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Deconstructing media narratives of the Indo-Pacific strategy: Exploring India's ontological security and national identity in the *Times of India*

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India's attempt to forge a distinct role for itself in the global order started soon after independence in 1947. Since this watershed event, India's policymakers have gradually recast their initial strategy of nonalignment, as they realized that Nehruvian "soft" power was not adequate for creating an especially dynamic presence in an increasingly volatile international environment. In response to this realization, India embarked on a journey of transforming its diplomatic benchmarks. In 2017, to counter China's assertiveness across the region, India joined then-U.S. President Donald Trump's advocacy in launching the Indo-Pacific strategy. Transforming the nation's diplomatic benchmarks while maintaining a coherent narrative of national identity was the main challenge. This paper examines the role that media narratives play in maintaining that coherent national identity. To do so, we analyzed 47 reports by the *Times of India* (TOI) on the Indo-Pacific strategy in order to reveal how elite media strategically framed the nation's regional policy, thereby ensuring its ontological security—its sense of continuity and order—while conveying its global aspirations.

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Introduction

India's attempt to forge a distinct role for itself in the global order started soon after independence in 1947. It persists in the face of great difficulty. Since this watershed event, India's policymakers have gradually recast their initial strategy of non-alignment, as they realized that Nehruvian "soft" power—promoting a just and equitable international order by encouraging peace and brotherhood among the people and leaders of the major powers to—was not adequate for creating a dynamic presence in an increasingly volatile international environment (Nayar and Paul, 2003). In response to this realization, India embarked on a journey of transforming its diplomatic benchmarks while preserving a coherent narrative of national identity. This paper delves into an analysis of 47 reports by the *Times of India* (TOI) on the Indo-Pacific strategy. We meticulously examine how elite media strategically framed the nation's regional policy, thereby ensuring its ontological security—a sense of continuity and order, of a coherent self—while conveying its global aspirations.

In 2017, to counter China's moves across the region, India joined U.S. President Donald Trump's advocacy in launching the Indo-Pacific strategy. This plan sought to connect the four major powers in the region—the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, by forming a security initiative called the *Quad Dialogue*, or *The Quad* for short—to maintain regional order. However, regardless of shared goals, the four nations offered different strategies. The TOI has framed the Indian version of the Indo-Pacific strategy as a crucial and pressing choice in order to support India's ontological security, on the one hand, and to further promote India as a potential world leader, on the other.

Ontological security refers to a nation's feeling of stability, coherence, and order within the collective identity, values, and beliefs of its people (Steele, 2008). As this sense of security is deeply connected to a nation's cultural and historical identity, preserving it involves promoting national pride and unity and safeguarding critical cultural traditions (Agius, 2016). The key to achieving this lies in the narrative—the stories we tell ourselves and others about who we are as a nation. Examining India's developmental and geopolitical history, and its diplomatic strategies, scholars in international affairs and regional studies have paid a good deal of attention to the Indo-Pacific strategy (Choong, 2019; Yoshimatsu, 2018). However, regardless of the critical role that foreign and domestic media have played in promoting this strategy, their contribution has been largely overlooked. To provide a more nuanced understanding of the tensions inside the Quad Dialogue and demonstrate how an emerging power like India sought to revive its fortunes, we use Entman's (1993) theory of framing to analyze TOI's 47 coverage of the Indo-Pacific strategy from June 2019 to May 2021. We argue that in promoting this plan as a better alternative than that of the United States, the TOI envisioned India as a potential world leader by drawing upon the nation's traditional narrative of exceptionalism. Before presenting a detailed contextualization of the plan, we will review the Indo-Pacific strategy.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy

In America's *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, the Indo-Pacific region was defined as critical to America's future (The Department of Defense, 2019). Home to the world's two most populous states (India and China), accounting for about 60 percent of global GDP, the region determines a significant part of the world's economic and cultural future. Its four major countries—the United States, Japan, India, and Australia—have emphasized this in their foreign policies.

In 2007, in a speech to the Indian Parliament, Japan's former prime minister, Shinzo Abe, addressed the importance of

connecting the economies surrounding the Indian and Pacific oceans to support freedom and prosperity. However, it was not until 2010 that the term "Indo-Pacific" was adopted internationally. This designation began in a speech by former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2010), who proposed that the area was critical to global trade and to bring the United States and India closer together. At the 10th Asia Security Summit, the 2012 Shangri-La Dialogue, Australian Defense Minister Stephen Smith argued the Indo-Pacific was "a region of global strategic significance." In late December 2012, Abe affirmed the political implications of the connections among the region's nations. He stressed the benefits of "peace, stability, and freedom" (Abe, 2012). In 2014, particularly, Abe promoted the key principles of the rule of law at sea: clarification of claims based on international law; a ban on the use of force or coercion in pursuing these claims; and peaceful settlements of international disputes (Abe, 2014). These objectives garnered the approval of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Yoshimatsu, 2018). In 2017, the Trump administration adopted the term, "Indo-Pacific," officially in its foreign policy.

With this understanding of the strategic implications of the name, the four countries restarted the Quad Dialogue around the theme of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" during the 31st ASEAN and the 12th East Asia summits (Panda, 2017). Countering China's moves in the area while maintaining the regional order brought the four together, but they had different strategies.

India's Indo-Pacific strategy aimed to construct a "free, open, and inclusive region" with which to pursue mutual progress and prosperity with all the regional states (Modi, 2018). In line with its *Look/Act East* policy, the geopolitical space connecting the Indian and Western Pacific oceans prompted India's strategic ambitions to become a pan-Asian power, rather than merely a South Asian one (Bajpae, 2017). In contrast to the other Quad countries, India had championed an inclusive Indo-Pacific strategy, owing to its complex relations with its neighbor China (Palit and Sano, 2018). China has increased its pan-Asian influence under the premise of its infrastructure strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI, strengthening ties with neighbors such as Pakistan, Nepal, and the Maldives. Moreover, India was reluctant to be labeled "anti-China," given China's position as its top trading partner (Choong, 2019).

While Australia tended to see China as participating robustly in Indian Ocean politics and economics, India opposed it, leery of China's increasing presence in this area. On the other hand, Australia and Japan joined the U.S. infrastructure push in Asia, as part of Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy, and formed a partnership to counter increasing pressure from Beijing. India underscored its nonalignment by refusing to participate (Paul, 2018). With these tensions among the Quad members in mind, we will conduct our rhetorically grounded textual analysis of the TOI's promotion of India's aspirations by framing its identity through the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Ontological security, national identity, and media narrative

There has been a surge in research on ontological security in international relations since the early 2000s when Giddens developed R.D. Laing's concept from the micro level to the societal level. Laing (1960) claimed that when there is an absence of "anxieties and dangers" and when "identity and autonomy" are not in question, ontological security prevails (pp. 39–41). Based on Laing's definition, Giddens refers to ontological security as a "sense of continuity and order in [complex] events" (1991, p. 243, emphasis added). Kinnvall then offered that ontological security was "finding a safe (or imagined) heaven" (2019, p. 285). In

Kinnvall's terms, it is an imaginary ideal that arises in response to regularly occurred critical situations, threatening continuity and disrupting order, in a constantly changing world. Even "state officials," as Weldes (1999) noted, "produce representations" of a crisis based on a discursive characterization of the state's identity "in order for the state to act" (pp. 57–58).

To suppress the anxiety of an identity challenge, states tend to reproduce actions in the form of routines that contribute to a sense of "continuity and order" to retain their sense of stable self (Steele, 2008). In constructing a salient group identity, narrative plays a key role (Kinnvall, 2004). By narrating their identity, agents not only recall and organize relevant events according to their own narrative but also enliven history by using this narrative to create a basis for action (Steele, 2008). In other words, narratives help the state justify its policy (as a guide for action) by demonstrating how it reflects the state's identity. According to Subotić (2016), during times of crisis and threats to the state's ontological security, narratives are employed by state actors to "provide a cognitive bridge between policy change that resolves [a] physical security challenge and preserves state ontological security [by] providing autobiographical continuity [within] a sense of routine, familiarity, and calm" (p. 611). As the power of the narratives rests on the positive political imaging of the self and the balancing and securing of relationships with others, insights from such narratives help secure a better understanding of the state's positioning on the global stage, Chernobrov (2016) argued, as well as its aspirations, both of which serve as the foundation for its action.

Western Indologists' studies of Sanskrit and Vedic literature boosted self-confidence and pride in India (Rao, 2007). Inspired by Vedic ideals, Indian nationalists found that *Sanatana Dharma's* moral values, including honesty, goodwill, patience, forbearance, self-restraint, generosity, and asceticism, created a sense of unity among all Indians (Rao, 2007). It embodies India's national culture as an "all-inclusive and accommodating" (Adey and Lall, 2005) way of life for all humanity, rather than just a set of duties for Hindus (Sanatana Dharma, 1904). Its exceptionalism, thus, not only established national integrity among people of various religions, languages, and cultures (Varshney, 1993) but also distinguished India from other nations, making it a unique moral-spiritual contribution to the world (Sullivan, 2014). Its promotion of the moral value of "unity in diversity" has been beneficial for both India's secular nationalism and Hindu nationalism.

Yet, Hindu nationalism has given a vastly different meaning to the concept of "unity in diversity." Instead, it has redefined the diverse fabric of India by creating a hierarchy of racialized groups, with non-Hindus, such as Muslims, Sikhs, and Jains being placed in a subordinate position to the Hindu majority under the umbrella of *Hindutva* (Waikar, 2018). While this religious understanding of India has been around for about a century, it has picked up major momentum in the last few years, especially after Modi's election as prime minister in 2014. Investigating India's reformulation of its foreign policy discourse under Modi's leadership, Kinnvall (2019) argued that the re-invention of "nationhood," "religion," and "Hindu masculinity" has created a foundation for governing practices aimed at healing ontological insecurities in Indian society. Spreading nationwide, the populist narrative produced by today's BJP argued that Indian identity and Hindu identity were equivalent. This assertion, built on the Western dichotomized understanding of "us" and "them," constructs an antagonistic discourse of "Hindus" and "non-Hindus."

In fact, like many former colonies, the construction of India's identity was a defense of the nation's ontological security (Wojczewski, 2019). In the national liberation movement and post-independence period, its narration of national identity was

"modeled on the nationalism of the West" (Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 169), creating a coherent, cohesive "us" in solidarity over and against a threatening "them," then British Raj, now Pakistan and China (Chakrabarty and Jha, 2020, p. 5).

Despite Muslims' significant contributions to Indian culture, society, and politics (Eaton, 1993), some Hindus, particularly those of *Hindutva* ideology, view them as outsiders or as a threat to Hindu identity. This gained traction after India failed to fully assume the British Raj's civil-political legacy. This tension was further exacerbated by unprecedented violence between Hindus and Muslims during the partition of India and Pakistani-backed separatism. While the new nation had to accept a divided sub-continent, the partition has been considered an "original sin" and Muslims have been viewed as a source of national anxiety and frustration, physically and ontologically (Devji, 1992, p. 1). Haunted by Pakistan, India needed to re-affirm its subjective existence and its ontology. It had to tell the story of its cultural myth and doing so, affirm its identity and resolve this historical and existential insecurity (Kinnvall, 2004).

Despite significant Sino-India economic ties, China has long been perceived as another geopolitical threat to India. The enduring territorial disputes between the two nations, China's strengthened cooperation with Pakistan under the grand infrastructure project, the BRI, and its investments in other South Asian countries have all contributed to India's concerns about China's movements and activities in the region. To counter the perceived encirclement by China and promote its own development and prosperity, India must not only seek the support of allies such as the United States, Japan, and Australia but also focus on reinforcing its sense of ontological security by projecting a positive national image. This, for India, can be achieved by disseminating media narratives that portray an optimistic national image, emphasizing the nation's strengths, values, and contributions to the world.

Scholars and reporters who examined the relationship between the Indian media and the central government generally agreed on the special bond between the government and the press. Former newspaper editor and reporter Siddhartha Varadarajan (2011) observed how Indian media have reflected mainstream ideology and "closely followed the imperatives of leading political parties" (p. 101) by regularly using policy as a source for their stories. Thomas (2014) also argued that the media was "deeply involved in supporting dominant political and economic interests" (p. 487). Mann (2016) found that the *TOI's* reports on the Punjab crisis reflected the positions and narrative of the government of Indira Gandhi in shaping the domestic *othering* of religious minorities like Sikhs. After Rajesh Kalra became editor-in-chief in 2014, the *TOI* established an even tighter relationship with the government, working closely with the prime minister's office and the Press and Information Bureau (Li, 2022). As evidenced by previous studies, the *TOI* has maintained a close collaboration with the government to propagate mainstream ideologies. The media narratives then become a foundation from which India can take action toward global aspirations amid ever-changing international relations. Against this background, we critically examine the *TOI's* framing of the Indo-Pacific strategy to demonstrate how India's elite media maintained a coherent national identity by narrating the strategy as a critical plan and the Indian version as the best option.

Methodology

Conceptual framework: Media framing. Defining a media frame as an organizing idea offering meaning to an unfolding series of events, Gamson and Modigliani (1987) said that a frame highlights the essence of any reported issue. Similarly, Tuchman

(1978) argued the necessity of using a frame to turn small or unrecognizable events into something more important. To explore how frames are critical to the *TOI*'s reports, we use Entman's (1993) theory to explain the pro-government discourse with which media socially constructed the Indo-Pacific strategy. This study will then analyze how elite media helped narrate India's global aspirations based on a consistent picture of a national identity that embodied Indian exceptionalism through its moral and spiritual contributions.

Entman (1993) argued two essential factors for media framing: selection (isolation and focus) and salience (relevance and impact). In his view, media framing is to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text" (p. 52). Upon his framing, paying attention to the included/emphasized and the excluded/downplayed in communicating texts is equally important. Entman (1993) also proposed four functions of texts. They are defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgements, and suggesting remedies. One sentence may perform more than one framing function, yet many may fail to perform any. Scheufele (1999) classified frames as both media and individual; Entman said they can be found in the communicator, text, receiver, and culture. Since we aim to explore the discursively constructed reality, the Indo-Pacific strategy, we use textual analysis to reveal how texts' framing functioned as expressions of power.

Research subject. The *TOI*, India's oldest English-language daily, is still the third-largest newspaper in India and the world's largest-selling English newspaper (Natarajan, 2017), with a circulation of almost 1.6 million (from January to June 2022; Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2022). Its global readership recorded a staggering growth of 17% on an already massive base—adding 2.2 million to 15.2 million in the first quarter of 2019 (TNN, 2019). *TOI* readership has been popular among educated elites since 1838 (Hanson, 1995). It is dominated by people from the top segment of society, most with college degrees, and by many officials and executives (TNN, 2020). Yet, unlike the clear preference for the BJP demonstrated in *Aajtak*, *News 18 India*, and *News 24*, the *TOI*'s promotion of the Modi government's strategies and ideologies is more nuanced and deserves a closer look (Pandey, 2021).

Data collection. News reports were selected from June 2019 to May 2021. The timeframe was chosen to coincide with the U.S. Department of Defense's release of the *Indo-Pacific Strategic Report*, in June 2019. The report signaled a commitment to expanding the role of the Quad beyond a hard security agreement, with the United States leading the Quad (Parmar, 2022). The reports collected over the 2-year period can be viewed as India's response to the U.S. strategy, demonstrating a well-developed Indian regional strategy. All reports with the key phrase "Indo-Pacific strategy" were collected on the Internet. We filtered out stories that merely mentioned the term and/or reported unrelated information. A total of 47 texts, spanning journalistic reports, editorial pieces, commentaries, and reprints, were carefully chosen from the *TOI* editorial team and 25 authors. Only three were professional journalists, while the rest came from diverse backgrounds, including Deputy National Security Advisors, ambassadors, U.S. foreign service officers, university professors, and Indian Army technical officers, among others. The broad range of backgrounds represented among the 21 non-journalist authors not only provided a diversity of perspectives but also reflected their expertise in their respective fields, resulting in an elite interpretation of the subject matter being made available to the public. Moreover, of the 47 reports (Fig. 1) from

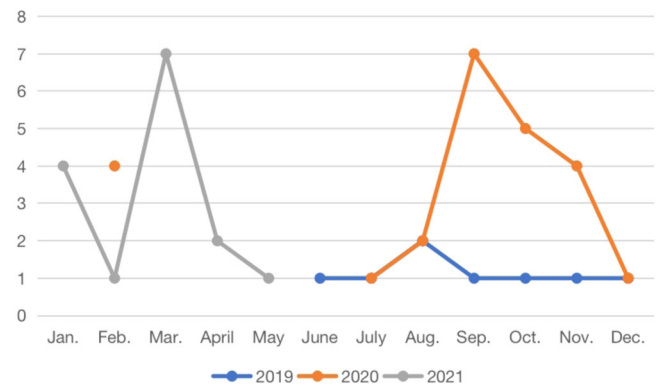


Fig. 1 Reports distribution. The figure illustrates how the 47 news articles are distributed, with blue indicating articles published in 2019, orange representing articles from 2020, and gray denoting articles from 2021.

September 2020 (just before the U.S. presidential election) and March 2021 (the Quad's first virtual meeting) had the highest number of publications, with seven each.

Analysis. We went through each report to locate the four functions of framing Entman stated above. Following his view, we evaluated the persuasive force of the messages embedded in the texts. Each of the reports was minutely investigated. We then read each other's notes and identified two interwoven frames in *TOI*'s presentation. These frames helped answer the following questions:

1. "What salient reality of the Indo-Pacific strategy did the *TOI* construct?"
2. "How was the nation's actual self and imagined self-constructed?"
3. "How did elite media coverage of India's Indo-Pacific strategy contribute to the preservation of the nation's ontological security and communication of the nation's geopolitical ambitions?"

Safeguarding National Security: Engaging in the Indo-Pacific Strategy. Media framing does not occur at random but as part of an active discursive strategy relevant to the nation's public (Tucker, 1998). We proposed that to convince the audience that India was suppressing its nonalignment policy and siding with the United States, the *TOI* framed the Indo-Pacific strategy as *necessary* and *urgent* following the logic of problem definition, including diagnosing causes, moral evaluation and recommended treatment. The emphasis of this frame has been on defining China's rise as a threat to the established global order, particularly in the Indo-Pacific which has implications for both the physical and ontological security of India. In response to this perceived challenge from China and in the interest of preserving geopolitical balance at globally and regional levels, the *TOI* has advocated for a heroic nation-agent (*TOI* Edit, 2020a). The proposal implicitly referenced India as the exceptional nation capable of leading the world in countering China's aggressiveness.

Reporting the problem, the *TOI* characterized China as a "rule-breaker" that threatened its neighbors' sovereignty and created human-rights issues but also challenged U.S. dominance in the region. Sharma (2020) evaluated "China's actions [military aggression against India and the Southeast Asian countries, and a threatening trade policy with Australia]" as "nothing less than a reverberation of Germany's aggressiveness under Hitler prior to the Second World War." To flesh out the vivid image of China being the new Nazi Germany, the *TOI* represented diachronic

(historical) and synchronic (contemporary) perspectives of China violating neighboring countries' territorial sovereignty. First, to evince the entrenched nature of China's aggressive behavior, the *TOI* referenced the Indo-China border wars of 1962 and 1967, as well as the standoffs in 1987, 2013, and 2017 in aiming to emphasize India as a chronic victim of China's invasions (Sharma, 2020). In addition to Beijing's muscle-flexing in areas like the Himalayas, the South China Sea and Aksai Chin over the past 15 years have been other examples of it (Camp, 2020). On the other side, India's long colonial history and the partitioning of British India constructed "territorial sovereignty" as "the prime measure of [its] international presence" (Abraham, 2014, p. 62). Therefore, for India, ensuring its physical integrity becomes a prerequisite for its ontological/geopolitical security and for imagining its collective Self, for positioning its strategy and influence on the global stage. As the integrity of territorial sovereignty has been encoded into India's national/cultural narrative since independence in 1947, it has become profoundly naturalized. Consequently, the media's review could easily trigger a "preferred reading" (Hall, 1980) among Indians eager to sift the good from the bad, *us* from *them*, since a rising China implied a physical violation and a symbolic denial of India's status as the main champion of South Asia.

Besides India, China had "swallowed" Tibet, Manchuria, and Hong Kong and continued its aggression in the entire Indo-Pacific region (Tripathi, 2021). Demonstrating China's recent aggression, the media focused most of its reports on Vietnam and Japan. The Sino-Vietnam confrontation was provoked by a Chinese survey ship, and some coast guard vessels and aircraft, that "intruded inside" Vietnam's exclusive economic zone to "disrupt legitimate oil and gas production" (Ghosh, 2019, 2020d). China and Japan also have been sparring over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands for years (Ghosh, 2020b; Tripathi, 2021). The *TOI*'s selective reporting on the Sino-Vietnam and Sino-Japan disputes have contributed to fostering a sense of solidarity among countries such as Vietnam, Japan, and India, which have been adversely affected by China's recent actions. These reports have not only validated the decisions of these nations to boycott China but also echoed the coalition diplomacy of the Modi government. As reflected in its commitment to *Look East* and *Act East*, Modi's coalition diplomacy aimed to enable India to maintain its sense of ontological security by forging partnerships with key regional powers like Australia, Japan, Vietnam, and the United States (Bajpai, 2017). This is the only way for India to counterbalance China's growing influence in the region and assert its own geopolitical interest.

A significant aspect of the Modi government's diplomatic effort has been to maintain high-level engagements with its core partners. The *TOI* has sought to align its recall of social-cultural memories of World War II (WWII) with the nation's overarching policy, despite any inherent paradox. While the *TOI* has depicted China as analogous to Germany under Hitler, its representation of Japan, one of the principal belligerents of the Axis powers, which had invaded Asia and committed genocide, has been less critical. Instead, the *TOI* has emphasized the centrality of Japan to a free and open Indo-Pacific region, downplaying its history of warfare and highlighting its pacifist constitution adopted after WWII.

Today's Japan is sufficiently different from the imperial Japan of 75 years ago that its war history is not a telling point of reference (Ghosh, 2020b). Ghosh cited Mao Zedong to support the argument that even China, the country most affected by Japan's invasion during WWII, believes that Japan has adequately compensated for its actions. Assuming Japan to be a significant player in the region, the *TOI*'s presentation of a positive image of Japan intended to create a more favorable perception of India's

participation in the Indo-Pacific strategy and the Quad Dialogue: namely, despite changing its nonalignment diplomacy, the nation would remain on the righteous side. It was critical to present India as taking great pride in its strong moral values and needing to ensure that all its allies share them.

The *TOI*'s reports suggested that China's aggressive actions in the region have contributed to its ongoing pursuit of global hegemony, which has challenged the sovereignty of independent nations. By framing this pursuit as a diplomatic objective, the *TOI* has highlighted tensions in U.S.–China relations and suggested that China seeks to replace the United States as the world's leading nation. Additionally, the media's depiction of China's regional activities as aggression has reinforced the notion that China has acted poorly during the period of lapsed American exceptionalism. However, the failure of the United States to fulfill its responsibilities like "providing peace and security" (Holsti, 2010) during Trump's presidency paved the way for the rise of an exceptional India.

To counterbalance China, the adoption of the norm of *territorial sovereignty* was not enough to construct a discourse of urgency. The media adopted "violation of human rights" as another rhetorical device. In the *TOI*, China's state terrorism was depicted in two ways: against its own citizens like Tibetans, Hongkongers, and Muslims in Xinjiang (Pradhan, 2020, 2021a), as well as those from other states, like Indian soldiers (Sharma, 2020). The report mentioned the Chinese government's destructive activities toward local culture and religion by focusing on the Sino-Indian clash in the recent Galwan Valley confrontation. Sharma emphasized India's loss of 20 soldiers and stated that fighting back was merely defensive. He claimed sacrificing 20 soldiers demonstrated the need to end the Nehruvian legacy and deal with an "imagined [solidarity] with China in the ... Asian century." This statement adopts a clear attitude towards the nonalignment policy. As the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru was an ardent disciple of Gandhi and was deeply influenced by Gandhi's policy of "understanding the universe [as] an organic whole" (Murphy, 1991). Incorporating Gandhian nonviolence into India's foreign policy, Nehru not only initiated the nonaligned movement but gave India its unique status after WWII: friends with both Cold War powers (Melegoda, 2019). Yet for India's contemporary policymakers, Nehru's nonalignment was too idealized for the post-Cold War world. Therefore, emerging after the Cold War, the post-Nehruvian discourse translated nonalignment as "strategic autonomy" and positioned India as "an independent, multi-aligned actor that should strive for a polycentric order" (Wojczewski, 2019, p. 80). Therefore, the appeal to end Nehruvian foreign policy, functioning as an advocacy for uniting countries to resist an aggressive China, constituted India as a guardian of peace for the Indo-Pacific region. Against this background, to counter China, Ghosh (2020b) called for democratic Asian countries, rule of law, and international agreements.

The *TOI* denied resistance by smaller Asian nations (Dwivedi, 2020) and argued that only the Quad group could constrain China's aggressiveness and assure a rule-based, free, and open Indo-Pacific region (Ghosh, 2020c; Lal, 2021a, 2021b). Though Entman's (1993) framing involves selection (focus) and salience (impact) in determining what is included and emphasized, we believe that analysis of *what is excluded and downplayed* is just as important (McKerrow, 1989). Other than Sharma's (2020) report on ending the Nehruvian legacy, the rest of the articles did not mention India's traditional nonalignment. Instead, they tried to demonstrate the necessity of siding with the United States—as the most like-minded country and representative democracy in the world. By design, to downplay the nonalignment policy, the *TOI*

selected and covered the Modi government's choice to side with the United States. To counter China's aggressiveness, the *TOI*'s frame excluded nonalignment and instead documented the ineffectiveness of the Nehruvian legacy. This strategy of negation, helping India construct an American-like identity through the Modi policy, by being democratic and promoting peace, amity, and equality, depended on India's spiritual exceptionalism. This pre-eminent capacity to lead the world morally and spiritually featured a substantial change in national diplomacy from the Nehruvian legacy (Sullivan, 2014; Wojczewski, 2019).

The Indo-Pacific strategy was socially constructed by the *TOI* as the exclusive means of addressing the pressing issue of China's growing dominance in the region so as to uphold India's ontological security and safeguard its geopolitical interests. Unlike Nehruvian non-alignment, the Indo-Pacific strategy envisioned India on a par with major Western countries like the United States, Australia, and Japan, enjoying a vested interest in the existing global order. While the Quad recognized the importance of the Indo-Pacific strategy, its members diverged on critical points. The *TOI*'s framing was mainly based on comparing the U.S. and Indian strategies, and it highlighted the latter.

Envisioning national identity: advancing India's Indo-Pacific vision. Our examination found that the Modi government actively embraced an identity similar to the United States but a balanced, or paradoxical, identity as the Other as well. In 2005–2006, under the Bush administration, the proposed Civil Nuclear Agreement between the United States and India was crafted to foster better resolution of American influence on clashes among foreign policy objectives and identity conflicts. Barthwal-Datta (2021) introduced the concept of a *similar enough other* to argue that by framing India as such, the Bush Administration steered U.S.–India relations toward a preferred future. Examining the frames, and upon the *TOI*'s strategies, we propose that India reversed its positions of *Self* and *Other* to showcase how an *othered* (under Western eyes) yet diverse and inclusive India could be a moral leader through such a strategy. Through problematizing both Trump's and Biden's agendas in the region, the *TOI* represented India's determination to embrace the Indo-Pacific strategy with its unique status as a relatively independent leader regarding the strategy's details being emphasized.

Notwithstanding the scrutiny surrounding the Trump administration's militaristic and unilateral tactics, the *TOI* advocated for the Modi government to adopt a more confrontational approach towards China as part of its containment strategy (Marjani, 2020). Whereas, a key principle in the discourse of post-Nehruvian diplomacy featured the equal status of all states and opposed all forms of political and economic dominance by any country (Wojczewski, 2019). Thus India, in the *TOI*'s framing, aims to adopt a multilateral approach and safeguard the interests of all stakeholders, while promoting its unique identity and leadership in building a rule-based, free, and peaceful Indo-Pacific region.

Moreover, India's neighborhood-first foreign policy, which prioritizes strengthening regional ties and addressing the concerns of its neighboring countries, has made it a different leader from the United States under the Trump government's unilateral stance (Bajpai, 2019). India's efforts to facilitate the Quad Dialogue and unite Japan, Vietnam, and other ASEAN countries have demonstrated a commitment to a cooperative and inclusive approach to regional security (Ghosh, 2019), in contrast to the U.S.'s emphasis on cost-sharing for joint defense with its allies (Ghosh, 2020a). Given India's ability to establish itself as a trusted partner and leader in the region, the *TOI* then encouraged the nation to treat the United States as part of a multilateral order, instead of making it a guide.

As Steele (2008) argued, states that prioritize ontological security tend to be concerned with a stable and predictable self-identity. They may actively identify and monitor potential sources of disruption or cultural alienation, both within their own borders and beyond. Taking into account India's strong sense of ontological security, the presence of perceived "disturbing strangers" has the potential to significantly heighten India's anxieties related to societal "continuity and order." That said, India's advocacy for multilateralism in its Indo-Pacific strategy remains questionable, given Hinduism's interpretation of "unity in diversity" as "one nation, one people," emphasizing a Hindu nation-state and creating more problems between Hindus and Muslims politically, treating the former as superior and the latter as inferior. Given domestic differences, if such a commitment remained unworkable, how "inclusive, open, and free" would India's leadership be?

Regardless, under U.S. leadership, the Quad remained more "aspirational than actual" (Chanda, 2020). Discourse from the United States regarding India's rise emphasized shared democratic values and might have helped resolve its problematic geopolitical posture by forming a "special relationship" with India (Chacko, 2014). But India seemed sure of its relative distance from the United States and the reason for maintaining it. New Delhi was not going to forget Washington's reticence during the Doklam standoff, despite the fanfare over its Indo-Pacific strategy (Bajpai, 2019), but it saw that siding with it was strategic for its own rise.

Though the *TOI* backed Biden's comprehensive approach to addressing China and promoting multilateral diplomacy (*TOI* Edit, 2020b, 2021), it expressed concerns over the potential militarization of the alliance (Chadha, 2021) due to ongoing divisions (Bhatia, 2021). Among these, the U.S. approach to China worried India the most. Not only was the decoupling of the United States and China a myth, but Biden's determination to bring China into negotiations has heightened India's concerns (Bhatia, 2021). India feared that China may use these negotiations to push its own agenda, giving it an unfair advantage in competing with India. Consequently, instead of pinning all its hopes on an uncertain partner like the United States, India has demonstrated its clear vision for regional peace and development through the *TOI*.

First, despite establishing joint security with neighboring countries to counterbalance China in the South and East China Seas, India's strategy aimed to establish a supply chain to reduce world dependence on the Chinese supply line. By working with Japan and Australia to establish the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, India could change its industrial system to become the manufacturing hub for the region and a critical one for the world (Pradhan, 2020).

Second, to further India's vision of a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, it should form alliances with Taiwan, Japan, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei to address its security concerns with China on both land and sea. Additionally, India should prioritize the involvement of ASEAN countries, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia, in the Quad Dialogue to restore their central role. Vietnam, in particular, has had disputes with China over its economic zone and has strong relationships with the other Quad members, making it a valuable supporter of the Indo-Pacific strategy (Pradhan, 2021b).

Third, India should publish a white paper on defense and expedite cooperation with those nations mentioned before to protect mutual interests (Chadha, 2021). The defense cooperation these reports mentioned was further legitimized by claims like "the expansionist and at times belligerent approach of China in the region," and "China [is being] particularly aggressive in South China Sea" (Chadha, 2021).

In this way, the *TOI* not only constructed India as different from the hawkish United States, especially during the Trump administration, but also demonstrated an exceptional leader India ready, willing, and able to lead the region and the world spiritually and morally. Whereas since the chair of ASEAN has been seated in Brunei in 2021, and Cambodia for 2022, the *TOI* also expressed concern over ASEAN's unity in fighting China economically, politically, or militarily, due to Brunei's weakness as "a tiny sultanate," along with Cambodia's pro-China leanings (Pradhan, 2021b).

If we juxtapose the *TOI*'s framing of the general Indo-Pacific strategy, along with the government's strategy, we see these nuanced differences in attitude through these frames: While countering China's aggressive actions with other major powers is important, it is incumbent upon India to uphold its moral exceptionalism by maintaining its ontological security and adhering to its own approach. Because it depends on the nation's policy to shape its stories, it is just as important for a medium like the *TOI* to highlight India's exceptional global image as it showcases the similarities between it and the United States. In order to delve deeper into the *TOI*'s determination to prioritize India's version of the regional strategy, it is necessary to elucidate three "uncertainties" that have persistently disrupted India's perception of ontological security in its relationship with the United States. They are an ambiguous Sino-U.S. relationship; the possibility of being used politically and strategically by the United States to get to China, likely economically but perhaps militarily; and an ambiguous U.S. stance on Kashmir.

Regardless of Trump or Biden administration leadership, Bhatia (2021) stated that the United States has been deeply engaged with China for at least 40 years in critical areas from trade and technology to investment and finance. With China's rapid rise on the world stage, the United States knows well that a serious trade war with China could turn into a global trade catastrophe (Bajpai, 2019). Nevertheless, the *TOI* predicted that the United States wouldn't fight China full force. Therefore, it warned the Modi government not to rely heavily on it to counter the emerging behemoth. Second, the *TOI* implicitly questioned U.S. motives behind the designation of India as the anchor of the Indo-Pacific region. Chadha (2021) admitted the possibility that the United States could "fire a lot of guns [at] China from India's shoulders" but still believed the Modi government would make the right choice and remain independent. Singh (2020) claimed a stronger American presence in the Indo-Pacific region could ward off China and that prioritizing India's interests might hinder the United States in establishing a free and open Indo-Pacific. Third, despite Modi's use of strident Hindu nationalism to make India strong, the United States seemed ambivalent about the Kashmir area. Facing the Modi government's decision to revoke Article 370, the basis for Kashmir's autonomy and its complex relationship with India for some 70 years, the United States failed to support it. Trump even met with Pakistan's prime minister at the World Economic Forum in Davos ("The U.S. refocus," 2020). The decision to integrate Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority region, and put it on the same footing as the rest of India, expressed Modi's ambition to create a Hindu India, even as the United States, a key ally, seemed less reliable. The Hindu nationalists' dream of a greater India would not allow it to follow other countries.

In fact, given the U.S. and India's very different positions from which to approach China, the Modi government knew well that the "protection" offered by "the tyranny of distance" was not reliable (Smith, 2020). Meanwhile, though Modi attempted to transform Nehruvian nonalignment, the philosophy of nonalignment still dominates the nation's leadership, restricting them

from aligning too closely with the United States to provide India enough space to chart an independent course. Plus, longstanding U.S. grievances over Indian barriers to trade and investment, the Trump administration's new sanctions on any country, including India (with a 6-month waiver), which was importing oil from Iran, proved that a conflict of interest exists between the United States and India. Considering these complications, Indian defense spending rose by 6.8% in 2019 and outpaced Russia's and Saudi Arabia's. It became the third-largest defense spender on the planet (Roche, 2020).

As one of the most religiously and ethnically diverse nations in the world, India needs to constantly differentiate itself (its political and cultural identity) from others to secure its ontological security and produce a coherent national identity. By making the United States an Other, in general, and given its Indo-Pacific strategy, in particular, the *TOI* continues to champion India's leadership in the region and challenges to western discursive hegemony—to outflank the West as the main political and normative agent in the world (Wojczewski, 2019). In this way, given the emergence of India's leadership through its Indo-Pacific strategy, India's promoting reconstruction of the world order is justified by voicing the aspirations of developing countries and pursuing economic and cultural priorities other than those derived from the United States. Therefore, by framing India as a "rule shaper," defining "new political and military coalitions, as well as the emerging economic order," the *TOI* argued strongly that, by contributing to the world in its own unique ways, India was ready to lead (Pant, 2020).

Conclusion

Analyzing the *TOI*'s 47 articles covering the Indo-Pacific strategy, we argued that by the narration touting India's regional approach as better than that of the United States, the *TOI* projected the vision of an *Othered* India rising as a moral and spiritual power, leading the Asian world to prosperity. But our reading of the Indo-Pacific strategy as reported reveals the *TOI*'s complex stance towards the Nehruvian legacy of nonalignment. While reporter Sharma clearly stated that India's change in its diplomatic approach marks the end of the Nehruvian legacy, other journalists' failure to even mention the legacy, a critical part of India's foreign policy, in reporting on the Indo-Pacific strategy, has reduced the legacy to a historical footnote. The *TOI* reporters' uncertainty about the Biden administration and its actions towards China led them to caution the Modi government about being bound by the interests of any major power, the United States, in this case. That approach reveals how the philosophy of nonalignment continues to influence India's assessment of its international relations.

Although there was controversy surrounding this nonalignment, the *TOI* helped India maintain the nation's ontological security by providing a clear narrative of the national self. This allowed India to establish a foundation for interpreting its actions on the global stage and assigning meaning to them. The *TOI*'s portrayal of India's national identity stands out for its recognition and appreciation of the country's rich cultural and religious heritage. This, as the media demonstrated, gives India a distinct advantage with which to manage diversity, especially when compared to its neighbors, Pakistan and China, and to the world leader, the United States. Pakistan and China, a hotbed of international terrorism and a rule-breaker, respectively, are each "dark side" competitors to a "righteous" India, which aims to maintain regional peace and development and assure the Indo-Pacific region is rule-based, free, and open. The United States, on the other hand, the undeniable world leader, failed to fulfill its responsibility to stop the rule-breakers and safeguard the benefits of all nation-states within the region as covered in the *TOI*'s reports.

In addition, during the hegemony of the neo-colonial period, India was represented as an *Other*, a non-Western country trying hard to move from the margin to the center and lead the world to prosperity, especially developing regions. In the *TOI*'s framing of the Indo-Pacific strategy, we revealed its narration of India's rise as a world leader. In a cultural myth affirming its exceptionalism, it adopted the discursive strategy of *Self* and *Other*. Using cooperation between the United States and China as an example, Goswami (2021) claimed that a similar approach can work for India: With U.S. support, India hopes to replace China as the new leader in the present geopolitical context.

Though we meticulously studied the *TOI*'s reports on the Indo-Pacific strategy to illustrate the role that elite media played in preserving the nation's ontological security, this study still has its limitations. First, since the *TOI* has catered to an educated, affluent, and urban audience, its reports are not representative enough to reflect the role the entire media has played in preserving the country's ontological security, especially after the rise of populism. Focusing our analysis on the *TOI*, we only had a chance to investigate the role that elite media has played. Second, the reports we analyzed were published from June 2019, to May 2021. Since newspaper reports are time-sensitive, they may not reflect the development of the Indo-Pacific strategy or the detailed actions that India has taken in recent years. The study focused only on 47 articles, and therefore, missed some important trends not captured in the reports. Yet, while policies may be subject to change in response to shifting circumstances, this very fact underscores the importance of focusing our attention on the core of ontology security. Therefore, for scholars interested in exploring the role of media in shaping a coherent Indian national identity, it would help to pay greater attention to media outlets that cater to non-English-speaking audiences. By doing so, we can gain insight into how these outlets perform during national diplomatic challenges.

Data availability

The datasets analyzed during the current study are available in the Harvard Dataverse, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/1FGBAB>.

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Author contributions

Conceptualization, ZL; data collection, ZL, LS; methodology, ZL; formal analysis, ZL, LS; writing—original draft preparation, ZL; writing—review and editing, ZL, LS; project administration, ZL. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval is not applicable in the current study as it does not involve human participants.

Informed consent

No informed consent was obtained in this study as it does not involve human participants.

Additional information

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