Research on the Impact of Economic Participation in Countries along the Belt and Road on China's National Image

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Abstract

The national image is increasingly becoming an important criterion for evaluating a country's comprehensive strength, and governments around the world are paying more and more attention to the shaping and dissemination of the national image. However, with the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative and the deepening of China's economic participation in countries along the Belt and Road, China's international voice and influence seem to have improved significantly. With the continuous development of the Belt and Road policy, what impact has China's economic participation in countries along the Belt and Road had on China's national image? Is this impact positive or negative? Answering these questions is of great theoretical and practical significance for us to understand and improve China's national image. This paper attempts to take the countries along the Belt and Road as an example, by building a fixed effect model, to study whether China's economic participation in these countries can help improve China's national image, and to explore the specific mechanism of economic participation's impact on China's national image. At the same time, it analyzes whether this impact mechanism is different for different types of countries.

Keywords

Economic participation, the Belt and Road countries, national image.

1. Introduction

With the development of economic globalization, the economies of countries around the world are becoming increasingly interconnected. After the reform and opening up, the Chinese economy has undergone a significant transformation from importing to importing and going out. While the economy is growing rapidly, China's economic strategic goals have also shifted from achieving economic benefits to participating in future world economic construction, enhancing national image, and promoting diversity in world peace and development. As the world's second-largest economy, China's comprehensive national strength and international influence are constantly improving, and its economic participation in various countries is also expanding. Since the Belt and Road policy was put forward, from 2013 to 2021, the annual trade volume between China and countries along the Belt and Road has increased by 73%, from US $1.04 trillion to US $1.8 trillion, which has made an important contribution to promoting the economic development of the host country. At the same time, it can be seen that China's economic participation in countries along the Belt and Road is getting deeper and deeper.

The national image has always been of great concern. A good national image allows a country to gain more favor from people around the world and play a more important role on the international stage, while a negative national image is not conducive to a country's economic and cultural development and dissemination. Since the 21st century, with the development of media and the internet, China's national image as a world power has received more attention.

Since the reform and opening up, exchanges between China and other countries in various fields such as politics, economy, and culture have become increasingly close. China's national image and international influence have also been significantly enhanced through these exchanges, and its image as a major country has gradually been established. However, with the sustained high-speed growth of the Chinese economy, overseas media have begun to create "China threat theories" with various purposes, such as "China's rise" and "strong country strategy", hoping to spread such public opinion to damage China's national image and interfere with China's great rejuvenation. Therefore, how to effectively build and enhance the national image in the new situation of opening up to the outside world has become an important and urgent question to be answered, and the impact of national image on which aspects has gradually become a hot research topic for scholars.

National image is increasingly becoming an important criterion for evaluating a country's comprehensive strength, and governments around the world are paying more attention to the shaping and dissemination of national image. After the reform and opening up, the focus of China's development has been on economic and social development, and there is still great potential in promoting its national image. However, the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative and China's economic participation in countries along the Belt and Road seem to have greatly improved China's voice and influence. With the continuous development of the Belt and Road policy, how does China's economic participation in countries along the Belt and Road affect China's national image? Is the impression of China's country moving towards good or bad? Solving the above problems has important theoretical and practical significance for us to understand and improve China's national image. This paper attempts to build a benchmark model to study whether China's economic participation in the Belt and Road countries can improve China's national image, and explore the specific mechanism of economic participation's impact on China's national image, and further analyze whether there are differences in the role of this impact mechanism on different types of countries.

2. Theoretical Assumptions

2.1. The Impact of Exports on National Image.

China's exports to countries along the Belt and Road show that China is a country with strong economic strength and is capable of providing high-quality products and services, which helps to improve China's reputation in the international economic arena and is regarded as a reliable trading partner. Infrastructure construction: China's exports are usually accompanied by investment in infrastructure, such as port, railway, and road construction. This helps to improve the infrastructure level of countries along the route, improve connectivity, and promote economic development. China's export industry has created a large number of employment opportunities, which not only contribute to local employment in China, but also help countries along the route increase employment rates and improve social stability. China's export products may contain advanced technology and innovation, which helps promote technology dissemination and knowledge sharing, and enhance China's international reputation in the field of technology. If China's export products are of substandard or defective quality, it may damage China's international reputation and lead to a negative impression of Chinese products. China's export industry may involve environmental pollution and social responsibility issues, and if these issues are exposed, it may have a negative impact on China's international image. Trade disputes and disputes may have adverse effects on China's exports, leading to tension in international trade relations and potentially damaging China's international image.

To sum up, China's exports to countries along the Belt and Road have had a positive impact on China's national image in terms of economy, infrastructure, employment and technology

dissemination. However, close attention needs to be paid to issues such as quality, environment, and social responsibility to avoid potential negative impacts, and to strengthen international cooperation to improve economic relations with countries along the route. Exports have both positive and negative effects on national image. However, considering the low level of countries along the Belt and Road, China's trade with countries along the Belt and Road is highly complementary, and the poverty relief effect of high-quality and inexpensive Chinese exports on ordinary people in countries along the Belt and Road is more significant.

Based on the basic characteristics of countries along the Belt and Road, we propose the following assumptions: Hypothesis 1: China's exports to countries along the Belt and Road have a positive net impact on China's national image.

2.2. The Impact of Direct Investment on National Image.

China's direct investment in countries along the Belt and Road has had various impacts on China's national image. China's direct investment contributes to the economic development of countries along the Belt and Road. These investment projects usually come with the introduction of funds, technology, and management experience, which helps to improve the industry and infrastructure level of beneficiary countries. This can improve China's economic reputation in the region and be seen as an active economic partner. China's direct investment usually creates employment opportunities and helps to increase the employment rate of beneficiary countries. This is a positive factor for beneficiary countries, as it can improve their attitude towards China and national image. Investment projects in China are often accompanied by the dissemination of technology and management experience. This helps to improve the technological level and production capacity of beneficiary countries, and promotes the sharing of technology and knowledge. This can enhance China's reputation in the field of international technology and innovation. The Belt and Road Initiative emphasizes connectivity, and China's direct investment helps strengthen economic ties and cooperation between countries. This can improve international relations, enhance friendly international relations, and help enhance China's international image. Some investment projects in China may cause environmental and social problems, such as environmental pollution or community protests. These issues may damage China's international image and be seen as irresponsible investors. Some countries are concerned that China's investment projects may lead to debt problems as they need to repay high loans. This may trigger international controversy and have a negative impact on China's international image. Some investment projects may have transparency and compliance issues, and a lack of transparency and regulation may cause negative reactions. China needs to ensure that its investment projects comply with international standards to maintain its international reputation.

China's direct investment in countries along the Belt and Road has had a dual impact on China's national image. Successful investment projects can promote economic cooperation, increase employment rates, disseminate technology, and strengthen connectivity, thereby improving China's international reputation. However, China needs to handle investment projects with caution, addressing environmental, social, debt, and transparency issues to ensure that its investment behavior does not harm the international image. China's investment in countries along the Belt and Road is mainly concentrated in infrastructure construction, energy cooperation, cultural exchange and cooperation industries, which may significantly promote employment, and Chinese investment can show a positive impact.

Based on the basic characteristics of China's investment in countries along the Belt and Road, we propose the following assumptions: Hypothesis 2: China's direct investment in countries along the Belt and Road has a positive net impact on national image.

2.3.   The Impact of Confucius Institutes on National Image.

Confucius Institutes are educational institutions established by the Chinese government for the dissemination of Chinese language and culture, spread all over the world. Their existence and operation can have a certain impact on the national image. As a platform for spreading Chinese language and culture, Confucius Institutes contribute to strengthening international cultural exchange and understanding. By providing language courses, cultural activities, and resources, they help foreigners better understand China's language, history, culture, and values. The role of promoting cultural understanding can help improve China's national image, make foreigners better understand China, and reduce cultural barriers. Confucius Institutes usually collaborate with foreign universities to provide opportunities for foreign students to learn Chinese language and culture. This cooperation helps to strengthen educational exchanges between China and foreign countries, and increase the awareness of China among international students. At the same time, it also provides an international platform for the Chinese education system, which helps to enhance China's educational reputation. The existence of Confucius Institutes can be seen as a manifestation of the Chinese government actively promoting its soft power internationally. By investing in Confucius Institutes, the Chinese government can showcase its strong influence and resources in the cultural field. This helps to enhance China's status and image in the international community. Confucius Institutes can also play a certain role in the field of diplomacy. They may become platforms for diplomatic exchange and cooperation, helping to strengthen diplomatic relations between China and other countries. Diplomatic success often helps to improve a country's image. The Confucius Institute also faces some controversy and criticism, including issues related to academic freedom and the Chinese government's control over the operation of the institute.

In summary, the establishment of Confucius Institutes has both positive and negative effects on the national image. However, considering that African countries themselves have a relatively low level of industrialization, there is strong complementarity in Sino African trade, and the affordable Chinese exports have a more significant poverty alleviation effect on ordinary African people.

Based on the basic characteristics of African countries, we propose the following assumptions: Hypothesis 3: China's establishment of Confucius Institutes in countries along the Belt and Road has a positive net impact on the national image.

3. Theoretical Assumptions

3.1.   Model Settings.

To estimate the impact of China's non export and investment on its national image, as well as whether there is an interactive effect between export and investment on China's national image, we construct the following econometric models:

$$Avgtone_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta1 \, export_{i,t} - 1 + \gamma X_{i,t} + \lambda i + \mu t + \varepsilon_{i,t} \tag{1}$$

Among them, is the measurement of China's national image, which represents China's export level to African countries in the year, represents China's direct investment level to African countries in the year, represents all control variables, and represents the fixed effects of the country and year, respectively, and is a random perturbation term.

3.2.   Variable Description.

The dependent variable: GDELT (Global Event, Language, and Emotion Database) is a global event database designed to track and record events, news reports, and social media content that occur around the world. This database was created by computer scientist and data analyst Kalev Leetaru, with the aim of providing real-time data on a global scale to assist researchers,

government agencies, and businesses in gaining a deeper understanding of events happening around the world, their impacts, and related trends.

The GDELT system automatically collects information from thousands of global news sources, blogs, social media platforms, and other data sources, and then structures this information to identify and record key elements of events, such as time, location, organizations involved, and people. GDELT not only supports English, but also covers multiple other languages, enabling it to track global multilingual content. In addition to recording event information, GDELT also attempts to analyze the emotions and emotional tendencies of the event to assist researchers in better understanding the emotional background of the event. GDELT is an open data project that allows users to access and utilize their data resources for free through the internet. This allows researchers, journalists, and policymakers to use this dataset for various analyses and studies. However, it should be noted that the data quality and accuracy of GDELT may be limited by data sources and automated processing, so caution should be exercised when using it. The GDELT database has a wide range of applications, including international relations research, media analysis, conflict monitoring, trend prediction, and public opinion analysis. It provides researchers with a rich dataset for in-depth exploration of the dynamic nature and complexity of global events.

The acquisition of raw data can be directly downloaded from GDELT's official website, but this method is cumbersome and cannot obtain target data in a targeted manner. In order to improve the efficiency of data acquisition, this article uses the API interface provided by Google BigQuery to access the GDELT database through Python programming language for data download. Through Python coding, screen out relevant events related to China's participation in countries along the Belt and Road or countries along the Belt and Road, and obtain information such as QLDATE, Actor1Code, Actor2Code, QuadClass, GoldsteinScale of events. These pieces of information represent attributes such as the date of the event, the type of event, the country in which the event was initiated, the country in which the event was received, and the intensity value. After screening, this article obtained all time data from 65 countries worldwide and China between 2013 and 2021.

After obtaining the raw data, the Python programming language is used to batch process the obtained data year by year, standardize the dates, and sort the data table using dates as indexes. Due to the emphasis on the perspective of China's contribution to the world in the theoretical hypothesis, this article places greater emphasis on China's information as the agent of events. In the data preprocessing process, information data that is more in line with the research idea is merged into a table for subsequent processing and calculation. After data collection, the average annual mean value (AAT) of China and countries along the the Belt and Road was calculated, which was used as a measure of China's national image in other countries and recorded as the national image index Gna. We used Python code to batch calculate China's annual national image in various countries.

Core variables: Based on the theoretical research on economic participation mentioned earlier, this article divides economic participation into three parts: exports, investment, and tariff rates. Therefore, the core variables of this paper are China's exports to countries along the Belt and Road, China's direct investment in countries along the Belt and Road, and China's tariff rate to countries along the Belt and Road. It is the amount of China's exports to African countries and the amount of China's direct investment in African countries. Considering that the effect of external investment is not timely and the previous investment effect may continue to have an impact, the current and previous two years' investment flows are combined as investment data. And, referring to a similar method proposed by Kleinberg, we divide both core variables by the respective GDP of African countries, thereby linking China's economic activity with the economic scale of African countries. In addition, considering the bidirectional causal relationship between China's national image and China's exports and investments to Africa,

Africa's perception of China will have a reverse impact on Africa's acceptance of Chinese export products and investment enterprises. Moreover, the new China's outward direct investment was agreed upon a few months before the actual project began, and it will take some time for the public to feel its impact. Therefore, we will lag the core explanatory variables by one period each to avoid this reverse causal effect. Considering the comparability of GDELT news data, the selected period was 2015-2021. During this period, there were a total of 53 countries in Africa where China made direct investment. After excluding African countries not covered by GDELT, 41 African countries with both news coverage and direct investment were ultimately obtained.

Control variable: National level characteristic variables: per capita gross domestic product, used to measure a country's economic strength and wealth level; The degree of trade openness, which refers to the proportion of the total import and export volume of the host country to GDP, is logarithmically processed to indicate the country's dependence on international trade; Political system type, used to measure a country's political system and ideology, with values ranging from (-10, 10). The larger the value, the closer the country is to a Western democratic system; Whether it was once a colony of European and American countries and whether the official language was a European and American language, these two variables are used to measure the influence of a country's social and cultural heritage by its original suzerain country. If yes, it is 1, otherwise it is 0.

The relationship between relevant countries and China: Political relations, following the approach of Pang Xun (2019), using the GDELT database to extract daily interaction event data records between China and African countries for systematic analysis. As the GDELT database assigns a Goldstein score to each event to measure the degree of conflict or cooperation, the mean Goldstein score is used as a substitute variable for fluctuations in the relationship between the two countries; The amount of arms exports from China to other countries is used to measure the military relationship between the two countries; The difference in voting in the United Nations General Assembly is used to measure the distance between a country and China in terms of diplomatic stance; Diplomatic partnership is used to measure the strategic level of a country's relationship with China, where diplomatic relations are assigned a value of 1, comprehensive cooperative partnership is assigned a value of 2, strategic partnership is assigned a value of 3, comprehensive strategic partnership is assigned a value of 4, and comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership is assigned a value of 5; Geographical distance, the closer one is to China, the greater the influence of China may be, measured by the logarithm of the geographical distance between the two capitals.

The relationship between relevant countries and the United States: As a good national image contributes to China's success in the international arena, coupled with the current comprehensive suppression of China by the United States, the United States may engage in strategic competition with China in terms of national image in Africa, thereby affecting China's national image in African countries. Therefore, this article introduces the trade relationship between relevant countries and the United States, which refers to the proportion of bilateral trade volume between the country and the United States to the country's GDP, to measure the economic influence of the United States on African countries.

3.3. Empirical Result Analysis.

This article first conducted a multicollinearity test between variables, and the results showed that the maximum absolute value of the correlation coefficients of all explanatory variables was 0.4310, and the maximum variance inflation factor (VIF) was 1.69, which is much smaller than 5, indicating that there is no serious multicollinearity problem between variables. For the panel data constructed in this article, we set it as an individual time double fixed effects model and used the within group estimation method (Within). However, since this method eliminates the influence of non time-varying variables, to estimate the coefficients of non time-varying

variables, we also used the least squares dummy variable estimation method (LSDV). At the same time, to reduce the impact of heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation, a robust standard error clustering to the national level was adopted.

Table 1 reports the benchmark regression results. From the regression results of columns (1) - (3) in Table 1 with lagged exports to non exports as the core explanatory variable, regardless of whether control variables are included, the coefficients for non exports are significantly positive. This indicates that China's exports to Africa are beneficial to the improvement of China's national image, which is in line with theoretical and policy expectations, and validates research hypothesis 1. From the regression results of columns (4) - (6) in Table 2, with investment in Africa as the core variable with a lag of one period, it can be seen that investment in Africa will reduce local evaluations of China, confirming the research hypothesis (2). This is different from the previous research conclusion of Hanusch (2012). We speculate that in addition to differences in national image measurement methods and samples, it is also related to the rapid growth of China's investment in non regions in recent years, which has sparked more controversy. In terms of controlling variables, from the regression results in columns (2) and (3) and (5) and (6) of Table 2, it can be seen that African countries with higher trade openness have a more positive national image of China in that country; For the type of political system, the closer it is to a Western political system, the greater the difference in political system (ideology) between African countries and China, the more negative China's national image tends to be in that country; The coefficients of political, military, and diplomatic partnerships between African countries and China are significantly positive, indicating that good and close political, military, and diplomatic relations with China will significantly enhance the country's perception of China; The coefficients for both colonies and official languages are significantly negative, indicating that historical factors can penetrate a country's social and cultural context, thereby affecting the perception of China's national image. For example, when a country's official language is English or other European and American languages, its citizens are more likely to use American social media apps such as Facebook and Twitter, or frequently visit American websites such as CNN, which may make them more susceptible to negative views of China influenced by American public opinion.

Table 1 Benchmark regression results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	WITHIN	WITHIN	LSDV	WITHIN	WITHIN	LSDV
L.export	0.414***	0.398***	0.398***			
	(0.109)	(0.090)	(0.099)			
L.invest				-0.096*	-0.096*	-0.096*
				(0.051)	(0.049)	(0.054)
lnpgdp		-0.663	-0.663		-1.366	-1.366
		(1.791)	(1.969)		(1.768)	(1.943)
lnopen		1.208***	1.208**		1.306***	1.306***
		(0.416)	(0.458)		(0.414)	(0.455)
regime		-0.233***	-0.233***		-0.196***	-0.196***
		(0.041)	(0.045)		(0.043)	(0.047)
goldsteinscale		0.350***	0.350***		0.354***	0.354***
		(0.086)	(0.094)		(0.085)	(0.093)
military		0.002**	0.002**		0.002**	0.002**
		(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.001)	(0.001)
diplomacy		0.268	0.268		0.536	0.536
		(0.380)	(0.418)		(0.449)	(0.493)
relation		0.280***	0.280***		0.259***	0.259**
		(0.090)	(0.099)		(0.093)	(0.102)

colony			-2.740***			-2.585***
			(0.561)			(0.563)
offlang			-4.087***			-4.334***
			(1.367)			(1.332)
Constant	0.231	-4.572**	-147.897***	0.672***	-4.390**	-130.220***
	(0.196)	(1.882)	(23.703)	(0.174)	(1.881)	(23.654)
Time fixed effects model	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
National fixed effects model	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

Although the analysis results of benchmark regression indicate a significant positive coefficient for non exports and a significant negative coefficient for non investments, further research is needed to determine whether exports and outward investments complement each other in enhancing China's national image, as both serve the host country in different ways. For this purpose, we will put the interaction between investment and exports into the benchmark model for re estimation, and the estimated results are shown in Table 3. Due to the relatively small changes in the coefficients of the control variables, we mainly focus on the significance of the interaction term coefficients. Therefore, the estimated results of the control variables are no longer shown in Table 2. The interaction coefficient is significantly positive, indicating that exports and investments to Africa have complementarity in enhancing China's national image, which verifies hypothesis 3. With the increase in exports to Africa, the negative impact of investment on China's national image will be reduced, and exports will help offset the negative effects of investment.

Table 2 Benchmark regression results

	(1)	(2)	
	WITHIN	LSDV	
L.invest	-0.091***	-0.091***	L.invest
	(0.030)	(0.033)	
L.export	0.372***	0.372***	L.export
	(0.088)	(0.097)	
L.invest*export	0.021**	0.021*	L.invest*export
	(0.011)	(0.012)	
N	246	246	N
R^2	0.460	0.769	R^2
	(1)	(2)	
	WITHIN	LSDV	

In benchmark regression analysis, China's measure of exports to Africa is the proportion of exports to GDP, while its measure of investment in Africa is the proportion of the total investment flow in the current period and the first two years to GDP. In order to verify the robustness of the conclusions of this article, following Eichenauer's approach, the proportion of trade balance (export import) to GDP and the proportion of bilateral trade to GDP were used to replace the proportion of non export, investment stock to GDP, and investment flow to GDP as investment variables. The impact of these two factors on China's national image was re evaluated. The estimated results are shown in Table 8, where exports still have a significant positive impact on China's national image, while non investments still have a significant negative impact on China's national image, consistent with the benchmark regression results.

This indicates that changing the way China measures non exports and investments will not change the core conclusion of this article.

4. Conclusion

This article uses GDELT big data media to measure China's national image and empirically tests how China's exports and investments to non regions affect China's national image. The research results indicate that increasing exports to the host country enhances China's national image in that country, while the effect of outward investment is the opposite; From the perspective of the interaction effect between investment and export, exports and investment have complementarity in enhancing China's national image. In addition, African countries with higher trade openness and closer political, military, and diplomatic partnerships with China tend to have a positive view of China, while African countries with more Western democratic regimes, former colonies in Europe and America, and official languages in Europe and America tend to have a negative view of China; Against the backdrop of intensifying strategic competition between China and the United States, the close trade ties between a country and the United States will also worsen the country's image as a Chinese nation. On this basis, the article further analyzes the impact of various heterogeneity characteristics on China's national image. From the perspective of national income levels, exporting to low-income countries significantly improves the perception of this type of country towards China, while investing in low-income and high-middle income African countries significantly reduces China's national image. Looking at different industries, although only a few industries have significant estimation results, the estimation coefficients for most industries are positive, indicating to some extent that there is industry heterogeneity in the impact of exports on China's national image. The robustness of the conclusion in this article was confirmed by changing the measurement indicators for robustness testing.

This study has strong practical significance, as its results suggest that economic hard power cannot automatically transform into national soft power. Simply increasing exports and investments cannot effectively enhance China's national image in the host country and enhance soft power. If the feelings of the host country's people are not fully considered, it may sometimes have the opposite effect. When building a good national image, it is not only important to do well, but also to address the vicious public opinion war against China by strategic competitors and strive to achieve "well said" results. Based on the research results of this article, we propose four policy recommendations: firstly, considering the significant negative impact of investment in Africa, China should not only consider its own interests when investing in Africa, but also fully consider the economic, social, environmental, cultural and other needs of African people, strengthen quality supervision of investment in Africa, and more effectively establish a good national image through investment. In addition, considering that exports can help compensate for the negative impact of investment, it is possible to import more from the country where the investment is located in a targeted manner, so that the country can have the ability to import more popular Chinese products in that country; Secondly, when China exports to Africa, it can target low-income countries more specifically. This approach not only meets the needs of African people, but also benefits the enhancement of China's national image; Thirdly, gradually achieve structural adjustment of export products, increase exports in high-tech fields such as metal products, general machinery manufacturing, and transportation equipment manufacturing, and meet Africa's demand for high-tech products; Fourthly, considering that the public opinion war between the United States and the West against China will damage China's national image, it is necessary for China to further enhance its media presence in developing countries, spread Chinese values more through excellent Chinese cultural products, and make more foreign people like Chinese culture and

thus like China. In summary, the construction of China's national image involves various aspects and requires in-depth research across disciplines and dimensions. Our subsequent research will be further expanded.

Acknowledgements

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