

Strategic Silence vs. Moral Outrage: A Comparative Framing Analysis of the Russia-Ukraine War on Weibo and Twitter

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Abstract: *As the Russia-Ukraine War unfolds, social media platforms have become critical battlegrounds for major powers to project geopolitical influence and construct competing realities. While much research focuses on the direct belligerents, less attention has been paid to how influential third-party states—specifically China and the United States—strategically frame the conflict to align with their respective national interests. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling with manual framing analysis, to examine 362 Chinese posts from Weibo and 2,513 American tweets from Twitter across three distinct stages of the war. Our analysis reveals a striking asymmetry in discursive strategies. The U.S. media maintained a sustained, high-volume "moral outrage," predominantly utilizing human interest and factual frames to establish forensic authority and mobilize global empathy for Ukraine. In contrast, Chinese media exhibited a pattern of "strategic silence": following an initial burst of coverage, attention dropped precipitously. When coverage did occur, it favored leadership and factual frames to project an image of neutral objectivity, while simultaneously employing specific thematic narratives to subtly attribute blame to U.S. hegemony rather than Russian aggression. These findings suggest that news framing on social media serves as a sophisticated instrument of statecraft. For the U.S., framing is a tool for consensus mobilization; for China, it acts as a mechanism for strategic hedging—maintaining a "pro-Russia neutrality" by selectively amplifying anti-Western sentiment while minimizing direct engagement with the war's brutalities.*

Keywords: *Strategic narratives; Russia-Ukraine War; news framing; political communication*

1. Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine War marks not only a seismic shift in the post-Cold War geopolitical order but also a critical turning point in global political communication. In the age of hybrid media systems, modern warfare is fought simultaneously on the ground and in the digital sphere, where news frames serve as strategic weapons for constructing legitimacy, mobilizing support, and defining the moral boundaries of conflict. While direct belligerents, Russia and Ukraine, engage in immediate information warfare, the discursive strategies of influential third-party states, particularly the United States and China, are equally consequential. As leaders of opposing geopolitical blocs, their media representations of the war do not merely reflect national policies; they actively shape global public perception and international diplomatic alignments.

However, existing scholarship on war journalism has largely focused on Western media perspectives or the binary opposition between belligerents. There remains a significant gap in understanding how non-belligerent superpowers strategically navigate their "neutrality" or "alliance" through social media framing. This inquiry is particularly pertinent given the divergent political and media systems of the two nations: the U.S., with its commercially driven but ideologically aligned corporate media, and China, with its state-affiliated media apparatus. How do these distinct systems construct narratives for a war in which they are deeply invested yet not directly engaged?

This study addresses this gap by examining the "discursive proxy war" between China and the U.S. on their respective dominant social media platforms, Weibo and Twitter. Unlike previous studies that assume a simple dichotomy of "pro-war" or "anti-war" rhetoric, we propose a more nuanced framework of strategic narratives. We argue that for the U.S., the war presents an opportunity for "moral

mobilization," utilizing human-interest and factual frames to consolidate the Western alliance. Conversely, for China, the war presents a diplomatic dilemma requiring "strategic hedging"—a strategy characterized by selective silence and the redirection of blame towards U.S. hegemony rather than Russian aggression.

To empirically test these dynamics, we employ a mixed-methods approach combining Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling with manual framing analysis. By analyzing 362 Chinese posts and 2,513 American tweets across three stages of the conflict, this study reveals a striking asymmetry in both the volume of attention and the framing strategies employed. Our findings challenge the conventional wisdom of "radical" state propaganda; instead, we identify a sophisticated interplay of "strategic silence" and "forensic outrage," offering new insights into how major powers project influence in the digital era.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Framing Theory: Constructing Reality and Thematic Focus

The concept of framing, tracing its epistemological roots to Bateson's theory of psychological focus^[1] and Goffman's schemata of interpretation^[2], has evolved into a foundational paradigm in communication research. Entman defined framing as the process of selecting "certain aspects of reality" to make them salient, thereby promoting specific problem definitions and moral evaluations^[3]. Contemporary scholars view frames as "organizing principles" that are socially shared and persistent, structuring the social world for audiences^[4]. While early research focused broadly on frame effects^[5], recent scholarship emphasizes the constructivist aspect of framing—specifically, the identification of topics and themes that constitute the narrative foundation^[6]. Before analyzing how the war is framed, it is essential to establish what specific themes constitute the discourse in the Chinese and American contexts. Therefore, we pose the first research question: **RQ1:** What themes are employed by the Chinese and American media in their coverage of the Russia-Ukraine War?

2.2. War Journalism: National Interests and Framing Typologies

Scholarship on war journalism consistently demonstrates that news coverage frequently operates as a discursive extension of the ruling elite's geopolitical interests. For instance, Peng noted that during the first Gulf War, American media coverage minimized domestic opposition, contrasting sharply with the anti-war sentiment visible in Japanese and Spanish media^[7]. Similarly, comparative analyses of the Gulf and Iraq Wars reveal that national foreign policy acts as a determinant of news narratives, with media in opposing nations producing divergent accounts that mirror official diplomatic stances^[8,9].

To deconstruct these narratives, scholars have established a typology of generic news frames. Semetko and Valkenburg's model identifies five core frames: conflict (emphasizing discord), human interest (emotional personalization), responsibility (attributing blame), morality (ethical prescription), and economic consequences (financial impact)^[4]. However, Western-centric typologies often overlook the nuances of state-led media systems. Addressing this, Luther and Zhou identified the leadership frame, which centers on the actions of political elites^[10], while Zillmann et al. proposed the factual frame, characterized by a straightforward, implication-free presentation of events^[11].

Despite the extensive application of these frames in isolation—such as the prevalence of the responsibility frame in Arab media versus the conflict frame in U.S. media^[12,13]—few studies have integrated the leadership and factual frames into a comprehensive cross-cultural framework. This study addresses this gap by applying a holistic seven-frame model to the Russia-Ukraine war. War is a dynamic process, not a static event. Narrative strategies often evolve as the conflict transitions through different phases. To capture these temporal nuances, this study examines the coverage across three distinct stages of the war to determine how media attention shifts over time. Therefore, we pose the following research question: **RQ2a:** How did the news themes of Chinese and American coverages change in the three stages of the war? **RQ2b:** How did the news frames used by the Chinese and American media change in the three stages of the war?

2.3. Geopolitical Divergence and Hypotheses Development

The framing strategies of China and the United States are rooted in their distinct geopolitical interests. Although the two nations maintain a complex relationship of competition and cooperation^[14],

their media consistently reflect divergent national narratives. Research indicates that U.S. media tend to frame Chinese governance in negative terms^[15], whereas Chinese media often adopt an objective stance when reporting on U.S. domestic issues to avoid direct diplomatic confrontation^[16].

Based on the adversarial posture between the U.S. and China, we propose that media coverage will reflect national antagonism, with Chinese media demonstrating reduced visibility of the U.S. (**H1a**) and U.S. media framing China predominantly in negative terms (**H1b**). Regarding the attribution of responsibility, consistent with divergent strategic goals, we posit that U.S. media will explicitly attribute the war to Russian aggression (**H2a**), while Chinese media will avoid direct criticism of Moscow (**H2b**). Finally, reflecting distinct journalistic paradigms, we hypothesize a structural divergence where Chinese media prioritize leadership and factual frames (**H3a**), whereas U.S. media favor conflict and responsibility frames (**H3b**).

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Acquisition and Sampling Strategy

To examine the divergent framing strategies employed by Chinese and U.S. media, this study collected data from two dominant social media platforms: Sina Weibo (China) and Twitter (United States). These platforms were selected as they serve as the primary digital public spheres for political discourse in their respective nations.

Data collection was restricted to the accounts of influential mainstream media outlets to ensure the analysis reflected dominant national narratives rather than peripheral opinions. For the U.S. sample, we selected six tier-one media outlets: The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, CNN, and Fox News. For the Chinese sample, due to the strictly state-managed media environment, we selected six central state-affiliated outlets: People's Daily, CCTV News, Xinhua News Agency, Global Times, China Daily and China News Service (CNS).

We employed Python-based scripts to harvest posts published between February 24, 2022 and February 1, 2024. The search queries utilized the localized keywords "Russia-Ukraine War" and "Russia-Ukraine Conflict". The final dataset consisted of 2,513 tweets from U.S. media and 362 posts from Chinese media. Data collection was completed retrospectively in April 2024 to ensure full archival availability and consistency.

It is important to note the significant disparity in sample size ($N_{US} = 2513$ vs. $N_{CN} = 362$). Rather than a limitation of data collection, this asymmetry reflects the ecological reality of the media attention cycle in the two countries. As hypothesized (H1), Chinese state media exhibited a pattern of "strategic silence," resulting in a naturally smaller corpus of content compared to the high-frequency coverage by U.S. outlets. We retained this imbalance to preserve the ecological validity of the study. To capture temporal dynamics (RQ2), the timeline was stratified into three geopolitical phases: Stage 1 (Outbreak, Feb 24, 2022–Mar 25, 2022), covering the initial invasion; Stage 2 (Stalemate, Mar 26, 2022–Jan 14, 2023), marking the war of attrition; and Stage 3 (Normalization, Jan 15, 2023–Feb 1, 2024), representing the routinization of the conflict.

3.2. Coding Procedure and Reliability

To answer RQ1 regarding the thematic landscape, we employed Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), an unsupervised generative probabilistic model widely used in computational communication research to discover hidden thematic structures within large text corpora. Prior to modeling, the text data underwent rigorous preprocessing. For the English corpus, we performed tokenization, lowercasing, and the removal of stop words, punctuation, and URLs. For the Chinese corpus, we utilized the Jieba segmentation library for word segmentation and removed Chinese stop words. We determined the optimal number of topics (K) by calculating the coherence score (C_v), which assesses the semantic interpretability of the topics. Based on the coherence metrics and manual inspection of topic distinctiveness, we settled on a 9-topic solution ($K=9$).

To test hypotheses H2 and H3, we conducted a deductive manual content analysis. Based on the integrated framework established in the literature review, a codebook was developed comprising seven distinct frames: Conflict, Human Interest, Responsibility, Morality, Economic Consequences, Leadership, and Factual. Two bilingual graduate students with expertise in political communication were recruited as coders. They underwent a rigorous training session using stratified random sampling

of 10% of the data ($n=288$). To assess inter-coder reliability, we calculated Krippendorff's Alpha, a robust measure that accounts for chance agreement. The resulting Alpha coefficients for all variables were above 0.80, indicating a high level of reliability. Following the validation of the codebook, the two coders independently analyzed the remaining dataset. In instances of disagreement, a third senior researcher served as the adjudicator to reach a consensus.

4. Results

4.1. The Semantic Landscape: Divergent Thematic Focus (RQ1)

The Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) analysis ($K=9$) revealed a stark semantic divergence between the two media systems (see Table 1). While both nations covered the basic facts of the invasion, the contextual framing of these facts differed fundamentally. For the U.S. media, the discourse was predominantly "event-driven" and "victim-centered." As detailed in Table 1, the two nations constructed divergent semantic realities. U.S. discourse was "event-driven," prioritizing battlefield mechanics (Topic 1) and humanitarian suffering (Topic 6) to construct a narrative of "unprovoked aggression." Conversely, Chinese discourse was "geopolitics-driven," marginalizing battlefield specifics in favor of diplomatic themes (Topic 2) and anti-hegemony narratives (Topic 4, 6) to reframe the war as a symptom of U.S. expansionism.

Table 1: News themes of Chinese coverages and American coverages.

Thematic Category	Focus in Chinese Media (Weibo)	Focus in U.S. Media (Twitter)
Military Operations	Topic 6: State-Centric Action (Keywords: Russian army, state, action, situation, nuclear plant, destruction)	Topic 1 & 7: Aggression & Resistance (Keywords: invade, attack, fight, force, missile, strike, kill, control)
Humanitarian Crisis	Topic 5: Evacuation & Security (Keywords: security, citizens, evacuation, safety, negotiations, students)	Topic 6: Civilian Suffering (Keywords: civilian, refugee, flee, woman, child, suffer, bomb, humanitarian)
Attribution of Responsibility	Topic 4: Anti-Hegemony (Keywords: USA, laboratories, biology, military, research, plan)	Topic 4: Condemnation of Russia (Keywords: invasion, condemn, crime, responsibility, threat, unprovoked)
International Response	Topic 3: Diplomatic Interaction (Keywords: UN, meeting, declaration, request, Japan, emergency)	Topic 3: Military Aid & NATO (Keywords: NATO, weapon, supply, aid, military, strengthen, alliance)
Economic Impact	Low Salience / Integrated in other topics	Topic 8 & 5: Sanctions & Energy (Keywords: sanction, price, gas, oil, economy, global, market, punish)
Conflict Resolution	Topic 8: Peace Talks (Keywords: negotiation, dialogue, peace, solution, promote, talk)	Low Salience / Integrated in other topics
Domestic & Leadership	Topic 9: Leadership & Development (Keywords: cooperation, development, global community)	Topic 2: Presidential Rhetoric (Keywords: Biden, Trump, Putin, Zelensky, democracy, speech, leader)

4.2. Asymmetric Attention Cycles and "Strategic Silence" (RQ2 & H1)

To answer RQ2 regarding temporal evolution, we mapped the volume of posts across the three stages. The results provide strong empirical support for H1 (Asymmetric Attention). As shown in Figure 1, U.S. media maintained a sustained, high-frequency engagement throughout all three stages ($N_{Stage1} = 892$, $N_{Stage2} = 1105$, $N_{Stage3} = 516$). This "saturation coverage" aligns with the strategy of moral mobilization, keeping the issue salient to justify continued aid and sanctions. Conversely, Chinese media displayed a pattern of "Strategic Silence." After a moderate peak in Stage 1 (Outbreak, $N=215$), coverage dropped precipitously in Stage 2 ($N=112$) and became negligible in Stage 3 ($N=35$). A Chi-square test confirmed that the distribution of coverage across stages differed significantly between the two countries (χ^2 [df=2, $N=2875$]=154.3, $p < .001$). This "vanishing" trajectory suggests that as the war dragged on and Russia faced setbacks, Chinese state media strategically disengaged to avoid the diplomatic awkwardness of reporting on an ally's struggles.

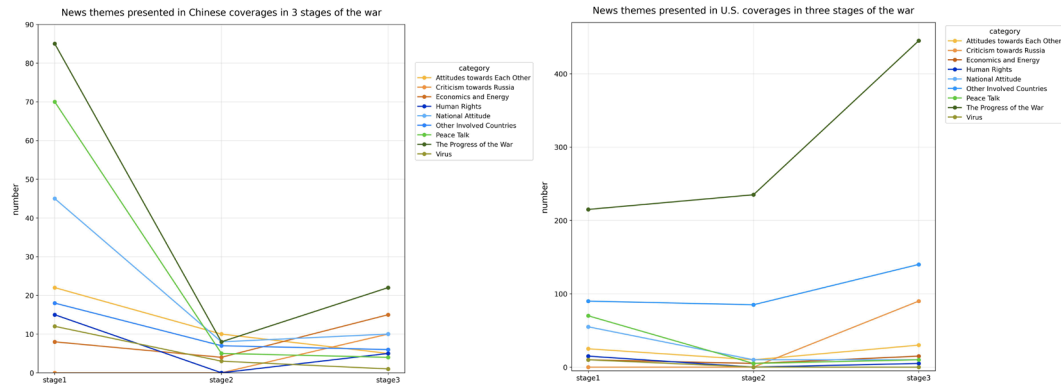


Figure 1: News themes presented in the Chinese/U.S. coverages in 3 stages of the war.

4.3. Mechanisms of Framing: Mobilization vs. Restraint (H2 & H3)

The analysis of blame attribution confirms H2. U.S. media overwhelmingly attributed responsibility to Russia (88.4%), constructing a clear "Villain-Victim" binary (H2a). In contrast, Chinese media adopted a strategy of "Strategic Ambiguity" (H2b). Only a small fraction of Chinese posts directly blamed Russia (12.4%). Instead, a significant portion redirected responsibility towards "External Instigators" (specifically the U.S. and NATO) or attributed the conflict to abstract "Complex Historical Factors," effectively diluting Russia's direct culpability. Regarding specific frame usage (see Figure 2), the data revealed a structural dichotomy in journalistic paradigms, supporting H3.

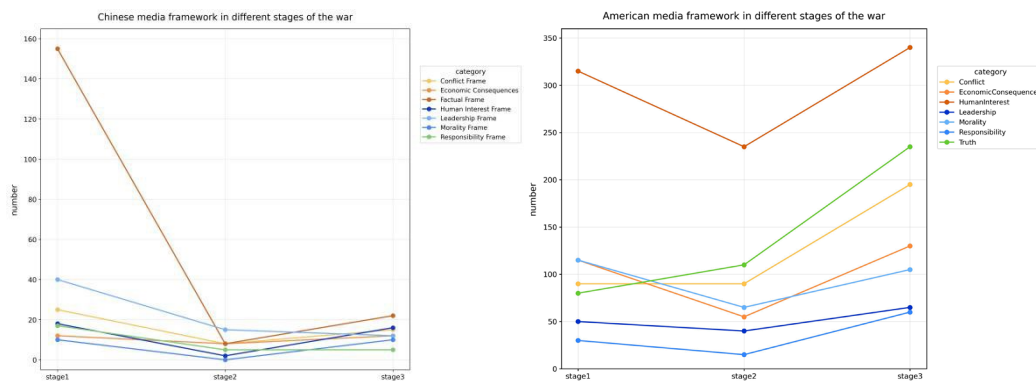


Figure 2: News frames used by Chinese/U.S. media in 3 stages of the war.

U.S. Media: Emotional Mobilization. Consistent with H3b, U.S. media heavily utilized the Human Interest frame (42.1%) and Conflict frame (31.5%). By prioritizing individual stories of suffering and dramatic battlefield clashes, U.S. narratives were designed to evoke empathy and moral outrage.

Chinese Media: Official Objectivity. Supporting H3a, Chinese media demonstrated a marked preference for the Factual frame (45.3%) and Leadership frame (28.7%). The predominance of the Factual frame allows Chinese media to appear "objective" and "neutral" by simply listing events without commentary, while the Leadership frame emphasizes state-level interactions over grassroots suffering. Figure 2 illustrates the cross-tabulation of frames by country. The Pearson Chi-square test indicates a significant association between country and frame selection ($\chi^2[df=6, N=2875]=433.1, p < .001$), confirming that the observed differences are systematic strategies rather than random variations.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. The Sound of Silence: Agenda-Cutting as Strategic Hedging

One of the most striking findings of this study is the "asymmetric attention" (H1). While U.S. media maintained a "saturation coverage" model to sustain moral outrage, Chinese state media exhibited a pattern of "strategic silence"—a sharp decline in coverage after the initial shock.

From the perspective of Strategic Narratives, media silence is not an absence of policy but a deliberate communicative act. For China, the war presented a "diplomatic dilemma": sustaining high-volume coverage risked amplifying Russia's military setbacks or foregrounding Ukrainian suffering (contradicting the "neutral" stance). By engaging in "Agenda-Cutting," Chinese media effectively reduced the salience of the war in the domestic public sphere. This strategy of "reticence" serves as a buffer, allowing the state to maintain its "comprehensive strategic partnership" with Russia while avoiding direct entanglement in the messy realities of the battlefield. This challenges the Western-centric "Issue-Attention Cycle", suggesting that in state-managed media systems, attention is driven less by audience fatigue and more by diplomatic calculation.

5.2. Affective Mobilization vs. Performative Neutrality

The divergence in frame selection (H3) reflects two competing modes of political legitimacy: "Affective Legitimacy" (U.S.) versus "Bureaucratic Legitimacy" (China). U.S. media heavily utilized the Human Interest frame to construct a narrative of "victimhood." By focusing on weeping refugees and bombed cities, U.S. narratives engaged in "affective mobilization"—transforming distant geopolitical maneuvers into immediate emotional experiences. This framing strategy does not just report the war; it moralizes it, creating a binary "Good vs. Evil" structure that legitimizes sanctions and military aid as a moral imperative.

In stark contrast, Chinese media prioritized the Factual and Leadership frames. This reliance on official statements and dry procedural reporting constitutes a form of "Performative Neutrality." By stripping away the emotional and bloody details of the conflict, Chinese narratives construct an image of the state as a rational, detached observer standing above the fray. This aligns with the concept of "Ontological Security"—for the Chinese domestic audience, the media projects stability and order ("Development/Cooperation," Topic 9) amidst global chaos, reinforcing the narrative that China is a "stability anchor" in a turbulent world.

5.3. The Discursive Proxy War: Deflection and the "Imagined Enemy"

Our analysis of thematic focus (RQ1) and responsibility attribution (H2) uncovers the mechanics of a "discursive proxy war." While the U.S. media targeted Russia directly, Chinese media engaged in "Discursive Deflection." Instead of defending Russia's invasion (which is difficult under international law), Chinese narratives shifted the focal point to the United States (e.g., Topic 4 "Biolabs" and Topic 6 "NATO Hegemony"). This validates our hypothesis of "anti-hegemony narratives." By framing the war as a consequence of U.S. expansionism rather than Russian aggression, Chinese media successfully integrated the Ukraine crisis into its long-standing "Anti-Americanism" master narrative. This serves a dual function: externally, it signals political alignment with the Global South's skepticism of Western power; internally, it inoculates the domestic public against Western democratic rhetoric.

This study provides a comparative roadmap of how major powers construct competing realities in the digital age. We argue that the U.S. and China represent two distinct paradigms of Mediatized Geopolitics: The U.S. Model: characterized by high visibility, moral indignation, and emotional mobilization, aiming to consolidate a global values-based alliance (Liberal International Order).

The China Model: characterized by selective visibility, strategic ambiguity, and administrative rationality, aiming to hedge diplomatic risks and challenge Western discursive hegemony. As the "Digital Cold War" intensifies, the ability to define the meaning of a conflict—who is the aggressor, who is the victim, and what is at stake—becomes as critical as military capability. Our findings suggest that social media platforms are not neutral carriers of information but active battlegrounds where these strategic narratives collide, shaping not just public opinion but the future of international order.

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