media even analogises the South China Sea issue with the history of "resisting the US and saving the country" to portray the image of "neo-colonial resisters". Second, metaphors and symbols: China's construction activities in the South China Sea are often labelled as "militarised expansion", while the ASEAN cooperation mechanism is metaphorically described as an "anchor of stability". For example, Philippine media describe Chinese maritime police vessels as a "Great Wall of Steel", suggesting their oppressive nature, while Singaporean media use the metaphor of a "common home" to downplay conflict.

5. The Communication Effect of Mainstream Media in ASEAN Countries on South China Sea Issues and China's Countermeasures

5.1. Shaping Public Perceptions: The Tension between Nationalist Sentiment and Rational Balance

The mainstream media in ASEAN countries on the South China Sea issue has a profound impact on public perception, the direction of international public opinion and geopolitical interactions within and outside the region. This effect reflects not only the divergence and consensus of ASEAN's internal positions, but also the complex game of external forces' intervention and regional cooperation demands. The media of direct claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines reinforce negative public perceptions of China through "sovereignty narratives" and "conflict frames". For example, the Manila Times in the Philippines frequently uses labelled terms such as "maritime bullying" and "violation of international law" to portray China's rights defence as a "threat" and stimulate nationalist sentiments. Vietnamese media, on the other hand, reinforce the legitimacy of sovereignty through historical narratives and detailed depictions of fishermen's encounters. Through emotive rhetoric and symbolic metaphors, such reporting creates a victim-perpetrator dichotomy among the public, which may build

domestic consensus in the short term but exacerbates hostility towards China in the long term. The media in non-claimant countries such as Singapore and Malaysia tend to favour a “cooperative framework” that weakens the conflict. For example, in its coverage of the China-ASEAN foreign ministers’ meeting, the United Morning Post highlighted the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea and the progress of consultations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, highlighting the win-win logic of regional stability and economic cooperation. By citing the results of multilateral mechanisms and economic data, these reports balanced the public’s concerns about security risks and promoted rational perceptions. In addition, when reporting on the South China Sea, different types of media in the ASEAN region, such as the Vietnam News Agency (VNA), the People’s Daily (PD), and the Manila Bulletin (MGB) of the Philippines, are susceptible to nationalist sentiments due to the territorial disputes between Vietnam and the Philippines over the South China Sea with China. Such reports tend to emphasise their own country’s position and highlight the conflict points in the dispute, which may inspire strong nationalistic sentiments among the public and contribute to the formation of a more radical and one-sided public perception of the situation in the South China Sea. On the other hand, media outlets such as Singapore’s Lianhe Zaobao and Thailand’s POP, under the influence of their national stance that emphasises regional stability and cooperation, tend to focus on rational and balanced reporting. They will comprehensively present the multi-faceted nature of the South China Sea issue, covering cooperation and exchanges as well as dispute resolution, and guide the public to view the South China Sea issue from a more objective and rational perspective. This creates a tension between nationalist sentiment and rational balance in the ASEAN public’s cognitive shaping. On the one hand, nationalist sentiment-driven reports may incite the public’s emotional response, while rational and balanced reports try to guide the public to think calmly, and the two pull each other to influence the formation of the ASEAN public’s cognitive and attitudinal direction towards the South China Sea issue.

5.2. The Polarisation of International Public Opinion: The Game of Extraterritorial Intervention versus Regional Autonomy

The South China Sea issue, as the core focus of geopolitics in the Asia-Pacific, not only affects regional peace and stability, but also creates ripple effects in the international political and economic landscape. Some ASEAN media, influenced by the Western narrative, have simplified the South China Sea issue into a “China-US game”. For example, the New York Times and other Western media have reinforced China’s negative image of “non-compliance with international law” by blurring the legal differences between “arbitral tribunals” and “international tribunals,” and the Philippines has been a major player in the South China Sea issue. Western media, such as The Arbitral Tribunal, reinforce China’s negative image of “non-compliance with international law” by blurring the legal differences

between “arbitral tribunals” and “international tribunals”, while Philippine media cite such frames to further polarise public opinion. However, ASEAN as a whole is wary of extraterritorial intervention. For example, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar has explicitly rejected U.S. intervention, calling for “the issue to be resolved by countries in the region,” a stance that has been widely reported by media outlets in Singapore, Indonesia, and elsewhere, creating a counterbalance to Western narratives. Social media has become a new battleground for the public opinion war on the South China Sea. While expanding audience coverage, this “soft penetration” strategy has also led to further fragmentation of the public opinion arena and polarisation of public opinion.

Overall, the communication effects of the media in ASEAN countries can either intensify conflicts or promote cooperation. The core contradiction lies in how to reconcile national interest-oriented media narratives with the demand for regional stability. In the future, China needs to further provide “reportable peace progress” through institutional cooperation, while using ASEAN and other platforms to strengthen the narrative of economic cooperation and weaken the space for extraterritorial intervention. If the ASEAN media can take a more proactive role in balancing sovereignty claims and regional stability, it may create a more favourable public opinion environment for the peaceful resolution of the South China Sea issue [4].

6. Conclusion

Mainstream media coverage of the South China Sea issue in ASEAN countries is diverse and complex. At the macro level, media choices and coverage reflect the political and economic interests of countries on the South China Sea issue; at the meso level, the content of coverage and analytical frameworks are influenced by agenda-setting and sources of information; and at the micro level, specific cases demonstrate the stances and perspectives of different national media on the South China Sea issue. The narrative construction of social media influences the field of public opinion on the South China Sea issue. Media coverage of the actions of international organisations tends to serve specific agendas, and this difference in coverage reflects both the tension between regional cooperation and great power games, and exposes the complexity of the struggle for discourse power in international organisations. The South China Sea narrative strategy of mainstream media in ASEAN countries is essentially a mirror projection of their geopolitical positions: direct claimants reinforce their sovereignty claims through conflict narratives, non-claimants maintain regional stability through cooperation narratives, and economically dependent countries seek a balance between the two. This division not only reflects the divergence of interests within ASEAN, but also reveals the complex role of the media as an “ideological tool” in the South China Sea game. In the future, China will need to address the challenges of public opinion through differentiated communication strategies, while accelerating institutional arrangements such as the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea (COC), in

order to weaken the space for confrontational narratives to survive.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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