

# Analysing Intertextuality and Value-Laden Assumptions of the Elite Press

-The case of China-US con/divergent interests in the Persian Gulf

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**Abstract**—This paper aims to identify whether the “elite-cum-official consensus” exists in the US press with regard to China-US divided interests over international affairs such as the 2012 Hormuz Crisis. Based on a critical discourse analysis of the sampled newspaper, this paper reaches the following conclusions: (1) these papers tended to contextualize China’s behaviour in this region within the economic framework; (2) value-laden assumptions are also made, as they were allocating China certain roles/responsibilities to coordinate the US-led sanction against Iran. It reaffirms the necessity to strengthen the China-US diplomatic dialogue between top officials and elite discourses so as to avoid unnecessary confrontations.

**Keywords**—China-US relations; Critical discourse analysis; Intertextuality; Value-laden assumptions

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the recent rise as an international economic power, China has been inevitably placed greater expectations as well as pressure to play a role in solving both regional and international conflicts. United States is one of these countries that have, on many occasions, urged China to do so; but its motives behind this strategy/standpoint are more complicated than others. There is growing concern that such rise of China would probably pose a serious challenge to US’ world leadership [1]. Some even argue the differences between China and US are intrinsically irreconcilable with further confrontations unavoidable; while others still believe both countries can become strategic partners on the condition that China is willing to coordinate US-led initiatives. Given this, such ambiguities necessitate a systematic analysis of relevant US elite discourses and especially those reflected in the media coverage of regional/international conflicts.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

From a situationist perspective, a state’s behavior should be interpreted in association with “where it is located” within the international system [2]. According to this, the China’s behavior of purchasing oil in Gulf region, for instance, can be viewed differently, depending on what kind of role China is supposed to have. In other words, it could be seen merely as a business activity wherein China – as a major engine for world economic growth – is seeking energy suppliers to sustain its

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economic development; or ambitious China seemingly attempts to exert political influence in this region by building strong economic ties with local powers. It in essence reflects a contentious nature of how this world can be viewed and explained. On the other hand, people with similar perspectives can be grouped around a certain explanatory framework, with corresponding lexicons/arguments available in various sources ranging from published books/reports to press/TV reports.

Thus studying the uses of language matters by which it shows the process how different groups of people seek to justify their own position [3]. In other words, it involves some “ideological work” to define and legitimize a certain world-view as general common sense [4]. Discourse analysis is usefully introduced to reveal how this “work” can be organized textually, with critical discourse analysis focusing more on how social/political power can be linked [5]. Subsequent analytical framework can be established, based on relevant concepts such as “intertextuality” and “assumptions”. It is through an analysis of intertextuality that media reports on a particular date can be related to other events and texts [3]. This also suggests studying a few isolated media texts is not sufficiently enough to grasp the complexity of such dynamics – i.e. some form of systematic analysis is needed. Moreover, value-laden assumptions that underlies the texts/claims need to be identified, especially in terms of “what is desirable” and “what is undesirable” [3]. By doing so, *which ideological perspectives are favored and developed* in the texts can be investigated, with reference to the systematic evaluation of relevant text implications.

## III. METHOD AND SAMPLE

This study selects the 2012 Hormuz Crisis as a case in point to illustrate why and how China-US interests are divided over international affairs. To conduct critical discourse analysis, we sampled four influential US press (i.e. *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *International Herald Tribune*, *The Christian Science Monitor*) – they are considered influential in informing public opinion – and reviewed relevant media coverage and column commentary about the 2012 Hormuz Crisis.

To be specific, news articles relating to the 2012 Hormuz Crisis and corresponding background information are accessed

through the Lexis-Nexis database. Besides this, viewpoints from quoted sources/experts in news articles are supplemented with those from column commentaries (and think-tank reports), for further analysis of their textual interactions. As one of the qualitative methods, critical discourse analysis aims to identify “significant semiotic features” of an important topic, as a way of understanding its nature as well as its dialectical relation with the social reality [6]. Thus we need to focus on what arguments (semiotically speaking, discourses) are presented and become salient textually in terms of their interpretations of these topics: (1) China’s motivation of getting involved in the Gulf region and the implication of its involvement for United States, (2) China’s roles/responsibilities assigned by United States in relation to the US-led initiatives such as sanctions against Iran, and (3) proposed solutions/mechanism, if any, to tackle potential conflicts when China-US interests are divided.

IV. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: CHINA-US RELATIONS BEHIND THE 2012 HORMUZ CRISIS

The basic question we need to bear in mind is that: In what sense might the international/world order led by the United States can justify its own definitions of China’s roles/responsibilities, as well as support its own interpretations/claims about China’s behaviors. Thus this study focuses on identifying both explicit claims in the US media texts and the underlying assumptions behind them, especially in terms of “what is necessary” and “what is desirable” the sake of United States interests. By doing so, we can better understand how their ideological position (or bias in some circumstances) have been developed or “reproduced” in media discourses systematically.

TABLE I. A CDA APPROACH TO SAMPLED MEDIA COVERAGE

Discourse Type	Sampled Media Coverage	
	Reported events & quotes	Contextualized with background and/or Intertextuality with quotes
Economic-needs-driven	Chinese leader’s visit to Arabian Gulf states <sup>a</sup>	China needs enormous energy to sustain its economic development
	Chinese state-owned oil companies’s new cooperation with Arabian Gulf states <sup>d</sup>	China attempts to broaden oil supplies and avoid economic risks caused by Iranian crisis.
Neither-collaborative confrontational	Nor- Chinese leader’s disapproval comment on Iranian nuclear program As the largest purchaser of Iranian oil, China refused to support US-promoted oil embargo.	Quote 1: “The message from China was clear: We do not support the Iranian nuclear program – but business is business” <sup>b</sup>
		Quote 2: “China has reduced its reliance on Iranian imports in recent months”

<sup>a</sup>. See articles for example from *The Washington Post* (Jan/14/2012), *The New York Times* (Jan 21, 2012).

<sup>b</sup>. See the article, for example from *The New York Times* (Jan 21, 2012).

<sup>c</sup>. See the article, from *The Washington Post* (Jan 14, 2012).

“broaden oil supplies” [8] or “prospect for alternate sources of oil” [9]. One of the most significant statements can be found as:

- China has enormous energy needs as its economy grows, and arranging for a steady supply of petroleum has become a major concern of the Beijing government in recent years (*The Washington Post*, January 14, 2012).
- China is among Iran’s biggest oil customers. It relies on Tehran for more than 11 percent of its oil imports...and it has extensive business interests in the Iranian oil industry (*The New York Times*, January 12, 2012).

This can be seen as a “political economy” framework within which the “economic-needs-driven” discourse can be established, as shown in Table I. Drawing on this discourse, the sampled media tend to categorize China as one of these countries in needs of energy – together with those countries considered as US traditional allies:

- Major buyers of Iranian oil, including China, Japan and India, are reconsidering their oil imports from Iran...South Korea had already adopted trade restrictions while China had begun to turn to alternative suppliers (*International Herald Tribune*, January 12, 2012).
- [There are] signs that Japan, South Korea and even China were seeking alternatives to Iran, in order to comply with American sanctions (*The New York Times*, January 13, 2012).

Notably, *The New York Times*’ interpretation further pointed to the issue of diplomatic relations with US – where the intention to comply with US’ world leadership is always used as a key touchstone. Here *The New York Times* extended its definition of China’s status within the “economic-needs-driven” discourse to that of China-US relations. Such interpretation of China’s motives could be considered by others as “being overstated” – indeed our study finds other sampled media tend to adopt a “neither-collaborative, non-confrontational” framework to explain China’s geopolitical dilemma. To be specific, as shown in Table-1, China’s

insistence that “business should be separated from politics” can be seen as its significant “non-collaborative” manifestation within which news reports of then US Treasury Secretary’s failure to persuade China were contextualized:

- “China Balks as Geithner Presses for Iran Curbs” (*The New York Times*, January 12, 2012).
- “Geithner finds Chinese Resistant to Iran Oil Sanctions” (*The Washington Post*, January 12, 2012)

These news headlines/texts, along with similar quotations from expert analysis, constitute a “wider intertextual chain” that focuses on China’s unwillingness to coordinate US-led sanction. Indeed, Chinese official stances were quoted to reinforce this context: “We oppose pressuring [Iran by cutting off our imports of Iranian oil] ...We believe these [nuclear] problems should be solved by dialogue” [10]. It in essence reflects the juxtaposition of interdiscursivity whereby the intertwined section yields a “non-confrontational” (to a large extent, negotiable) discourse – a combination of both “economic-needs-driven” and “non-collaborative” ones, see Fig. 1. Thus the promotion of China’s economic/business interests in the Gulf region, though as a top priority, has not been so assertive as to become politically confrontational towards US. Clearly, a kind of consensus had been reached textually, as summarized in *The Christian Science Monitor*: “China will not go all the way to support Iran...They are not going to confront the US in a decisive way” [11].

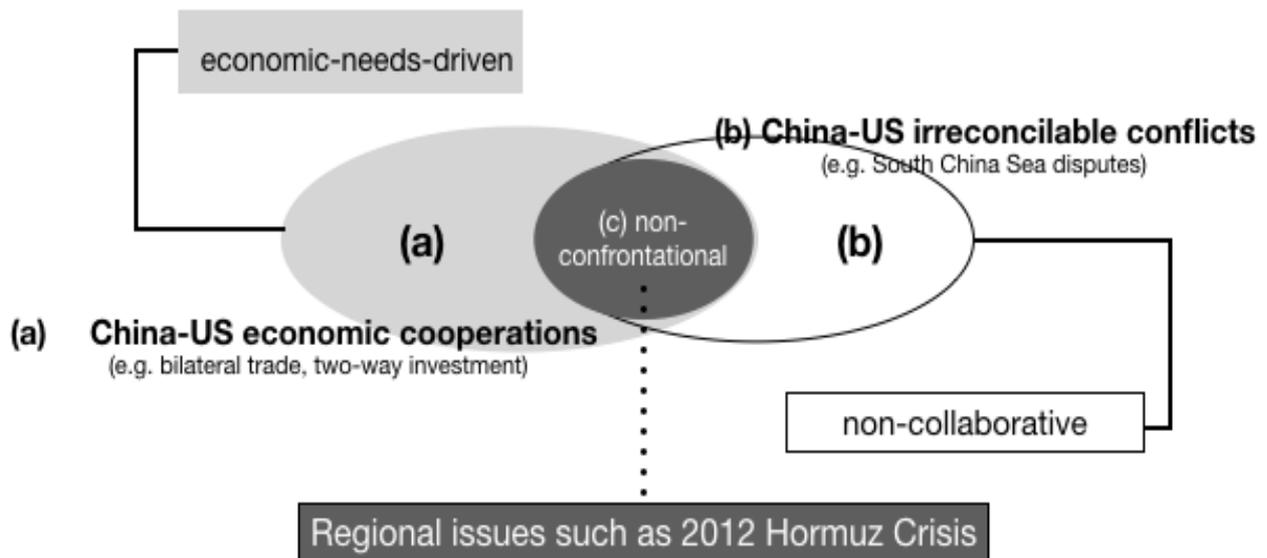


Fig. 1. Interdiscursivity that establishes contexts to explain China’s behaviors

**B. Assumptions: Allocating Roles/Responsibilities to China**

Media scholars have repeatedly argued that US media, when covering international affairs, tend to reproduce “hegemonic assumptions” derived from the elite consensus unified in the name of US national interests [7]. This suggests, to a large extent, these US media would point out explicitly and/or implicitly “what is desirable” for the implementation of US foreign policies (incl. US-led initiatives). As shown before, our study points to one of the most significant assumptions that

underlie the news texts/discourses: US expected coordination from China to play a key (or, an “ally”, to some extent) role in pressuring Iran on nuclear issues. To be specific, China was expected to cut off its imports of Iranian oil – which is seen as vital by the US to the imposition of US-led sanctions aiming to pressure Iran. Such value-laden assumptions can also turn into textual forms which reiterates US’s bottom line of “pressing China to resist importing more” (*The New York Times*, January 7, 2012).

## V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on a critical discourse analysis of how the sampled US newspaper covered 2012 Hormuz Crisis, this study finds – though these media assumed international conflicts should be solved under the leadership of US – the role such countries as China can play can be negotiated in a feasible way whereby China’s “non-collaborative” behaviors were explained within the contexts of its economic needs and energy stability. There was no evidence to suggest these media tend to exaggerate China’s uncooperativeness; nor demonized its further involvement in the Gulf region – instead some of them consider China’s seeking alternative oil supplies itself “put pressure on Iran” or “comply with American sanctions” [8]. There also emerges an interdiscursivity model within a certain realm of which China-US issues can be sorted, with reference to its nature defined by the media/elite discourse. Thus further exploration is needed on how to facilitate China-US strategic dialogues.

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