

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Online News Reports on the Withdrawal of US Troops from Afghanistan

Wang Xudong

College of Liberal Arts and Communication Graduate Studies, De La Salle University-Dasmariñas, Cavite, Philippines

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.803187>

Received: 13 March 2024; Revised: 02 April 2024; Accepted: 06 April 2024; Published: 22 April 2024

ABSTRACT

This study undertakes a CDA of online news reports from China Daily regarding the 2021 withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Drawing upon van Dijk's (1988) theory of news discourse analysis, the study examines the discursive features of China Daily's coverage between April and September 2021. A corpus of 192 reports, with ten selected for detailed examination, offers a thorough analysis of how this important geopolitical event has been portrayed in the media and its ideological foundations. The major findings reveal a refined presentation of multi-angled discourses. These reports politically emphasize China's stance on the event and advocates for a moral obligation toward Afghanistan's future and a broad, inclusive government arrangement post-withdrawal and economically calls for policies that consider the welfare of local populations. These findings underscore the strategic use of discourse to navigate complex geopolitical narratives, illustrating the media's role in ideological dissemination.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; News Report; Withdrawal of US Troops; Afghanistan; China Daily

INTRODUCTION

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan is one of the controversial events in the international community in 2021. Since President Biden announced the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan in April 2021, major mainstream media worldwide have extensively reported the event, which has great social significance and extensive social impact. This concern directly reflects people's views on the war on terrorism launched by the United States against Afghanistan.

The different reporting attitudes from different media on this matter have also triggered extensive discussion, which focused on the purpose and consequences of the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan and reflection on the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

The news report is never a simple description of a news event, but mixed with the position and tendency of the media. In essence, it reconstructs a pre-determined ideology (van, 1988). The reports from different media on the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan implied the media's reproduction of different ideologies involved in this Event.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) have been committed to carrying out various studies, and they tried to develop CDA theory by drawing on valuable theories from other disciplines or employ CDA tools to analyze various types of discourse. The aim of their research is to uncover the correlations between the discourse and the ideology which is believed to be concealed in the discourse and how the power relations are realized in the service of social authorities. Discourse, ideology and power are the three basic and inseparable concepts of CDA and run through the whole research process on CDA. CDA tends to analyze social interaction and disclose the ideology and unequal power relations hidden in the form of public discourse through the analysis of the text, discourse practice and social context (Xin, 2020).

Reports on news events are regarded as a type of discourse that can replicate information. News reports are a representation of news discourse, and the social context strongly influences the meaning that is suggested in them. Numerous academics have been studying news discourse analysis since the 1980s in order to investigate the various social cultures and ideologies that are present in news (Wang, 2022). Van Dijk is one of the outstanding contributors to news discourse analysis. In the field of linguistics, Fowler (1991) defines news as a kind of social practice, a product of the social and political world on what it reports.

Early studies on news discourse have paid much attention to the overall organization of news discourse. Van Dijk (1988) claims that news discourse analysis theory includes news structures, news production, and news comprehension, which provides an innovative method for news discourse analysis from an interdisciplinary perspective. This research paradigm is called the social cognitive model. The core idea of this model is discourse analysis made from the level of macrostructure and microstructure. He argued that the main aim of discourse analysis is to give a clear and systematic description of the language users. This is called discourse. This description has two main dimensions: textual and contextual. The text dimension analyzes the structure of the text at different levels of description from three aspects: the superstructure, the macrostructure and the microstructure. That is to say, the superstructure is the schema structure of news discourse. The macrostructure mainly analyzes the thematic structure of

news discourse, while the microstructure mainly discusses the local semantic features of news discourse.

This study conducted a critical discourse analysis of news coverage on the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. This study sought to reveal discursive features constructed by news coverage while striving to effectively fathom the hidden discourse power. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions: (1). What are the discursive features of the news reports on the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan from China Daily ? (2). What ideologies are embedded in China Daily on those news reports ?

METHODOLOGY

This study undertakes a comprehensive qualitative analysis of news discourse using a corpus of 192 reports from China Daily, focusing on ten for detailed examination. This analysis is framed within the theoretical paradigm of CDA, drawing upon van Dijk’s discourse analysis model. The methodology employs both textual and contextual analyses to explore how the construction and comprehension of news discourse contribute to the shaping of public perception and ideological narratives surrounding the U.S. troop withdrawal.

The textual analysis segment examines the macrolevel structures of news discourse. At the macro level, the focus is on thematic and schematic structures of news reports, identifying the predominant themes and organizational schemas of the news reports, which are instrumental in predicting news report tendencies. For contextual analysis, the study examines the discourse patterns and strategies employed in the news reports, considering how the media discourse within these reports reflects broader social and cultural constructions. This involves a critical analysis of discourse modes and strategies, emphasizing the role of intertextuality in constructing ideologies. Through this lens, this study assesses how the reports from China Daily on the U.S. troops’ withdrawal not only provide information but also engage in the negotiation of power and ideology within the public sphere.

This methodological approach, combining textual and contextual analyses underpinned by a solid theoretical framework, enables a refined understanding of the complex dynamics between news discourse and societal constructs. It highlights how news media, through specific linguistic and discursive choices, play a pivotal role in the ideological battleground surrounding significant political events like the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discursive features of the 10 sample news reports

Thematic structures

The thematic structures of the sampled news reports from China Daily, concerning the U.S. troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan, reflect a diverse range of perspectives and narrative layers, each structured according to van Dijk’s discourse analysis framework. Table 1 presents a summary of what is found in Move 1 (M1), Move 2 (M2), and Move 3 (M3) for each sample.

Table 1. *Thematic structures of 10 sample news reports*

News Reports	M1	M2	M3
1: “Biden announces time has come to leave Afghanistan”	Consultations by Biden with former Presidents Obama and Bush, and support from Afghan President Ghani for the withdrawal plan.	Biden’s announcement and historical reference to Bush’s initiation of the war.	Emphasis on Biden’s declaration marking the time to leave Afghanistan.
2: “Ending ‘forever war’ must be done responsibly”	Highlights the U.S.’s moral obligation to assist Afghanistan post-war.	Describes soldiers’ return and critiques the discourse on ending the war.	Calls for a responsible end to the war.
3: “US to deploy additional forces to Afghanistan as withdrawal underway”	Discusses Biden’s withdrawal timeline and Taliban warnings.	Reports on the deployment of additional forces to ensure a safe withdrawal.	Summarizes the paradoxical increase in forces during withdrawal.
4: “Priority should be to restore peace in Afghanistan”	Critiques the two-decade-long U.S. intervention’s failure and China’s diplomatic efforts.	Addresses the Taliban’s power seizure and China’s concerns.	Stresses the importance of peace restoration.
5: “US must clean the mess it created in Afghanistan”	Condemns the U.S.’s abandonment post-failed democracy experiment and interference in the Middle East.	Contrasts Biden’s portrayal of the withdrawal as a success.	Urges the U.S. to rectify its created turmoil.
6: “FM says US must help Afghanistan’s peaceful reconstruction”	Details the war’s failure to eliminate terrorism and the U.S./NATO’s rushed exit.	Highlights diplomatic discussions on Afghanistan’s future needs.	Advocates for U.S. support in Afghanistan’s reconstruction.

7: “Afghan war doomed to failure from the start”	Asserts the inherent injustice of the war.	Questions the efficacy of U.S. and NATO military strategies.	Declares the war’s predestined failure.
8: “Failure in Afghanistan predestined”	Critiques the U.S.’s hegemonic policies and flawed strategy.	Reports on the Taliban’s control post-U.S. withdrawal.	Reiterates the inevitability of failure in Afghanistan.
9: “US war leaves behind devastated Afghanistan”	Reviews Afghanistan’s longstanding political instability.	Highlights the global focus on Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal.	Depicts the devastating aftermath of the U.S. war.
10: “Top US general calls Afghan war ‘strategic failure’”	Reflects on U.S. military leadership’s surprise at the Afghan army’s collapse and strategic misjudgments.	Documents military and congressional reflections on the war’s end.	Labels the Afghan war a strategic failure by top U.S. generals.

As shown in Table 1, these thematic summaries underscore the various narratives present in China Daily’s coverage of the U.S. withdrawal, from critical analyses of its policy failures and strategic misjudgments to calls for responsible action and peace restoration. Studies by Jiang et al. (2020), Taj et al. (2019), and Hossain et al. (2021) illustrate the sophisticated structure of news discourse, emphasizing the significance of hierarchical thematic organization and the role of sentiment and strategic language in headlines to shape reader perceptions and elicit specific emotional responses. This methodological approach reveals how news events and their broader geopolitical and human implications frames significant military and political events to influence public opinion.

Further exploration into the framing effects of news discourse by Ebrahim (2022), Tourni et al. (2021), along with the organizational and politicization insights provided by Choubey et al. (2020), and Topic and Bruegmann (2021), reveal the underlying frameworks that guide news construction and narrative development. Additionally, contributions from scholars such as Mehmood et al. (2022), Pjesivic et al. (2023), Waheed et al. (2023), Boys (2022), Shah et al. (2022), and others deepen the understanding of the strategic, geopolitical, and ideological complexities surrounding the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. These analyses collectively underscore the need for a critical reassessment of U.S. foreign policy and strategy, showcasing the diverse perspectives and the impact of national and geopolitical contexts on media discourse.

Schematic structures

Table 2 serves as a structured guide on how each sample news report frames the story of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan through headlines, leads, the main events, the consequences, the context, historical backgrounds, and any verbal reactions or conclusions. This approach helps dissect and understand the narrative and discourse presented in each news report comprehensively.

Table 2. Schematic structures of 10 sample news reports

News Report	Summary	Story
News 1	1) Headline 2) Lead	1) Situation ① Episode a: Main event b: Consequences ② Backgrounds a: Context b: History
News 2	1) Headline 2) Lead	1) Situation ① Episode ② Backgrounds 2) Comments ① Verbal reaction ② Conclusion
News 3	1) Headline 2) Lead	1) Situation ① Episode ② Backgrounds a: Context b: History
News 4	1) Headline 2) Lead	1) Situation ① Episode ② Backgrounds
News 5	1) Headline 2) Lead	1) Situation ① Episode ② Backgrounds 2) Comments ① Verbal reaction ② Conclusion
News 6	1) Headline 2) Lead	1) Situation ① Episode ② Backgrounds 2) Comments ① Verbal reaction ② Conclusion
News 7	1) Headline 2) Lead	1) Situation ① Episode ② Backgrounds 2) Comments ① Verbal reaction ② Conclusion
News 8	1) Headline 2) Lead	1) Situation ① Episode ② Backgrounds 2) Comments ① Verbal reaction ② Conclusion
News 9	1) Headline 2) Lead	1) Situation ① Episode ② Backgrounds 2) Comments ① Verbal reaction ② Conclusion
News 10	1) Headline 2) Lead	1) Situation ① Episode ② Backgrounds 2) Comments ① Conclusion

As shown in Table 2, these schematic structures of ten sample news reports highlight a strategic approach in news reporting that

transcends simple information dissemination. Insights from leading scholars like Rosdiana et al. (2023), Yan (2023), and Chen and Wang (2022) explain how elements such as headlines, leads, and the detailed organization of story content—encompassing situations, episodes, and backgrounds—serve not just to narrate events but to frame them ideologically. This framing is key in setting the tone of the narrative, influencing public perception by highlighting certain aspects of events while providing contextual and historical backgrounds that enrich understanding and situate the news within a broader socio-political narrative.

Moreover, the inclusion of verbal reactions and conclusions in the news reports, as discussed by scholars like Azka et al. (2022) and Surya R et al. (2023), demonstrates the role of discourse structures in molding public perceptions. This structured approach not only offers a comprehensive view of events but also incorporates societal and political responses, challenging or reinforcing the narratives presented. Such critical analyses, supported by findings from Yuan et al. (2021), Kim & Jung (2021), and Sahputra (2021), affirm the significance of schematic structures in news discourse, especially in portraying major geopolitical events like the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. These analyses confirm that news discourse, through its structured narrative arrangements, not only conveys but also significantly influences public discourse and perception.

Ideologies embedded on 10 sample news reports

Table 3 summarizes the embedded ideologies as reported by China Daily regarding the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in terms of political, military, and economic discourses. Each entry in the table draws from the contextual analysis, integrating the perspectives of official stances, intellectual discourse, and the broader socioeconomic impacts.

Table 3. Ideologies embedded in 10 sample news reports

Aspect of Discourse	Embedded Ideologies
Political Discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - China supports Afghanistan's independence - The U.S. should help Afghanistan rebuild - Afghanistan deserves to choose its own path - Calls for a diverse, non-interfering Afghan government setup
Military Discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Uses expert insights on military failures and strategies - Labels the withdrawal as a failure despite some successes - Highlights the cost of U.S. action in Afghanistan - Critiques U.S. military approach and its long-term ineffectiveness
Economic Discourse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Points out Afghanistan's economic hurdles - Discusses negative economic impacts of U.S. withdrawal - Criticizes U.S. financial actions against Afghanistan post-withdrawal - Promotes policies focusing on Afghan well-being and development

As shown in Table 3, the analysis of China Daily’s reporting on the U.S. troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan showcases a construction of political, military, and economic discourses, aimed at articulating China’s ideological perspective within the broader geopolitical framework.

In political discourse, the emphasis on Afghanistan’s sovereignty and the U.S. post-withdrawal obligations aligns with China’s foreign policy, reflecting a strategic approach to international relations and geopolitical strategy (Zappettini & Rezazadah, 2023; Ford, 2023). Military discourse, enriched by insights from figures like Henry Kissinger, critiques the strategic outcomes of the withdrawal, offering a nuanced analysis that extends beyond governmental rhetoric to explore the implications of military strategies (Nurhidayah et al., 2023). Economic narratives further illuminate the challenges and economic impacts facing Afghanistan post-withdrawal, advocating for a holistic foreign policy approach that prioritizes sustainable development and governance (Fedotov & Kovalev, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study identified the discursive strategies employed and the ideologies embedded within these reports, analyzing how the media power in news discourse production reflects broader societal and cultural ideologies and presented a two-dimensional analysis model of Chinese Daily newspaper’s reports on the U.S. troops withdrawal from Afghanistan. The major findings show a sophisticated presentation of multilevel discourses that, on the political front, highlight China’s position on the U.S. troops’ withdrawal, argue for a moral duty to support Afghanistan’s future and a broad, inclusive post-withdrawal government structure, and, on the economic front, demand the implementation of policies that take local populations’ well-being into account.

This study also serves as a reference for the study and appreciation of related discourses, broadening the field of sociolinguistics research and advancing the field of critical discourse analysis.

REFERENCES

1. Azka, H. S., Prasetyo, B. D., & Kriyantono, R. (2022). Discourse on news of the changes in PCR and antigen policies as travel requirements in Indonesia. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.912.13618>
2. Boys, J. D. (2022). Strategic ambiguity: the U.S. grand strategy initiative in Afghanistan. *Policy Studies*, 43, 1216-1234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2022.2057461>
3. Chen, F., & Wang, G. (2022). A social network approach to critical discourse studies. *Digit. Scholarsh. Humanit.*, 38, 515-529. <https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqac085>
4. Choubey, P. K., Lee, A., Huang, R., & Wang, L. (2020, January). *Discourse as a function of event: Profiling discourse structure in news articles around the main event*. In Proceedings of the 58th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics.
5. Ebrahim, S. (2022). The corona chronicles: Framing analysis of online news headlines of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, USA and South Africa. *Health SA Gesondheid*, 27(1).
6. Fedotov, I., & Kovalev, L. (2023). Specific nature of the communication strategies of military-political discourse in the information environment (on the material of the English and Russian languages). *Journal of Linguistic and Intercultural Education*, 1. <https://dx.doi.org/10.30853/phil20230198>
7. Ford, N. G. (2023). Taking leave, taking liberties: American troops on the World War II home front by Aaron Hiltner (review). *The Journal of Military History*. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hfs.2022.a910761>
8. Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the news*. London: Routledge.
9. Hossain, A., Karimuzzaman, M., Hossain, M. M., & Rahman, A. (2021). Text mining and sentiment analysis of newspaper headlines. *Information*, 12(10), 414. <https://doi.org/10.21744/ijllc.v6n4.904>
11. Jiang, T., Guo, Q., Chen, S., & Yang, J. (2020). What prompts users to click on news headlines? Evidence from unobtrusive data analysis. *Aslib Journal of Information Management*, 72(1), 49-66.
12. Kim, M.-g., & Jung, O. (2021). Critical analysis of discourse on reading discussion in newspaper articles. *Journal of Reading Research*, 59(5). <https://dx.doi.org/10.17095/JRR.2021.59.5>
13. Mehmood, S., Sulaiman, S., & Jabbar, A. (2022). Discourse analysis of the US War on Terror policy in Afghanistan. *Journal of Humanities, Social and Management Sciences (JHSMS)*. <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.jhsmss/3.1.34>
14. Pjesivac, I., Imre, I., Klein, L., & Petrov, A. (2023). Failure or reasonable move?: Portrayal of American pullout from Afghanistan in Russian and American international media. *Electronic News*, 17(1), 247-268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19312431231165931>
15. Rosdiana, R., Budiana, S., & Mahajani, T. (2023). Unraveling the language and ideology: A critical discourse analysis of Permendikbudristek No.30 Year 2021 in Republika Newspaper. *Journal of Pragmatics and Discourse Research*. <https://doi.org/10.51817/jpdr.v3i2.337>
16. Sahputra, D. (2021). Cabinet reshuffle news for 2020 in Van Leewun's critical discourse analysis. *Politic*, 1(1). <https://dx.doi.org/10.33258/POLIT.VIII.363>
17. Surya R, Y., Jufri, J., & Usman, U. (2023). Issues of the 2024 presidential candidates in online news texts: Critical discourse analysis of the Teun A Van Dijk Model. *Journal of Asian Multicultural Research for Social Sciences Study*. <https://doi.org/10.47616/jamrsss.v4i1.358>
18. Taj, S., Shaikh, B. B., & Meghji, A. F. (2019, January). *Sentiment analysis of news articles: a lexicon based approach*. In 2019 2nd international conference on computing, mathematics and engineering technologies (iCoMET) (pp. 1-5). IEEE.
19. Tourni, I., Guo, L., Daryanto, T. H., Zhafransyah, F., Halim, E. E., Jalal, M., ... & Wijaya, D. T. (2021). *Detecting frames in news headlines and lead images in US gun violence coverage*. In Findings of the Association for Computational Linguistics: 2021 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing, November 2021, pages 4037-4050, Punta Cana, Dominican Republic..
20. Van Dijk, T. A. (1988). *News as discourse*. Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.
21. Waheed, A., Rafique, A., & Toor, S. I. (2023). News coverage of US withdrawal from Afghanistan: A study of the Dawn, New York Post and Afghanistan Times (14th April – 31st August 2021). *Global Foreign Policies Review*. [https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2023\(vi-i\).01](https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2023(vi-i).01)
22. Wang J. (2023). Critical discourse studies eleven years on in China (from 2011 to 2021): A critical review. *Discourse Studies*, 25(3): 361-382.
23. Xin B. (2020). Critical discourse studies in the 21st century: Reflection and Prospect. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 4, 37-42.
24. Yan, Y. (2023). A corpus-based critical discourse analysis of news reports about China on COVID-19 in The New York Times. *International Journal of Education and Humanities*. <https://doi.org/10.54097/ijeh.v10i2.11479>
25. Yuan, Y., Wang, X., & Shen, J. (2021). Critical discourse analysis of reported speech in China and American media on the coverage of COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Science Research*, 3(5). <https://dx.doi.org/10.36922/ssr.v3i5.1260>
26. Zappettini, F., & Rezazadah, M. (2023). Communication strategies on Twitter: A critical discourse analysis of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2023.2280555>