

CHINA'S GLOBAL IMAGE MAKING

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD



MUHAMMAD KHALIL KHAN


PETER LANG

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES / 3

China's international political prominence is currently facing a strategic challenge and significant dilemma due to its image abroad. To address this, China is utilizing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to shape its global image and enhance strategic engagements in the Afro-Eurasia region and beyond. This study employs a longitudinal content analysis method to examine China's political, cultural, economic, technological, and social image in the most influential Islamic English news media. It critically analyzes China's construction, interpretation, and dissemination of its global image in the context of the BRI. Furthermore, it sheds light on the historical and current relations between China and the Islamic world, including future prospects and potential challenges to China's rise as an alternative global power for the Islamic world.

“This book provides a comprehensive and critical analysis of China's strategic efforts to shape its global image through the Belt and Road Initiative in the Islamic world. By analyzing influential Islamic English news media, it sheds light on the historical and current relations between China and the Islamic world and offers valuable insights into future prospects and potential challenges. This book is essential for scholars and policymakers interested in comprehending China's evolving global image and its impact on Sino-Islamic relations.”

—Wu Fei, Qiyushi Distinguished Professor, Director of International Communication
Research Center, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China

“It is increasingly important that, with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) now on the books for a solid decade, we begin to take stock of its global impact in granular terms. This timely, well-illustrated book, which explores the nexus of BRI and China's image as constructed in select English-language news media, does that with compelling, insightful analyses and with effulgent statistical data to boot in, and about, a region that is an archetypal Islamic influence.”

—Cornelius B. Pratt, Professor Emeritus of Global Communication and Leadership,
Temple University, Philadelphia, United States

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*To my beloved parents,
whose innumerable prayers and endless cooperation encouraged
me in all aspects of life.*

*To my wife, who always stood firmly beside me
on all occasions of happiness and sadness, and*

*To my beloved sons, and
To my beautiful daughter who has always wished me
with their innocent prayers.*

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Introduction

The growing international discourses on China's status as an "emerging global power" has reinvigorated the Chinese government's commitment to focus more on China's positive image promotion in the foreign public to convalesce its long-lost right of say in global affairs (Zheng, 2005; Cull, 2009; Gong, 2021; Jacob, 2020; Wang, 2011). It employs the new public diplomacy initiatives—the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) strategically to magnify its soft image and neutralize the stigmatization of China's reputation in the globalized mediated societies.

The rapid information flow and digital transformation have revitalized the importance of a country's reputation and favorable image in globalized and mediated societies. A country's reputation and favorable image abroad have become more exigent than "territory, access, and raw materials" (Gilboa, 2008, p. 56) as they define the country's political standing and space for political action through mutual understanding in the international system (Gilboa, 2008; Leonard et al., 2002; Schatz & Levine, 2010; Vickers, 2004; J. Wang, 2006). Therefore, nation-states dedicate all-out efforts to raise the country's soft power, soft image, and soft esteem by establishing a strong, stable, and reputable country image in an antagonistic global environment (Kunczik, 2003; Melissen, 2005; Nye, 2005; Price, 2003; Werron, 2013).

A country's image critically impacts its geopolitical influence and its action in the global governance system (Gilboa, 2008; Kunczik, 2016; Leonard et al., 2002; Sun, 2008; Van Ham, 2008; Vickers, 2004); international consensus-building (Wang, 2006); foreign direct investment (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Kunczik, 2002); promotion of exports (Barr, 2012; Papadopoulos, 1993); attractiveness for foreign skilled labors (Papadopoulos, 2004), the opulence of national tourism industry (Gertner, 2010; Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000); educational systems (Gertner, 2010; Srikatanyoo & Gnoth, 2002); economic growth, national security, and advancing national interests (d'Hooghe, 2014; Han et al., 2012; Hartig, 2019). It has become even more critical in the newly mediated environment and is consistently rated and compared by foreign media, international organizations, and the foreign public based on its effectiveness and morality in political values, economic stability, domestic development, international policy, cultural prestige, etc. Therefore, the political leadership is always worried about a country's overseas image (Kunczik, 2003; Price, 2003; Werron, 2013) and employed best communication practices to manage and promote the country's positive image within the national state system and abroad (Dinnie, 2015; Dyke & Verčič, 2009; Kunczik, 2016; Snow & Taylor, 2008).

A nation's image contributes to its international relations. Scholars (Leonard et al., 2002; Schatz & Levine, 2010; Vickers, 2004; Wang, 2006) argue that a favorable perception of a country by the foreign public can enhance its political standing and space for political action through mutual understanding in the international system. A positive national image is an important component of the nation-state's strategic communication that enhances its soft power to attract, influence, and even shape the preferences of other nations without any punitive or coercive measures (Nye, 2005; Nye & Jisi, 2009). A country's positive image builds public trust and strengthens public confidence in the country's future. This public trust and confidence in the state later works as a currency for its future international credit ratings, foreign investments, and foreign exchange rates (Kunczik, 2003).

China's multi-billion US dollar BRI enchants unique opportunities that can boost China's global image. Scholars (Khan & Pratt, 2019) argue that BRI facilitates regional connectivity, improves financial integration, promotes free trade, strengthens systematic policy coordination, and people-to-people bonds in the developing world and, therefore, "it attracts global attention and is intent on improving China's political stature, sociocultural reach, and economic standing on the global stage, not least in [Islamic] countries" (Khan et al., 2022, p. 2).

Enabled by BRI, China's economic engagements in the Islamic world can propel China's positive image in the Islamic World and attract foreign public attention to promote trade, business, investment, exports, tourism, public diplomacy, and foreign policies abroad (Voon & Xu, 2020).

The Islamic world is beset with lingering regional disputes and faces subtle economic challenges. It needs substantial financial capital to rejuvenate its economic growth and renovate the much-needed infrastructure to deal with the evolving challenges of the 21st Century. China's BRI aims to facilitate infrastructural development and cultural and policy dialogues among divergent national states. It promises regional connectivity, infrastructural development, financial and economic support, and unimpeded trade among Islamic countries that will eventually improve China's global image and stature as a trustworthy global partner in the Islamic world (Jin et al., 2016; Khan & Pratt, 2019). China is hoping that the large investment in the shape of BRI will facilitate the "Chinese dream" of global leadership. It will stimulate a new wave of share globalization through the share development model which could improve the existing global governance and China's image as a new global leader (Khan et al., 2018).

In recent years, China's national image studies have received significant attention from communication researchers around the globe, particularly in Chinese academia (An & Feng, 2022; Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015; Meng, 2020; Xie & Page, 2013). Researchers are focusing more on China's image-building (Allison, 2013; Barr, 2012; Guo et al., 2015; Zhang & Cameron, 2003), public diplomacy (d'Hooghe, 2014; Jia & Li, 2020; Schliebs et al., 2021; D. Scott, 2015), charm offensive (Eliküçük Yıldırım & Aslan, 2020; Kurlantzick, 2007; Lee & Hao, 2018), and related concepts "with an enthusiasm rarely seen in other parts of the world" (Rawnsley, 2012, p. 126, 2014). China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database indicates that Chinese academicians used the word "national image" over 2700 times in their research titles between 1998 and 2017. Scholars argue that the global discursive debate about China's status as an "emerging global power" has encouraged the Chinese government to focus more on China's positive image perception in the foreign public to recuperate its long-lost right of say in global affairs (Cull, 2009; Zheng, 2005). Recently, the Chinese government has shown great concern, sensitivity, and enthusiasm to project China's soft image around the world (d'Hooghe, 2014; Rabinovitch, 2008). Wang Chen, a prominent member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, Vice Chairman, and Secretary-General of the Standing Committee of the 12th National People's Congress (NPC) consistently

voiced for grasping the precious historical opportunity to create and built a favorable image of China on the global stage (Xie & Page, 2013).

But scholars like Ramo (2007, p. 12) still believe that “China’s greatest strategic threat today is its national image . . . For one of the few times in its history, this famously inward-looking nation is vulnerable to how it is seen abroad. How China is perceived by other nations—and the underlying reality that perception reflects—will determine the future of Chinese development and reform”. As a result, Chinese scholars are avidly probing the question of China’s image abroad but the focus remained broadly in the Western media and the Western world, particularly in the United States (Barr, 2012; de Moura et al., 2011; Ding, 2011; Dinnie & Lio, 2010; Han & Wang, 2014; Liu & Yang, 2015; Wekesa, 2013; Zeng et al., 2014). China’s image construction in the Islamic world is ignored. Even though few scholars tried to inquire about the relationship between China and the Arabic Islamic world, most studies merely focus on the economic and strategic relationship (Dorraj, 2013; Elmagherbi, 2010; Elmagherbi & Wang, 2011; Hayoun, 2013; Makar, 1985; Olimat, 2010; Sekkal, 2013; Xiaodong, 2013; Zhu, 2010). This has left a huge scope for communication scholars to probe the Islamic English news media’s role in building and shaping China’s image in the Islamic world. Particularly, the impact of China’s huge investment in the shape of BRI on its image construction in Islamic English news media.

Purpose of the study

China’s problematic image abroad poses a “strategic threat” to its dream of rejuvenation into a new global power (Ramo, 2004, 2007). It is often considered a “major issue” and challenge to China’s peaceful rise, and its role in global governance and leadership (Hayden, 2012; Khan et al., 2022; Kurlantzick, 2022a; Ramo, 2007). In recent years, China has devoted sufficient resources to boost its positive image abroad. But Western media steadily disparage China’s role in international politics and the new world order due to its alleged exponential expansionism abroad, an abridgment of the freedom of speech, and alleged human rights violations (Armony, 2012; Hayden, 2012; Kurlantzick, 2007, 2022a). China’s flimsy political image abroad made it vulnerable, particularly in the West, therefore, China needs to strengthen its positive image to counter evolving propaganda

of the “China threat” in international media (Corkin, 2014; Li, 2008). Chinese scholars argue that international media possess ideological biases and often distorted facts to “demonize” China’s image (Xiang, 2013). There is international misunderstanding and unwarranted criticism of China’s development owing mainly to the negative reporting of Western media. China needs to talk back and communicate the “real” and “true image” of China to the world to converse the frivolous negativity and demonizing of China’s image by Western media (Gao et al., 2016; Hartig, 2016, 2019; Zhao, 2017). Therefore, China should manage and utilize all available means to communicate and establish China’s positive image abroad i.e., the effective use of Chinese media and communication tools and public diplomacy to strengthen its soft power and improve China’s national image abroad (Kurlantzick, 2007).

The Western allies, particularly the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have started to galvanize collective actions against China’s alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang by announcing the diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics Games on the allegations of “genocide and crimes against humanity” against ethnic Uyghur Muslim minority (Mather, 2022, p. 1). France which had decided against the diplomatic boycott earlier adopted a resolution just a week before Beijing Winter Olympics that “officially recognizes the violence perpetrated by the People’s Republic of China against the Uyghurs as constituting crimes against humanity and genocide” and directed the French government to initiate “the necessary measures within the international community and in its foreign policy towards the People’s Republic of China” to halt Beijing’s actions in Xinjiang (Al-Arabia News, 2022). Such Western countries (e.g., the U.S., UK, and Canada) have also imposed human rights sanctions on China due to the alleged forced labor and human rights violations in Xinjiang. However, Beijing historically denies those accusations and terms them “slandorous attacks” and “serious interference in China’s internal affairs”(CNBC, 2021). Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told the U.N. Human Rights Council in February 2021 that the “basic facts [e.g., social stability and economic development] show that there has never been so-called genocide, forced labor, or religious oppression in Xinjiang,” and “[s]uch inflammatory accusations are fabricated out of ignorance and prejudice, they are simply malicious and politically driven hype and couldn’t be further from the truth.”(Nebehay, 2021, p. 1 emphasis added).

However, the powerful Western narrative about human rights issues in Hong Kong, Tibet and particularly labeling China’s actions in Xinjiang as

“suppression” and alleged “genocide” of Uyghur Muslims, have reverberated the Islamic English news media (Al-Arabia News, 2022; Al-Jazeera, 2020; Roache, 2021). For example, Al-Jazeera on December 9, 2021, published an unofficial and independent UK-based tribunal report under the title “China guilty of Uyghur genocide in Xinjiang, tribunal rules” aligning its editorial judgment with the popular Western media narrative (Roache, 2021). Similarly, Al-Watan (a Saudi Arabic newspaper) published an eyewitness account of a teacher on February 19, 2021, under the headline “They flaunt rape stories”... A shocking testimony “from inside the Uyghur camps”. The article explicitly highlighted the alleged sexual abuse of women by Chinese administrations and described the events at Uyghur campus as “so disturbing that it made her ill” (Alhura, 2021; Ezell, 2021, p. 17). Protest in support of Uyghur Muslim rights in Xinjiang has also been witnessed in a few Islamic countries (e.g., Turkey, Malaysia, Kazakhstan, and Indonesia) in recent years (Al-Jazeera, 2022; Ezell, 2021). For example, in June 2015, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs alleged China imposed a so-called “Ramadan ban” and did not allow the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang to fast during Ramadan resulting in an anti-China media campaign and an outbreak of large-scale anti-China public demonstration in Turkey on July 5, 2015 (Chen, 2020).

The Islamic world and its leadership refrain from openly criticizing the Chinese policies in Xinjiang to avoid China’s provocation in fear of losing the lucrative investment from China and a big Chinese market (Kelemen & Turcsányi, 2020). However, the Islamic English news media has shown a steady trend of picking up stories from the Western media to sensitize the Uyghur Muslim issues in the Islamic world, making China’s fragile political image vulnerable in the Islamic world (Al-Jazeera, 2022; Ezell, 2021; Kelemen & Turcsányi, 2020; Yusuf, 2020). The Islamic world is an ardent participant and backbone of the BRI. Almost the entire Islamic world (48 Islamic countries) has officially joined the BRI (Table 1.1). Five out of six economic and energy corridors pass through the Islamic countries, making them indispensable partners of the BRI (Khan & Pratt, 2019). Therefore, China needs to strengthen its communication strategies and public diplomacy to boost its favorable image in the Islamic world and counter the Western media’s evolving propaganda about mistreating its Muslim minority in the Islamic world (Corkin, 2014; Khan et al., 2022; Li, 2008).

Table 1.1: Geographical Distribution of Muslim and Non-Muslim Countries Associated with the Belt and Road Initiative.

| Geographical Regions | Muslim Countries (<i>N</i> = 48) | Non-Muslim Countries (<i>N</i> = 105) |
|--|--|--|
| East Asia & Pacific (<i>N</i> = 25) | Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia. | Cambodia, China, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, South Korea, Lao PDR, Micronesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Vanuatu, Vietnam. |
| Central Asia & Europe (<i>N</i> = 35) | Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz Republic, Turkmenistan. | Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Ukraine. |
| Middle East and North Africa (<i>N</i> = 20) | Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Palestine. | Israel, Malta. |
| South Asia (<i>N</i> = 7) | Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Maldives. | Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka. |
| Sub-Saharan Africa (<i>N</i> = 47) | Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Chad, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Gambia, Comoros. | Central Africa, South Sudan, Tanzania, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Seychelles, South Africa, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Sao Tome & Principe, Malawi. |

Continued

Table 1.1: *Continued*

| Geographical Regions | Muslim Countries (<i>N</i> = 48) | Non-Muslim Countries (<i>N</i> = 105) |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| Latin America & Caribbean (<i>N</i> = 19) | None | Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Panama, Peru, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, Venezuela. |

Source: <<https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn>>, April 1, 2022

China's image has also become a core concern in China's foreign policy. It is also evident from President Xi Jinping's keynote at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) held on October 18, 2017, where he categorically signifies the importance of improving the Chinese "capacity for engaging in the international communication. . . to tell China's stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance [the] country's cultural soft power" (Xi, 2017c, p. 39 emphasis added). Scholars and policymakers consistently make efforts to analyze China's image abroad to develop a strategic framework that justifies China's rise as a global power, boosts its global standing, and fosters its influence on the global stage (Hayden, 2012). Within the scope of this significance, this study is designed to analyze China's image in the Islamic world. The findings of this study will hopefully help improve a better global understanding of China and help improve China's international communication system which eventually helps it to build a strong positive image in the Islamic world.

Significance of the study

China and the Islamic world are becoming influential players in the newly evolving international order as powerful allies under the auspice of BRI that started to bind the Chinese and Muslim communities. They found mutual respect and trust in each other. China has extended the BRI to every corner of the Islamic world and connected Afro-Eurasian communities across Africa, Asia, and Europe through the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic, and Western Pacific shores. The BRI bids China for global leadership and strengthens China's connectivity with the

Islamic world, “with the global economy, and with rapidly changing transnational political order” (Bianchi, 2019; Khan et al., 2018; Khan & Pratt, 2019).

The Islamic world has emerged as an indispensable partner in China’s BRI due to its geostrategic, geo-economic, and geopolitical importance in global governance (Khan & Pratt, 2019). It includes 50 Muslim-majority countries that account for more than 24% of the world’s landmass (Majoka et al., 2012; World Population Review, 2022). In addition, a total of 1.9 billion people (24.1%) around the world adhere to the Islamic faith (World Population Review, 2022). According to the Pew Research Center, Islam is the world’s second-largest and fastest growing religion that will surpass Christianity at the end of this century (Pew Research Center, 2015). Finally, more than 62% of the Muslim population live in close vicinity to China’s geographical location in Asia (Khan & Pratt, 2019; Li, 2018; Sherani, 2013).

The Islamic world upholds an influential and powerful “Islamic political bloc of 57 nation-states under the banner of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)” —the second-largest intergovernmental body in the world after the United Nations (UN) that animated the geostrategic and geopolitical standing of the Islamic world in global politics (Khan & Pratt, 2019). It also controls abundant natural resources, mainly oil and gas. The Islamic world holds 75% of the world’s proven oil reserves and 42–55% of the world’s natural gas reservoirs (Cooper & Yue, 2015; Majoka et al., 2012). It is the backbone of the world’s natural energy supply; “the Middle East contributes 42% of oil and 26% of natural gas to the world’s energy supply chain and it possesses 65.36% of the world’s proven oil reserves and 51% of the world’s total natural gas resources” (Khan & Pratt, 2019, p. 124). Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, and Qatar are among the world’s largest oil and gas exporters and are vital for the entire world’s economic growth, social development, energy security, and human prosperity. China heavily relies on Islamic countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq) for its petroleum products to sustain its economic growth and social development (Chen, 2011; Cooper & Yue, 2015; Khan & Pratt, 2019; Majoka et al., 2012).

China’s unprecedented economic growth and alleviation of more than 800 million people out of poverty entice the international community and strengthen China’s image as an emerging global power. Subsequently, the United States’ (US) competitive favorability advantage over China declined to 12 from 25 countries, where the US enjoys a more favorable image than China (Vice, 2017). However, Kurlantzick (2022a) argues that China’s global image has been weakened in the last few years, not only in rival countries such as Japan, Australia, and the U.S. with whom it has grumpy relations, but also among the developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe where it had enjoyed positive or at least neutral relations during

the past two decades before COVID-19. He noted various reasons for the decline of China's soft power and the deteriorating China's global public image: (a) rising authoritarianism at home, (b) initial cover-up of the COVID-19 outbreak, (c) repressive actions in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, (d) aggressive "wolf warrior" diplomacy, (e) use of economic coercion against other states and multinationals (companies); and (f) zero-COVID strategy that miff foreign public perception against China and undermine people-to-people contacts that cast doubt on Chinese development model—even within China (Kurlantzick, 2022a, 2022b; Yuan, 2022).

A new Pew Research Center survey (2022) also indicates that in the past four years, China's global image has been damaged intensively in Asia Pacific, Europe, and North Africa and negative public perception about China is at "historic highs" in many of the 19 countries in the Asia Pacific, Europe, and North America. A majority of the people in those regions showed strong resentment and negative opinions toward China's human rights policies (79%), China's growing military power (72%), economic contest with China (66%), and China's involvement in domestic politics of other countries (59%). The U.S. favorability over China has also increased in those regions except Singapore and Malaysia (a Muslim country) where the public still views China more favorably than the U.S. (The Pew Research Center, 2022). In the last four years, the negative public perception of China's image increased in Japan from 78% in 2018 to 87% in 2022, negative public perception in Australia increased up to 87% in 2022, and the U.S. witnessed an increase from 79% in 2019 to 82% in 2022, in South Korea negative public perception about China raised from 60% in 2018 to 80% in 2022. Public perception in European countries that once held a positive view of China in 2018 also changed into negative perceptions in 2022. For example, China's negative perception in Poland increased from 37% in 2018 to 55% in 2022, in Hungary from 47% to 52%, in Greece from 48% to 50%, in Spain from 48% to 63%, in the UK from 35% to 69%, and negative public perception about China in Italy raised from 60% in 2018 to 64% in 2022. China's negative public perception in Israel also rose from 25% in 2018 to 46% in 2022. However, Singapore (34%) and Malaysia (39%) observed relatively low negative public perception of China in 2022 (Silver et al., 2022; The Pew Research Center, 2022). China's public perception in some Islamic countries is also negative and hostile. For example, the majority of the population in four major Islamic nations—Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon hold a negative view of China (Pew Research Center, 2017; Xie & Page, 2013).

The Pew Research Center, Global Indicators Database on global image survey from 2005 through 2019 reported variation in China's unfavorable image perception in some main Islamic countries from an average of 4% to 56% between 2005 through 2019 (Figure 1.1).

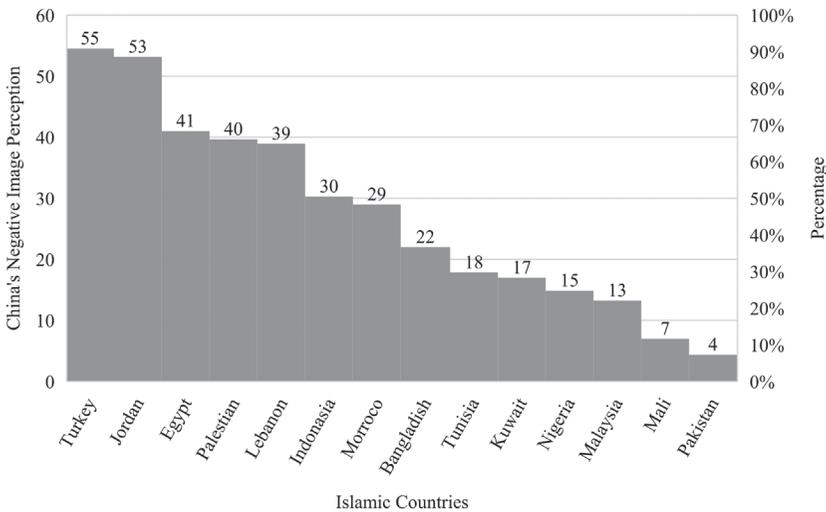


Figure 1.1: An Average of China's Unfavorable Image Perception in the Islamic World between 2005 and 2019.

Source: Pew Research Center, Global Indicators Database 2005–2019

Similarly, an average of more than 50% of the people from the four major Islamic countries, namely Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine, self-reported distrust in the Chinese Government's claim to do the right things regarding world affairs between 2014 and 2019 (Pew Research Center, 2014–2019) (Figure 1.2). Public perception of China in some other Islamic countries in the Middle East (e.g., Saudi Arabia) and Africa is also negative, even hostile in some cases (Al-Sudairi, 2013; Khan, Pratt, & Akhtar, 2023; Wekesa, 2013). The favorable perception of China as an emerging global power is still under the shadow of the strong Western narrative in the Islamic world. Therefore, BRI projects can facilitate China's public diplomacy endeavors to enhance its favorable image in the Islamic world.

People's perception of foreign countries mainly depends on how a foreign country is projected in local and international media (Mcnelly & Izcaray, 1986; Semetko et al., 1992; Wanta et al., 2004). Therefore, it is imperative to analyze how Islamic English news media portrayed China's image in the Islamic world during the last decade and how a different dimension of China's image has been interpreted, constructed, and disseminated in Islamic English news media. Particularly, how the influential Islamic English news media outlets (i.e., *Arab News*, *The Nation*, *Daily Sabah*, *Tehran Times*, *Daily News Egypt*, and *Al-Jazeera English*) of the most influential and powerful Islamic countries i.e., Saudi Arabia,