A Study of Mainstream Malaysian Media's Attitude and Its Changes on China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis (2018-2023)

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Abstract

The period of 2018 to 2023 saw both four changes in the Malaysian government and a geopolitical game between great powers in the Asian-Pacific region. Especially, 2020 saw both change in the Malaysian government as well as the outbreak of COVID-19—inevitably affecting Malaysia's attitude towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) both politically and economically. Hence, this study collects BRI reports from the mainstream Malaysian media—*New Straits Times* (NST)—from 2018 to 2023. Using corpus-based critical discourse analysis as the research framework, this study builds two target corpora for the periods of 2018-2019 and 2020-2023, respectively. Through comparative analysis of the reports amount, thematic terms, and concordance lines, this study examines NST's attitude towards the BRI and changes of attitude. The research findings firstly indicate a dynamic upward trend in NST's coverage of the BRI; secondly, the content of NST's reports shows a trend of diversification; and thirdly, while it expresses concerns about issues such as China's rise and challenges to security in the Southeast Asian region, NST's attitude towards the BRI remains positive overall, with no significant changes. This study explores Malaysia's attitudes towards the BRI from the perspective of news discourse analysis—providing both a perspective for enhancing mutual understanding between China and Malaysia, and further understanding of the status of China-Malaysia cooperation under the BRI.

Keywords: Malaysian media, attitudes, China, the Belt and Road Initiative, corpus-based critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched by China in 2013. This initiative aims to fervently promote the economic cooperation relationship with partners, as well as jointly enhance political mutual trust. Since 2013, the BRI has initiated more than 3000 cooperation projects and raised approximately one trillion dollars over the last decade (Rakha & El-Aasar, 2024), and it has attracted widespread attention worldwide. For instance, some Asian countries such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka support this initiative, but America and European countries consider it as economic and security threat (Dusyk et al., 2018). Given the significant role of the media in shaping public opinion and constructing images (Happer & Philo, 2013), the academic community has so far analysed and interpreted the BRI related reports in the media of many countries. This includes Malaysia, Cambodia, the Philippine (Shi & Jin, 2021; Li & Yang, 2023; Yang, 2023), as well as other countries including Russia, Japan, Australia, India, the United Kingdom, and America (Liu, 2020; Zhu & Shi 2022; Yang & Van Grop, 2023; Wei & Hu, 2024). These research findings hold great value for systematically analysing and interpreting the attitude towards the BRI in various countries' mainstream media.

Malaysia was one of the earliest countries to respond to China's BRI. Since 2013, the cooperation between China and Malaysia under the BRI has spanned a decade, mainstream Malaysia media has been extensively covering this initiative. Media discourse is not neutral, but rather influenced and shaped by political, economic, or social forces (Chomsky & Herman, 2002; Jiang, 2023). Against the backdrop of the changes of Malaysian politics, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupting global development momentum, and the growing involvement of America in the Asian-Pacific region, which cause the relations between China and Malaysia experiencing the phase of ups and downs, and restoration, Malaysia media's attitude towards the BRI is inevitably affected by these domestic and international factors (Luo, 2022). Malaysia and its mainstream media's attitudes toward China's BRI are crucial; this is because Malaysia, as one of the founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and an important economic entity in Southeast Asia, plays a significant political and economical role in the region.

In closing, given the significant role of mainstream Malaysian media in shaping public opinion and constructing images, the study firstly examines the media's attitudes towards the BRI and changes of attitudes at a micro level, and then further elucidates and analyses the discourse and social background reasons at a macro level. This study aims to address the following research questions:

1) What are features of coverage number and topics of NST's reports on the BRI from 2018 to 2023?

2) What is NST's attitude towards the BRI from 2018 to 2023? Has its attitude changes?

3) What factors affect NST's attitude towards the BRI?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Discourse Analysis of the BRI News Reports

Since its launch by China in 2013, the BRI has become a focal point for many academic studies. Scholars have explored the feasibility, necessity, communication channels, significant roles, and diplomatic influences of the BRI from different theoretical perspectives in fields such as political economy, international relations, journalism, and philosophy (Callahan, 2016; Herrero & Xu, 2017; Dunford, 2020). In the field of linguistics, investigating the discourse content and methods of national media news reports is an effective means of understanding a country's attitude towards the object they are reporting on (Shi & Jin, 2021). Therefore, linguistic experts have conducted systematic research on the reports of the BRI by various countries' media through linguistic theories and analytical methods.

Zhu and Huang (2016) used reports from the American newspaper *The Washington Post* as the object of analysis; they explore how American media constructs the image of China's BRI from three levels of text, discourse practices, and social practices, as well as delving into the underlying social ideologies. Shang (2017) started from the transitivity perspective to explore the attitude of India's media, *The Times of India*, towards the BRI and the implicit ideologies behind it. Zhong (2018) employed corpus-based critical discourse analysis to investigate the meaning construction of the discourse on the BRI in 12 national newspapers in the United Kingdom—including *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, and *The Times*. Liu (2020) studied relevant reports on the BRI in Japan's three major mainstream newspapers—*Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Asahi Shimbun*, and *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*—analysing the media discourse from the perspectives of naming strategies, argumentative strategies, and viewpoint strategies. Zhu and Shi (2022), based on the evaluative theory, conducted research on the reports of the BRI in Russia's mainstream media *Rossiyska ya Gazeta* and *Kommersant*—aiming to reveal the Russian government's attitude and perception towards the initiative. Li and Yang (2023) conducted frame analysis and corpus analysis on the reports on the BRI in Cambodian newspapers, online platforms, and comments from netizens; they explored the different viewpoints and attitudes of various social strata in Cambodia towards the implementation of the initiative in Cambodia.

Previous studies manifest that the BRI has evolved as an issue of national interests, geoeconomics and geopolitic. This is because the BRI news reports have been a key area of discourse analysis, especially for critical discourse analysis; they not only aim to analyse the attitudes of various groups or countries towards the initiative, but also explore related underlying factors—including ideology and power relations, as well as historical, socio-political, and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, although current research studies mostly explore the overall attitude of one country towards the BRI within a certain period of time, they do not further explore the dynamic changes in attitudes during this specific period of time; this is because attitudes are not static. Identifying and analysing the factors that cause dynamic changes in attitudes of one country towards the BRI is a prerequisite for better promoting the BRI. Therefore, this study conducts a comparative corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis of what is Malaysia's mainstream media's attitude and its changes on China's BRI.

3. Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an important research paradigm in linguistics and sociology—aiming to delve into the manifestation of the relations of social and power in verbal communication (Fairclough, 2005). CDA focuses on power structures, identity, and social critique within discourse. Therefore, it connects linguistic texts, discourse practices, and social realities; moreover, it reveals the power relations and ideologies behind discourse through the analysis of discourse features.

Traditional qualitative discourse analysis generally lacks a systematic method of collecting data (Meyer, 2001). Typically, researchers collect and analyse texts through manual reading. This phenomenon not only results in insufficient text quantity, reducing the representativeness of the texts, but also decreases the universality, objectivity, and credibility of the analysis results. Against this backdrop, in the mid-1990s, some researchers such as Caldas and Coulthard (1996) and Stubbs (1996) combined corpus linguistics with CDA, which is a new discourse analysis methods, called the corpus-based critical discourse analysis.

Corpus-based CDA has significant features: Firstly, through the application of corpus techniques, a large amount of authentic and effective texts can be collected—providing reliable data support for CDA and enhancing the universality of the analysis results. Secondly, the combination of quantitative analysis in corpus with qualitative descriptions in CDA improves both the objectivity and credibility of the analysis results. Thirdly, through corpus techniques, it becomes more effective to explore discourse phenomena and characteristics, thereby uncovering the hidden power relations and ideologies within discourse. Subsequently, Baker (2013) established the basic analytical framework of Corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis—continuously improving it.

In summary, CDA focuses on the power relations and ideologies hidden behind discourse; furthermore, analysing media discourse is also one of the important contents of CDA (Dijk 2015). This study adopts the corpus-based critical discourse analysis—using a large and authentic corpus of news media reports as research texts—to explore the attitude of mainstream Malaysian media towards China's BRI and its changes.

3.2 Data Collection and Method

This study selects news reports related to the BRI from New Straits Times (NST) as the research object. Because NST, being founded in 1845, is regarded as Malaysia's oldest, largest circulation, and most authoritative newspaper; this historic tenure has allowed it the

reputation of being 'National Newspaper' in Malaysia. News reports from NST are usually objective, comprehensive, and have both a wide audience and great level of influence. Therefore, it represents the true attitudes of the Malaysian mainstream media (Shi & Jin, 2021). The time span for data collection is chosen from 2018, when Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad took office, up until 2023. The reason for this chosen time period is that from 2018 to 2023, this period saw four changes in the Malaysian government, the outbreak of COVID-19, and a geopolitical game between great powers in the Asian-Pacific region; and 2023 marked the 10th anniversary of the BRI. All these elements may affect policy stability and economic exchanges. Furthermore, since this study aims to conduct a comparative analysis to examine the attitude towards the BRI and its change, it chooses 2020 as the time boundary that divides the time span of the research into two periods: 2018 to 2019 and 2020 to 2023. The reason is that 2020 saw the first change of four political changes in the Malaysian government, as well as the epidemic—these inevitably affected Malaysia's attitude towards BRI both politically and economically.

According to the analysis methods of corpus-based CDA, this study is mainly conducted with the following steps.

Firstly, establish the corpus. The study utilises the news database *Factiva* in order to collect news reports related to the BRI in NST. A total of 107 BRI news reports (52,910 tokens) from 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2023 have been collected. The study disposes collected news reports through removing those that are irrelevant to the BRI, and then creates two self-built target corpora: The NST corpus A (NSTC-A) and the NST corpus B (NSTC-B) for the first period (from 2018 to 2019) and second period (from 2020 to 2023). The British Press Reportage corpus (BPRC) is used as a reference corpus for extracting thematic terms.

Secondly, conduct comparative analysis of thematic terms. This study uses the corpus tool *Antconc 3.5.8* to conduct comparative analysis of thematic terms and concordance lines. In corpus linguistics, thematic terms refer to words that appear with unusually high frequency in a given text. Through frequency retrieval and comparison with a reference corpus, the target corpus can visually present the frequency of thematic terms—this can reflect the thematic content of the target corpus.

Thirdly, comparatively analyse concordance lines. This step can provide contextual information about the search terms—this will thereby reveal the collocations, colligation, semantic preference, and semantic prosody of the searched terms. Sinclair (1991) first proposed the concept of semantic prosody in 1991. It is an evaluative meaning that contains the speaker's attitude towards a certain topic—usually including positive, negative and neutral aspects (Sinclair, 1991; Louw, 2000). Collocation refers to the co-occurrence between words, while colligation refers to the co-occurrence of vocabulary and grammar (Huang & Zhu, 2022). Through collocations and colligation, the construction, selection, and preferences of semantic structures can be visually observed—thereby revealing the true meaning and attitudes expressed in the text. This paper would focus on analyzing collocations and colligation.

Finally, analyse the results. Combining longitudinal studies, the study analyses the thematic terms, collocations, and colligation of the two target corpora to explore what the focus of NST news reports on the BRI from 2018 to 2023 was and whether there were any changes, what the attitudes towards the BRI held by NST were like and whether there were any changes in that, and what social background reasons were.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Changes in the Number of Reports on the BRI by New Straits Times

The sociocultural context significantly influences the generation of texts. The quantity, focus, and discourse features of news reports and changing trends of these factors on a certain topic all reflect the characteristics of the contemporary background (Kong & Han, 2023). Hence, it is necessary to understand the changing trends of the BRI reports in NST, as well as the background of the times they reflect.

This study counts the number of news reports published by NST on the BRI from 2018 to 2023. As shown in Figure 1, a total of 107 relevant reports were published over the past six years, averaging 24 per year—this indicates that the BRI is a news focus for NST. The number of reports on the BRI from 2018 to 2019 is high and shows a clear upward trend; this is related to Malaysia's active response to the BRI and its closer cooperation with China. In August 2018, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir was officially invited to visit China. During this visit, the two sides conducted in-depth docking on the joint construction of the BRI. In 2019, China and Malaysia marked the 45th anniversary of their diplomatic relations. During the same year, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir made a second visit to China and attended the BRI Summit. These events have led to an increasing focus by NST on the BRI.
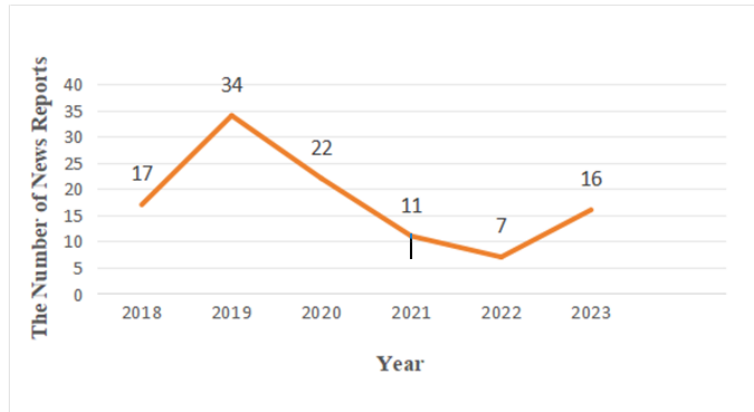
Figure 1. The Number of News Reports Related to the BRI from 2018 to 20

The year 2019 was an important turning point. The number of reports sharply declined and reached its minimum in 2022. The main reason for this phenomenon is the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 in 2020, which swept across the world—bringing with it enormous and heavy impacts to countries worldwide. After 2022, as the pandemic was in the later stages of being effectively controlled, an increasing number of countries began to deepen cooperation and exchanges with other countries in economic, cultural, and anti-epidemic aspects to recover and develop their economy. This is especially true in 2023, when Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim visited China twice—attending the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2023 in March and the 20th China-Asean Expo in September. In this context, the BRI news reports of NST began to increase.

4.2 Comparative Analysis of Thematic Terms

Thematic terms with a high frequency can visually present the discourse focus and issues of concern emphasised by NST on the BRI. Firstly, this study compares the two target corpora, NSTC-A and NSTC-B, with the reference corpus, BPRC, and selects the top 50 thematic terms according to the keyness value (see Figure 2). The font size of the thematic term represents its keyness value: the larger the font size, the higher the significance—this indicates that the word is highly representative of the characteristic vocabulary of the two self-built corpora. This step can provide a clear picture of what topics on the BRI the *New Straits Times* are interested in.

a. 2018-2019   b. 2020-2023

Figure 2. The Topics on BRI Concerned by *New Straits Times* from 2018 to 2023

In order to further demonstrate the different reports focuses of NST during two different time periods, this study identifies 30 primary thematic terms for each period, utilizing a stop list to filter out high-frequency, non-content words that could detract from thematic clarity (such as common prepositions, conjunctions, and 'be' verbs) and merging semantically repetitive terms. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the statistical results reveal that during the two time periods, NST coverage of the BRI reflects different thematic emphases.

Table 1. Thematic terms from 2018 to 2019

Type	Rank	Keyness	Type	Rank	Keyness
countries	1	258.0	southeast	16	64.6
ASEAN	2	248.1	largest	17	62.4
trade	3	239.7	construction	18	61.8
cooperation	4	224.9	connectivity	19	56.7
economic	5	179.3	security	20	50.5
development	6	168.8	investment	21	49.2
international	7	158.4	future	22	47.6
project	8	117.8	technology	23	47.5
global	9	107.6	shared	24	46.8

forum	10	104.7	Huawei	25	46.5
relations	11	98.2	rail	26	46.1
infrastructure	12	94.6	foreign	27	45.6
billion	13	80.9	media	28	44.8
regional	14	79.1	president	29	42.5
bilateral	15	67.1	growth	30	39.0

Table 2. Thematic terms from 2020 to 2023

Type	Rank	Keyness	Type	Rank	Keyness
ASEAN	1	202.0	project	16	50.4
countries	2	180.8	bilateral	17	47.9
cooperation	3	160.8	investments	18	46.2
economic	4	157.8	states	19	46.2
development	5	115.9	southeast	20	44.5
relations	6	90.8	medicine	21	44.2
international	7	79.3	diplomacy	22	44.2
poverty	8	77.3	shared	23	43.0
global	9	70.6	infrastructure	24	40.9
trade	10	66.9	regional	25	36.3
Covid	11	65.0	forum	26	34.4
pandemic	12	64.1	visit	27	32.2
billion	13	62.1	building	28	32.2
strategic	14	60.7	president	29	29.3
digital	15	55.0	diplomatic	30	27.9

4.2.1 News Report Focus from 2018 to 2019: Bilateral Economic and Political Dialogue and Cooperation

According to Figure 2 and Table 1, words like 'ASEAN,' 'trade,' 'cooperation,' 'economic,' and 'development,' have the highest keyness value. This indicates that NST reports on the BRI firstly would pay great attention to the overall situation of bilateral economic cooperation and exchanges between China and Malaysia and ASEAN countries; and secondly, when reporting on China-Malaysia economic cooperation, NST would also focus on several key areas such as infrastructure, investment, high-tech technology, *Huawei*, and rail projects. This is closely related to the fact that Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir's official visit to China in 2018. During this visit to China, the leaders of the two countries unanimously stated that both sides highly affirm the current economic and trade cooperation. The two sides would commit to enhancing collaboration in infrastructure, production capacity, agriculture and fishery, as well as other fields, and actively expand partnerships in e-commerce, Internet economy, innovation and other key fields. At the same time, the East Coast Rail Link project, which was previously suspended, would officially resume on 25 July 2019 after consultations between the two governments. In these related reports, NST would convey its attitude towards China-Malaysia cooperation in the context of the BRI through using adjectives and nouns with explicit evaluative functions, such as bilateral, largest, future, shared, growth, etc.

Within international relations, politics and economics greatly influence each other. When NST reports on the economic cooperation between China and Malaysia, it also focuses on the political and diplomatic exchanges between the two countries at the government level under the BRI. Specifically, NST would pay close attention to ASEAN-China relations, the Prime Minister Mahathir's visit to China, and the dialogue and cooperation between the two countries at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, as well as other related summits. Secondly, the two countries' contribution to regional development and security and the in-depth promotion of China-Malaysia bilateral relations are also the focus of the reports. At the same time, NST is quite interested in the meeting and dialogue between Malaysian leaders and Chinese leaders President Xi Jinping.

4.2.2 News Report Focus from 2020 to 2023: Reviving Economy and Promoting Comprehensive Cooperation

Bilateral economic cooperation is deepening. According to Figure 2 and Table 2, the keyness value of words like ASEAN, cooperation, economic, and development is very high. This clearly means that NST has been attaching attention to the economic cooperation among China, Malaysia, and other ASEAN countries countries under the BRI from 2020 when the COVID-19 broke out to its effective controlling in 2022. Secondly, compared with the reports before 2020, NST not only continues to pay attention to investment cooperation between the two countries in economy, trade, infrastructure, and other projects, but also has begun to report on China-Malaysia digital economy cooperation since 2020. At the same time, NST still uses adjectives and nouns with explicit evaluative functions to describe China-Malaysia cooperation such as strategic, bilateral, shared, building, etc. It is worth noting that from 2018 to 2023, NST has always used the word 'shared' to describe the China-Malaysia economic cooperation under the BRI.

Bilateral political exchanges are deepening. According to Figure 2 and Table 2, since 2020, NST's political coverage of China and Malaysia in the context of the BRI has shown three characteristics. First, NST continues to focus on the dialogue between the two countries at the traditional political level, such as participating in high-level summits or forums, deepening China-Malaysia diplomatic relations, exploring the relationship between ASEAN and China, promoting regional cooperation and security, and leadership exchanges. Second, NST begins to focus on China's efforts to address domestic poverty. China announced on 23 November 2020 that all 832 impoverished villages have been lifted out of poverty, and that all poverty alleviation goals and tasks have been completed. China makes great contributions to world poverty alleviation and puts forward its experience. Third, NST pays attention to China-Malaysia cooperation regarding epidemic

prevention and vaccine development. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, China, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian countries have maintained close communication and cooperation on virus testing, prevention and control measures, and pharmaceutical research and development—aiming to work together to fight the epidemic and strive to achieve economic recovery.

Based on the comparative analysis above of thematic terms with high frequency, it can be found that, firstly, in the two periods of 2018 to 2019 and 2020 to 2023, NST continues to report on the economic and political exchanges between China and Malaysia under the BRI, as well as between China and other ASEAN countries; secondly, the topics NST focuses on are dynamically changing. Specifically, NST would adjust the themes of news reports according to changes in the social environment; this is so that the themes and content of news reports can timely and truly reflect the current status of exchanges and cooperation between China and Malaysia and other ASEAN countries under the BRI.

4.3 Comparative Analysis of Concordance Lines

In corpus linguistics, analysis of thematic terms with high frequency can reveal the focus of discourse, while the analysis of collocation words can explain attitudes toward the target topic. According to the definition of Baker (2006), those certain words, which frequently appear next to or adjacent to other words, are called collocation. Since the China proposed the BRI in 2013 and has been committing to all-round and in-depth cooperation with other countries, it is necessary to use "China" as a node word to search for collocations related to "China" to explore NST's attitude towards the BRI and its changes.

Based on the *AntConc3.5.8* software, the study sorts out the collocations of "China" in the two target corpora (as shown in Figure 3).

As presented in Figure 3, the collocation forms of "China" are highly matched in the two target corpora. Therefore, after sorting out and merging the data, this study finally selects "China and Malaysia + V or V+ China and Malaysia," "China +be+ N/Adj," "China has/had +V," "China will +V," and "South China sea +Be/V " as node words in order to further study their colligation. This step aims to explore NST's cognition and attitude towards the BRI in the two time periods of 2018-2019 and 2020-2023.
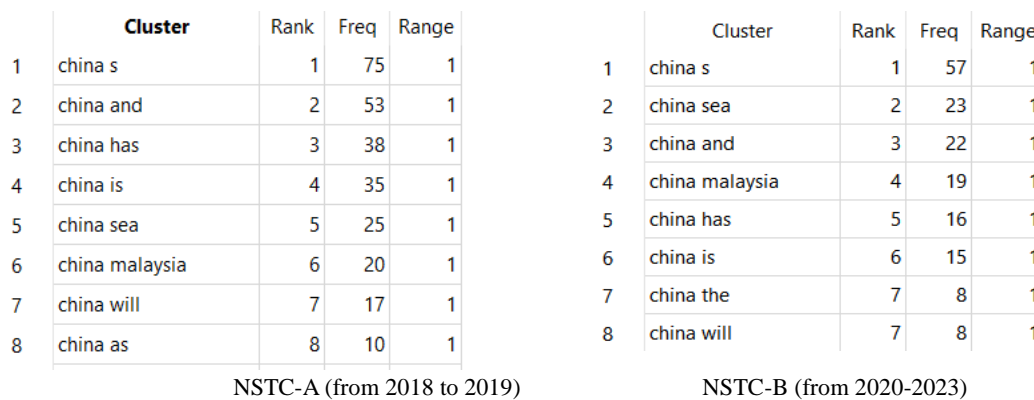
	Cluster	Rank	Freq	Range
1	china s	1	75	1
2	china and	2	53	1
3	china has	3	38	1
4	china is	4	35	1
5	china sea	5	25	1
6	china malaysia	6	20	1
7	china will	7	17	1
8	china as	8	10	1

	Cluster	Rank	Freq	Range
1	china s	1	57	1
2	china sea	2	23	1
3	china and	3	22	1
4	china malaysia	4	19	1
5	china has	5	16	1
6	china is	6	15	1
7	china the	7	8	1
8	china will	7	8	1

NSTC-A (from 2018 to 2019)   NSTC-B (from 2020-2023)

Figure 3. The Collocations of "China" in NSTC-A and NSTC-B

4.3.1 Analysis of Collocations and Attitude from 2018-2019

As shown in Table 3, there are five colligation patterns related to the node word "China". This study would respectively analyse these colligation patterns by presenting related concordance examples.

Table 3. The colligations of "China" in NSTC-A (2018-2019)

Colligation	Common collocations
China+is+ N/Adj	member, big, great, the largest, willing to
China and Malaysia + V or V+ China and Malaysia	agree, establish, remain, stand , support
China will + V	do well, avoid, bloom, foster, keep
China has/had + V	become, contributed to, developed, hotsed, made

4.3.1.1 China+is+ N/Adj

When observing the concordance of the collocations (as shown in Table 4), it is apparent that the structure "China+is+ N/Adj" primarily serves as a paraphrase for China. The word "is" serves as the most common indicator of paraphrase. Since China began its reform and opening-up policy in 1978, it has been experiencing continuous and rapid development. The current situation in China is vastly different from before. Therefore, it is crucial to provide explanations and descriptions of China and its circumstances in reports, which can help readers gain an understanding of China and the BRI. In turn, the process of explaining the China's situation in reports reflects NST's attitude towards China and the BRI.

Table 4. The collocations of China+is+ N/Adj

> 1. **China is** a big enigma, notwithstanding its rising global influence.
>
> 2. **China is** a member of almost every inter-governmental international organizations, making its due contributions to world peace and development.
>
> 3. **China is** a great power and we have to take its policies into consideration and find out how we can benefit from them.
>
> 4. **China is** now the largest trading partner for more than 130 countries and a driving force for world economic growth.
>
> 5. **China is** willing to enhance bilateral trade with Malaysia and foster deeper collaboration in finance, high-value agriculture and new industries.

In Example 1, China is described as an enigma. Considering the specific context, this statement indicates that while many countries and people now recognise that China is rapidly developing and its global influence is increasing, their understanding of the other aspects of China remains lacking—this opacity of China disturbs them, leading to this consensus being considered a negative assessment.

Examples 2 to 5 introduce China as a partner that is dedicated to world peace and economic development. Additionally, China is keen on deepening bilateral exchanges with Malaysia. Obviously, even though there are still some concerns regarding China, NST presents a overall positive evaluation of the country.

4.3.1.2 China and Malaysia + V or V+ China and Malaysia

In reports on the BRI (as shown in Table 5), when "China and Malaysia" are used as subjects or objects, the words they are paired with are quite varied.

Table 5. The collocations of China and Malaysia + V or V+ China and Malaysia

1. **China and Malaysia** also agreed, in the MoU, to work together to encourage the use of ...

2. There are more than 4.2 million tourists visiting between **China and Malaysia** annually...

3. ... Zheng He of the Ming dynasty heralded the friendly exchanges between **China and Malaysia** in the history.

4. It was during this visit that **China and Malaysia** officially established diplomatic relations ...

5. May the friendship between **China and Malaysia** remain fresh forever.

6. **China and Malaysia** shall be friends forever, and shall help each other pursue common development...

7. Bilateral trade between **China and Malaysia** stands at more than US$100 billion (RM4.13 billion)...

8. Both **China and Malaysia** support economic globalisation, openness and cooperation.

9. On the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between **China and Malaysia** this year, Dr Mahathir visited China...

10. ...even though **Malaysia and China** had differing opinions on the matter, both parties could eventually come to a mutually-agreeable solution.

When "China and Malaysia" are used as subjects in sentences, the words paired with them include "agree," "establish," "support," and "shall be." Among them, "agree," "establish," and "support" are action verbs with positive meanings. Through using these verbs, NST shows the willingness of both China and Malaysia to engage in bilateral exchanges under the BRI, promote economic globalisation, and support openness and cooperation. Furthermore, in English grammar, "shall be" can indicate the future. "Shall be friends forever" expresses an affirmation of the current stage of China-Malaysia relations and a positive outlook for the future. Significantly, as shown in the Example 10, although China and Malaysia have different interests and views on some things, through consultation and communication, the two sides can finally reach a mutually agreeable solution. This indicates that China and Malaysia have already built a basic strategic mutual trust, which has granted both parties the ability to overcome problems they face when they are dealing with each other.

When "China and Malaysia" serve as objects in sentences, they are paired with phrases such as "visit between," "exchange between," "friendship between," "trade between," and "relations between." The term "between" establishes a connection between China and Malaysia. The words "visit," "exchange," "trade," and "friendship" indicate that under the BRI, the channels of China-Malaysia exchanges at both government and public levels are diverse and have been recognised by both sides. Based on the analysis above, it is apparent that NST holds a positive and affirming attitude towards the cooperation between China and Malaysia.

4.3.1.3 China will + V and China has/had + V

The structure "China will + V" conveys both a description of future actions and an outlook on the future. Addressing many countries and people's concerns about China's opacity in many fields, the report explicitly states that China will do well to be more transparent. In the second and third example sentences of Table 6, NST expresses through quotations and statements that in the future, China will not only be cowed by threats or subdued by pressure but will also continue to develop jointly with other countries under the BRI and achieve mutual benefits. The fourth example sentence indicates that China aims to develop peacefully and make friendships with more countries. The last example sentence conveys a concern about the Chinese system, which stems more from a lack of understanding. In summary, when

discussing the future of China and the BRI, NST presents an overall positive and affirmative attitude. However, due to differences in national systems, there are also certain concerns that are being raised about China.

Table 6. The collocations of China will + V

1. **China will** do well to be more transparent.
2. As President Xi emphasised many times, "China will do well only when the world does well, and vice versa".
3. **China will** not be cowed by threats or subdued by pressure.
4. **China will** stick to the path of peaceful development, actively pursue global partnerships...
5. Perhaps **China will** avoid this tendency, but it has been widespread throughout history...

The structure "China has/had + V" conveys a description and comment of past actions. As shown in Table 7, NST mainly uses several positive words or phrases, such as "become the most important pillar," "become the largest trading partner," "become a key anchor and driver" and "made a significant contribution." When referring to the past, NST describes that China has already become a vital partner to the world and Malaysia—appraising that China has made significant contributions to the economic development of the world, as well as being committed to deepening friendly ties with Malaysia. Clearly, NST here provides a positive evaluation of China's past efforts, as well as the BRI.

Table 7. The collocations of China has/had + V

1. **China has** become the most important pillar for multilateralism and is an indispensable, trustworthy and important force for promoting world peace and development.
2. ... **China has** become the largest trading partner for almost all member states.
3. **China has** become the largest exporter and the second-largest importer of commodities, and the second-largest FDI (foreign direct investment) recipient country.
4. ...**China has** become a key anchor and driver for the world economy and a positive force...
5. **China has** become Malaysia's largest tourist source country out of Asean for seven consecutive years.
6. ...**China has** made a significant contribution to mitigating the Asian financial crisis and ...
7. **China had** made its open door policy a fundamental national policy and ...

4.3.2 Analysis of Collocations and Attitude from 2020-2023

As shown in Table 8, there are five colligation patterns related to the node word "China." This study analyses these colligation patterns by presenting related concordance examples.

Table 8. The colligations of "China" in TNSTC-B (2020-2023)

Colligation	Common collocations
China+is+ N/Adj	willing to, the most important, able to
China and Malaysia + V or V+ China and Malaysia	embrace, accelerate, improve, cooperate, conclude
China will + V	Accelerate, remain, begin, continue, realize
China has/had + V	promoted, pursued, committed to, remained, shown
South China sea +Be/V	zone, belong to, dispute, issue, remain

4.3.2.1 China+is+ N/Adj

As shown in Table 9, NST presents different images of China by using many combinations. Firstly, "willing to," "work with," "important," and "achieve" carry distinct positive meanings. NST views China as a good partner for Malaysia—seeing them as capable of facing challenges together. Secondly, although "dysfunctional" is a negative term in meaning, in specific contexts, it reflects a positive meaning—indicating China's achievements in poverty alleviation and its fight against the COVID-19. Thirdly, the term "upend" carries a negative meaning; NST uses it to indicate that China is overturning the global order, expressing concerns about changes in the order. Clearly, NST generally holds a positive and affirmative attitude towards China and the BRI, while also revealing concerns about China's such rapid development.

Table 9. The collocations of China+is+ N/Adj

1. **China is** willing to work with Malaysia to face the risks and challenges, deepen exchanges and mutual learning...
2. ... **China is** the most important economic player in the region.
3. **China is** able to achieve the miracle of poverty alleviation due to three "keys."
4. **China is** not a dysfunctional state given the speed by which it can contain Covid-19.
5. ... **China is** out to upend the whole global order.

4.3.2.2 China and Malaysia + V or V+ China and Malaysia

According to Table 10, when NST uses the phrase "China and Malaysia" as the subject and object in news reports, the related collocations

all carry significantly positive meanings, such as "embrace," "accelerate," "partnership between," "ties between," and "cooperation between." Among the examples from Table 10, Examples 1 and 2 indicate that China and Malaysia will seize the opportunity and further accelerate processes of implementing of the BRI. Examples 3 to 5 directly indicate that the two countries have a comprehensive strategic relationship; moreover, under the BRI, the China-Malaysia relationship will further deepen with time. Judging from the above statements, NST presents a positive and optimistic attitude towards the BRI and the cooperation between China and Malaysia.

Table 10. The collocations of China and Malaysia + V or V+ China and Malaysia

1....**China and Malaysia** will embrace new opportunities.
2.Soon, **China and Malaysia** will accelerate the process of implementing the Belt and Road Initiative...
3....the comprehensive strategic partnership between **China and Malaysia** has been full of vigour, just like the baby pandas.
4.Since the launch of the BRI in 2013, economic ties between **China and Malaysia** have improved tremendously.
5....forge ahead with friendly cooperation between **China and Malaysia**.

4.3.2.3 China will + V and China has/had + V

During the period of 2020 to 2023, NST frequently mentions the measures China would take to expand its domestic market and alleviate poverty under the BRI. On the one hand, this is because in 2020, China proposed a novel development pattern to deeply improve domestic and international markets. This new pattern provides new ideas for other countries seeking new development modes and drivers for growth to support their high-quality economic development. On the other hand, it is also because China achieved a comprehensive victory in the battle against poverty in 2021.

Table11. The collocations of China will + V

1. **China will** accelerate the process of creating a dual circulation development pattern that centres around internal circulation with the domestic and international markets promoting each other.
2. **China will** always remain a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development and an upholder of international order.
3. With this strong impetus, **China wil**l begin its new journey towards the second centenary goal...
4. **China will** continue working with the United Nations and developing countries to embark on an international poverty alleviation cooperation while promoting high-quality cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative for people around the world to share the fruits of development.
5. **China wil**l realize its first centenary goal (to build a moderately prosperous society in all aspects by the time the Communist Party of China celebrates its centenary in 2021)

In these news reports, the collocations used by NST include positive and neutral terms (as shown in Table 11)—such as "accelerate," "remain," "continue," "realise," and "begin." Example 1 indicates that China is constructing a novel development pattern to promote the mutual development of domestic and international markets. Example 2 demonstrates China's commitment to maintaining world peace and promoting global development. Examples 3 to 5 indicate that China has completed the poverty alleviation task. Clearly, during this period, NST fully affirms China's efforts and provides positive evaluations to various cooperations under the BRI in the future.

According to Table 12, NST predominantly uses positive and neutral collocations when reporting on China's past situations and completed tasks. Positive collocations include "pursue," "achieve," and "commit to," while neutral collocations include "fund," "send," "show," "begin," "sign," and "remain."

Firstly, when NST uses positive collocations, the focus is on China's proactive measures to help other countries develop their economies, China's achievements in alleviating poverty, and China's cooperation with Malaysia in palm oil production. Secondly, some neutral collocations, when combined with their context, overall show a positive meaning in the sentences. For example, in Example 4, China sends experts to Africa for actively engaging in pandemic control efforts. In Example 8, China and Malaysia keep cooperation in projects. In Example 9, China has maintained its position as Malaysia's top trading partner for 14 consecutive years. These reflect NST's affirmative attitude towards the BRI and China.

Table 12. The collocations of China has/had + V

1. ... **China has** been actively pursuing programmes to help other countries build their economy.
2. ..."In fact, **China has** been funding research and development and this investment would substantially grow over time.
3. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, **China has** achieved the poverty alleviation goal set on the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 10 years ahead of schedule.
4. **China has** also sent experts to countries in Africa to help them deal with the early stages of the virus attack.
5. **China has** also shown itself remarkably adept in adapting to local conditions after initial missteps.
6. At about the same time, **China had** begun concerted efforts aimed at the internationalisation of the yuan.
7. **China had** committed to purchasing 1.7 million tonnes of palm oil until 2023.
8. ...**China had** previously signed a similar MoU on November 2011, with Malaysia represented by then health minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai...
9. **China had** remained Malaysia's largest trading partner for 14 years in a row.

Based on the above diachronic analysis of concordance lines, NST's attitude towards the BRI reflects the following major characteristics:

Firstly, NST's attitude towards the BRI remains consistent overall, with no significant changes observed, during the periods of 2018-2019 and 2020-2023. NST generally holds a positive attitude towards the BRI and has always been paying attention to the economic China-Malaysia exchanges and cooperation under the BRI from 2018 to 2023. It gave positive comments on BRI's role in promoting infrastructure construction, attracting high-quality investment projects, and expanding areas of cooperation between the two countries. When it comes to the rise of China, as well as geopolitics,and regional security issues, although it has certain concerns and worries about China, NST keeps relatively neutral in its expression—stating that others countries can take some lessons from Dr. Mahathir because there is no harm with doing business with China. This phenomenon reflects that NST has an inclusive understanding of the BRI and is not subject to those negative arguments such as the so-called "the BRI is a debt trap" and "the BRI is channel for spreading China's ideological" in Western countries (You & Guo, 2024). Besides, it also reflects the diplomatic characteristics of Malaysia and China—to carry out principled and pragmatic foreign policies and vigorously develop the economy and hold the notion that economic development takes precedence over geopolitics.

Secondly, NST frequently mentions ASEAN when reporting on BRI. It can be found from Tables 1 and 2 that ASEAN is mentioned in *New Straits Times*' reports on the BRI, and ASEAN has the highest keyness value as a thematic term. In BRI reports, NST holds that Malaysia's exchanges with China will set an example for ASEAN countries and have a significant leading effect. In turn, the stable strategic relationship and active cooperation and exchanges between ASEAN and China can bring better strategic mutual trust and development opportunities to Malaysia and other ASEAN countries.

3. Conclusion

This study, based on corpus-based critical discourse analysis, comparatively analyses the news reports of the BRI by NST during two time periods—2018-2019 and 2020-2023—and explores NST's attitude towards the BRI, as well as whether any changes have occurred, amidst evolving social contexts.

From the comparative analysis of the reports amount, it is observed that NST exhibited a dynamic upward trend in its coverage of the BRI from 2018 to 2023. Although there was a decline in coverage after 2019, it began to rise again in 2022. From the comparative analysis of thematic terms, the themes of the reports showed a trend towards diversification. Starting from 2020, NST began to focus on China's achievements in poverty alleviation and the collaboration between China and Malaysia in areas such as pandemic response and the internet economy. From the comparative analysis of concordance lines, it is noted that from 2018 to 2023, while NST expressed concerns about issues such as China's rise and challenges to security in the Southeast Asian region, it still overall maintained a positive attitude towards the BRI and the China-Malaysia cooperation—remaining optimistic about them.

In closing, this study explores Malaysia's attitudes towards China's BRI from the perspective of news discourse analysis, providing a perspective for enhancing mutual understanding between China and Malaysia, as well as a further understanding of the status of China-Malaysia cooperation under the BRI. This study elucidates the stance of NST towards the BRI, while also identifying factors that continue to raise concerns or worries in Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries. These include the changes in the global order brought about by not only China's rise and social system, but the stability and security of the Southeast Asian region as well. These factors can influence ASEAN countries' attitudes towards the BRI and affect the progress of China's cooperation with them in advancing the initiative. Therefore, future research can delve deeper into the impact of these factors on the BRI and explore strategies to address them—thereby achieving further high-quality development of the BRI.

Authors' contributions

Mingcheng Huang is a PhD student from Universiti Putra Malaysia. He was responsible for the data collection, data analysis and drafting

the manuscript. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zalina Mohd Kasim and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Afida Mohamad Ali supervised and guided the research design and framework as well as the revision of the manuscript. All authors contributed equally to the study and all authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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