



Narrative Construction of the 2025 US-China Tariff War by Spanish News Media: A Comparative Analysis of El País and El Mundo

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Abstract: Drawing on 101 news reports from Spanish newspapers El País and El Mundo regarding the 2025 US-China tariff war, this study employs frame analysis and discourse analysis to examine European media's narrative construction of Sino-American trade conflicts. The findings reveal: a three-stage narrative evolution characterized by "conflict-game-autonomy"; Western sources accounting for 78.4% while Chinese voices constitute merely 18.6%; and negative evaluations of Trump (180 instances) significantly outnumbering those of China (97 instances). This research illuminates the positional logic and discourse strategies employed by non-direct conflict participant media in international conflict reporting.

Keywords: China-US trade friction; news framing; media discourse; source structure; Spanish journalism

1. Introduction

Following Trump's return to the White House in January 2025, his reinstatement of aggressive protectionist policies culminated in comprehensive tariff increases against China in April, triggering global market turbulence. As the EU's fourth-largest economy, Spain's media coverage not only reflects Southern European interests but also influences public opinion across Europe and Latin America. While existing research predominantly examines adversarial narratives between Chinese and American media—with Chen and Wang [1] revealing American media's emphasis on "war" metaphors versus Chinese media's "friction" discourse, and Liu et al. [2] finding that deeply involved democratic nations exhibit more prominent strategy framing—"third-party" media perspectives remain underexplored. This study systematically analyzes coverage by Spain's center-left El País and center-right El Mundo to reveal how non-direct participant media construct narratives in international conflict reporting.

2. Research Design

This study integrates Entman's framing theory [3] with Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis framework [4]. Using the LexisNexis database to retrieve relevant reports from both newspapers between January and December 2025, we obtained 101 valid samples—44 from El País and 57 from El Mundo—totaling approximately 150,000 words. The coding scheme builds upon Semetko and Valkenburg's five news frames [5], supplemented with "power shift" and "European autonomy" frames. We conducted multidimensional classification of 527 sources and systematic coding of discourse features including high-frequency vocabulary, metaphors, and grammatical voice. Reliability testing yielded Krippendorff's α coefficients ranging from 0.82 to 0.89, meeting acceptable standards.

3. Three-Stage Narrative Evolution

Frame analysis of the 101 reports reveals significant temporal evolution patterns. The first stage (January-April) was dominated by conflict and chaos frames, with chaos accounting for 47.9% and conflict for 37.5%. El País deployed chaos semantic vocabulary (81 instances) significantly more frequently than El Mundo (47 instances), framing Trump's policies as "intimidation, bluster, and chaos," while El Mundo adopted a more neutral economic perspective. The second stage (May-August) shifted toward gaming and negotiation frameworks. Following the Geneva agreement, chaos frames declined to 24.1% while conflict frames rose to 41.4%, transforming from "uncontrolled conflict" to "controllable game." Game metaphors surged by 292%, with China predominantly presented in active voice and Trump in passive voice, reinforcing power relation contrasts. The third stage (September-December) redirected the focus toward European autonomy, with "strategic autonomy" terminology surging by 467%. Reports discussing European impacts rose from 68% to 83%, while China-US negotiation coverage declined from 62% to 33%. Both newspapers called for European strategic independence, though El País adopted an aspirational tone while El Mundo emphasized the gap between rhetoric and reality, indicating a fundamental shift from "observing China-US dynamics" to "contemplating European strategy."

4. Source Imbalance and Discourse Power

Analysis of 527 sources reveals severe geographical imbalance. Western institutions and experts account for 78.4%—comprising American institutions (21.3%), EU and Spanish institutions (33%), and Western think tanks (24.1%)—while Chinese-related sources constitute merely 18.6%, with Chinese scholars at only 2.1%. Western think tanks serve as primary "China interpreters," with their total citations (127) exceeding all Chinese source types combined (98). Chinese academic institutions were cited merely 11 times, validating Boyd-Barrett's "media imperialism" thesis regarding global news production's dependence on Western knowledge systems [6]. Frequently cited experts form a cohesive "revolving door" network, circulating among government, financial institutions, and think tanks, thereby forming an elite network sharing similar worldviews and Western liberal economic frameworks. Source imbalance also manifests in the "Europeanization" of topic selection, with 71% of reports discussing "what this means for Europe" while attention to Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia accounts for only 21%. Issues including rare earths, semiconductors, and agricultural products were systematically transformed into European interest concerns.

5. Evaluation Criteria and Discourse Strategies

Evaluations of China-US policies exhibit significant asymmetry, with negative evaluations of Trump's policies (180 instances) far exceeding those of China (97 instances), a ratio of 1.9:1. However, this disparity does not reflect pro-China bias but rather an implicit "benefit to Europe" evaluation standard. US tariffs on China were framed as "rule-breaking" and "harming allies" due to indirect impacts on European supply chains, while US threats against Europe were evaluated as "betrayal" and "extortion." Chinese countermeasures against the US were deemed "reasonable" or "strategic" as they do not directly affect Europe, yet Chinese rare earth restrictions were labeled "weaponization" and "concerning" due to threats to European industries. When China opened markets to Europe, both newspapers framed it as "opportunity" and "pragmatic cooperation." Discourse strategies reinforce this asymmetry through naming (Trump as "mercurial" and "populist"), voice usage (Trump in passive voice diminishing agency, China in active voice conferring strategic intentionality), and metaphors. El País employs disease metaphors pathologizing Trump's policies, while utilizes instrumental metaphors technicalizing them; both newspapers describe China through architectural and natural force metaphors emphasizing scale and power rather than value judgments.

6. Ideological Divergence Between Left and Right

The two newspapers demonstrate significant differences in frame selection, with El País favoring the chaos frame (40.9%) versus El Mundo (26.3%), while El Mundo emphasizes economic consequences (28.1%) versus El País (13.6%). Source selection differs accordingly: El País relies more heavily on economists (45%) while El Mundo allocates greater space to business circles (28%). These differences stem from ideological orientations—El País's social democratic stance emphasizes values and rules with readership comprising the urban middle class and intellectuals, while El Mundo's liberal orientation emphasizes data and efficiency with business-oriented readership. On European integration, El País advocates radical federalism while El Mundo pragmatically emphasizes sovereignty. Regarding China policy, El País adopts more receptive "constructive dialogue" while El Mundo exercises caution emphasizing "coexisting opportunities and threats." Despite these differences, both newspapers exhibit high consistency on core positions: both criticize Trump more than China, both emphasize China-US conflict's European impact, and both advocate enhanced European strategic autonomy.

7. Conclusion

Through systematic analysis of 101 reports, this study reveals how non-direct participant media construct narratives in great power competition. The dominance of Western sources (78.4%), the focus on European impacts (71%), and the asymmetric criticism pattern validate framing theory's proposition regarding selective presentation while revealing frames' temporal evolution from chaos to gaming to autonomy. Source analysis supports media political economy's thesis on global knowledge production inequality, with Western think tanks overwhelming Chinese voices. The covert "benefit to Europe" evaluation standard demonstrates that "objective reporting" often conceals specific positions, with media constructing reality representations serving their own interests. Recognizing the constructedness of objectivity and the politics of discourse power holds significant implications for building a more equitable international communication system.

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