Beyond a dyadic approach to public diplomacy: Understanding relationships in multipolar world

Aimei Yang, Anna Klyueva, Maureen Taylor

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ABSTRACT

This study advocates for a multipolar approach to public diplomacy within a public relations framework. This study applies semantic network analysis to understand Chinese public diplomacy efforts during the 2011 Libya crisis. Two theories, image building and relationship management, informed the analysis. Four important findings emerged from the analysis. First, the evidence suggests that the combination of image building and relationship management provides a comprehensive theoretical framework to understand public diplomacy communication efforts. Second, understanding triads of national relationships reveals nuances that cannot be captured by a dyadic approach to public diplomacy. Third, this study introduces a new method, semantic network analysis, to the research of public diplomacy, and reveals linguistic relationships and shared meaning manifested in the content of People’s Daily newspaper coverage of the Libya crisis. Finally, the findings support the pervasiveness of multipolar thinking. Public diplomacy in general, and soft balancing specifically, is about positioning a nation in a wider context and strategically using relationships to accomplish foreign policy goals.

The role of public diplomacy in international relations changed significantly at the end of the Cold War. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States and Russia cut their public diplomacy budgets significantly. China, on the other hand, increased its public diplomacy spending to craft a more nuanced strategy that included using international radio broadcasting and cultural diplomacy, sponsoring museum exhibits, building Chinese-language schools and establishing Confucius Institutes all over the world (Kurlantzick, 2007). Chinese public diplomacy efforts articulated the idea that China is growing into a preeminent power but supports a multipolar world (Kurlantzick, 2005). By engaging in comprehensive and elaborate public diplomacy campaigns, China ultimately seeks to boost its soft power to create and maintain economic ties, foster good relations with international organizations, encourage understanding, and improve its image abroad.

China’s growing economic and military power is a principle cause of change in Asia (Zhu, 2010). As the economic power of China expands, Chinese foreign policy has also been gradually adjusting to its new role in the current international system. China actively seeks to participate in international institutions and international affairs, especially in the reformation of the current international financial system (Zhu, 2010). To build an international image and boost its soft power, Chinese government has been investing billions of dollars in Africa and Asia, while at the same time trying to ease international fears about its rising influence (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 405 706 2835.
E-mail addresses: ayang1.udayton.edu (A. Yang), klyueva@ou.edu (A. Klyueva), mtaylor@ou.edu (M. Taylor).
Most public diplomacy research focuses on dyads of national relationships. Scholars have traditionally examined the interactions and programs of one nation that are directed toward another nation (Anderson, 2003; Zhang, 2006). Yet, in the 21st century, as the global economic and political landscape evolves, the study of national dyads may overlook the rich interplay of multiple relationships influencing the practice of public diplomacy. This paper precedes from the idea that the China–United States relationship involves, whether explicitly or implicitly, Russia. Any progress toward understanding the Sino–American relationship must consider their individual historic and current relationships with Russia. In 21st century public diplomacy, triads may be emerging as foundational relationships and thus a triangle of interactions should drive public relations approaches to public diplomacy.

In the first section, we seek to understand the public diplomacy of China, an emerging super power of the 21st century. The second section provides a brief discussion of the evolution of China’s public diplomacy strategies. Building on the case of the 2011 Libyan conflict as an event that prompted all three nations to publicly position themselves in response to the crisis, the third section explores how the government-run Chinese newspaper, People’s Daily, portrayed the interplay of relationships between China, Russia and the United States around the Libyan crisis. The People’s Daily provided insight not only into how China viewed its position in the resolution of the crisis but also how China viewed the positions of Russia and the United States in relation to its own. The language used in newspaper accounts and the portrayal of Chinese officials’ responses is treated as an outcome of Chinese public diplomacy communication efforts. The method used in the study is semantic network analysis. It allowed the research team to look for linguistic relationships and shared meaning manifested in the content of the People’s Daily that positions China in relation to the United States and Russia as a peaceful, rising power in the region. Finally, the last section of the paper reflects on the findings of the study and identifies next steps in formulating a relational approach to public diplomacy in a multipolar world.

1. Public diplomacy as public relations image cultivation

The term public diplomacy has been explored in the Communication literature for over 20 years and it is natural to study it within the theoretical domain of international public relations. Image cultivation is the most dominant theme in the public diplomacy literature. It is premised on the idea that governments attempt to cultivate a certain image of their nation for international publics and that public relations strategies and tactics help to build and promote that image. We argue that additional concepts such as relationship management, soft power, and soft balancing are alternative ways to extend theory building in public relations and public diplomacy.

The images that people hold of another nation really do matter. That is why nations spend resources on cultivating their image. Understanding public diplomacy as image cultivation first requires an understanding about how people learn about other nations. Boulding (1956) observed that individual behavior is largely dependent on our personal images. Communities, like individuals, base actions on images. Societal knowledge is based on a stock of shared national images, created by language and discourse, that helps people to understand themselves and other nations. Images provide people with interpretative frameworks. Citizens in one nation will make attributions about people from other nations even when they have not visited those countries. When many individuals discuss their personal images in different venues, they contribute to the creation of public images.

Kunczik (1997) showed how nations have consciously attempted to alter their own national images for both domestic and international audiences. Image cultivation is important because it is through these personal images of “other” nations and of their own nation that people make judgments about events in far away places (Kunczik, 1997). Personal experience (a visit to a nation or a friendship with someone from that nation) plus mediated messages (television, newspapers, radio, Internet) provide the stock of images that people hold of another nation.

Media images provide basic frames for how individuals will judge the actions and accomplishments of other countries. Mediated images are especially powerful when someone has not visited a nation. Mediated images constructed by state-owned media provide insight into how a government wants to be viewed in relation to other international actors. This mediated understanding of image cultivation has always focused on uncovering how public diplomacy efforts have been used to communicate with external publics. What is missing from the image cultivation approach is a recognition of the multiple, complex, ongoing relationships that have become the reality of 21st century public diplomacy. A more timely theoretical framework might be found within the public relations literature on relationship management.

2. Relationship management as a framework for public diplomacy

Ferguson (1984) proposed that public relations should be studied and practiced as a relationship management function. Ferguson’s idea has become the foundation for a recent theoretical shift in public relations research. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) explicated the concept of relationships from a variety of research literatures and tied the concept back to interpersonal communication, psychotherapy, inter-organizational research (IOR), and systems theory. At the heart of this article is the conceptualization of new ways to study relationships in public relations. Ledingham and Bruning (1998, 2000) and Ledingham (2003, 2006) extended Broom et al.’s work by quantifying various relationships and relationship outcomes. Over the past 13 years Ledingham, Bruning and others have measured various parts of “relationships” and have continued to refine relationship management theory. Relationship management theory provides starting point to understanding the
multipolar relationships among nations in post-Cold War public diplomacy efforts. We argue that the relationship management literature has both strengths and shortcomings when one attempts to apply it to the research of public diplomacy.

On the one hand, as suggested by Fitzpatrick (2007), an application of such public relations theories as relationship management to public diplomacy could facilitate theory building. Using public relations and public diplomacy tools such as relationships with other nations may balance out pressures from powerful countries like the United States and its unilateral decisions (e.g., war in Iraq). Looking at the complex relationship between China, the United States and Russia, this paper argues that to achieve a balance of power (and to avoid hegemonic rule) it is important to rely on public diplomacy as a tool of soft balancing.

On the other hand, in much of the relationship management literature, the unit of analysis is usually the relationship between the organization and the public (Grunig & Huang, 2000). There is a dyadic framework used for understanding relationships in this literature. We believe that public diplomacy in a multipolar world extends beyond dyadic relationships.

Therefore, in this paper, we combine the image building approach and the relationship management literature to argue that nations use multipolar thinking to achieve soft balancing. We argue that multipolar thinking is so pervasive in public diplomacy that it also affects nations’ image building strategies. The next section introduces the concept of soft balancing and discusses its implications in the context of the current study.

3. Understanding relationships through soft balancing

Balance of power refers to the situation in international relations when there is stability between competing forces (Fry, Goldstein, & Langhorn, 2004). In an ideal world, the balance of power prevents any one nation from becoming strong enough to force its will upon the rest (Waltz, 1979). According to Pape (2005), when the balance of power cannot be achieved in a pure form, particularly when the world has one military and economic superpower, rising powers and other nations can resort to “soft balancing”. In this case, soft balancing refers to “actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use non-military tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies” (Pape, 2005, p. 10). These actions may include territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, or economic strengthening. According to Pape (2005), soft balancing has been a prominent feature of the post-Cold War world. Pape (2005) suggested that soft balancing is an important strategy for what he called “second-ranked powers” or countries whose economic and political advancement put them into the category of rising powers (e.g., Russia and China). They are called status seekers and strive to counterbalance U.S. global influence. Status-seeking actions are often symbolic and have a goal of altering national images. The status-seeking actions can also take the form of soft balancing against the U.S. primacy. According to the logic of soft balancing, China and Russia need to band together to coordinate solutions to the problems they face in dealing with the unipolar United States (Pape, 2005).

Therefore, managing relationships with other rising powers to counteract the U.S. dominance can be one of the tools of soft balancing. Cooperation between Russia and China in important matters can cause a change in the existing world order. A good example is the situation with Libya and divided UN Security Council vote on a no fly zone over Libya. Nevertheless, to think the collaboration between China and Russia is a dyadic relationship would be naïve. As suggested by the literature, China collaborates with Russia with the U.S. in mind. By illustrating the delicate position of China in the Libya crisis, we try to demonstrate how the relationship management literature could inform our understanding of nations’ image building strategies. Soft balancing is the goal of such diplomatic strategies. The next section will examine the positions of Russia, China, and the United States on the 2011 Libya crisis. The public diplomacy efforts can help us to assess the soft balancing in actions of status seeking countries such as China and Russia and to better understand the complex interplay of the three nations’ relationships.

3.1. The evolving public diplomacy strategies of China

In the late 1960s to 1970s, under Mao Zedong’s rule, decision-making in China was highly centralized. Mao's approach to public diplomacy was highly personalized and was characterized by its bombastic language and communism propaganda, isolation from the international community, and economic autarky (Cohen, 1973; Wang & Chang, 2003).

In the 1980s, Deng initiated the first major diplomatic transformation in China. At the heart of this policy reformation was the idea of “Tao Guang Yan Hui” (Deng, 1990). Tao Guang Yan Hui originally described a Confucian lifestyle, according to which a person should have a clear understanding of his condition and wait for the right time to take actions. Tao Guang Yan Hui also suggests that a person should work hard to build up his power while acting modestly and humbly in society. Through this approach, China significantly increased its connections and participation in international governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and thus gradually changed its isolationist position.

Over the years, China’s public diplomacy strategies have evolved together with its changing international role and domestic political system (Taylor, 2006). After Mao and Deng, the political decision-making process of the Chinese government gradually changed from a highly personalized to an increasingly institutionalized approach and has achieved a new level of sophistication. A small leading group (Guojia Anquan Lingdao Xiaozu) was formed to coordinate different key policy issues limiting the power of any individual or party factions. As China began playing a more engaging and constructive role in the international community, its diplomatic strategies also became more flexible. The Department of Foreign Ministry now
makes major decisions about China’s foreign policy, including hiring think tanks and experts to draft policy and provide consultation.

China’s diplomacy aims at rebuilding China’s image, ensuring national security, promoting economic interests and creating a favorable environment for its long-term development (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003). China uses the People’s Daily newspaper to communicate its self-image and frame international understanding of its role in the world order. Russia and the United States are often featured in these stories thus providing a lens through which to see how China understands itself in relation to the other two powers.

4. The multipolar relationships of the China–U.S.–Russia triangle


In 1978, China and the United States established an official diplomatic relationship. Chinese presidential visits in 1985 and 1997 opened up a new era in the Sino–U.S. relationship. However, in 1999, the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia severely damaged the bilateral relationship. During George W. Bush’s first term, the relations between the United States and China had improved. However, during his second term frictions between Washington and Beijing arose again (Dumbaugh, 2006). In 2011, President Hu jingtao visited the United States to promote a bilateral relationship and a long-term cooperation. Yet, the Sino–American relationship can still be described as complex and multi-faceted.

In the post-Cold War era, security concerns, trade and human rights issues are major challenges for Sino–American relationship. In terms of security, Taiwan remains the most sensitive issue that can potentially lead to conflict (Friedberg, 2005). China’s expanding military budget also concerns Washington. In addition, the official dispute over the trade balance and currency values of RMB raise concerns on both sides. Finally, the Chinese government is unhappy with the Washington’s accusations of its human rights violations. Beijing classifies this topic as a domestic issue not open to international discussion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2010a).

At the same time, mutual interests closely tie China to the United States. On the one hand, China is America’s second-largest trading partner, third-largest export market and the biggest source of imports. China holds a total amount of $900 billion of U.S. Treasury securities, which makes China the largest foreign holder of U.S. debt (Morrison, 2010). Many observers argue that the most significant bilateral international relationship in the 21st century is the one between China and the United States (Friedberg, 2005). A stable cooperation between the two countries could provide sustainable economic growth, peaceful resolutions of longstanding regional disputes and management of global problems. Yet, when considering the China–U.S. relationship, they are not sitting at a table for two. Russia has a seat at the table as well.

4.2. China–Russia relationship

The bilateral relationship between China and Russia reached its apex during the Cold War. However, in the late 1950s and early 1960s the close Sino–Soviet relationship split. In the early 1990s, Russian president Boris Yeltsin adopted pro-western policies while eagerly seeking a balance between the West and alignment with China. In the post-Cold War world, the China–Russia relationship improved significantly (Hitt, Ahlstrom, Dacin, Levitas, & Svobodina, 2004).

When Putin assumed office in 1999, China and Russia reached a settlement for their shared 4300-km border. Both sides supported policies of non-interference with domestic politics, specifically with regard to Taiwan and Chechnya. China and Russia also became allies on the issues of Iran and Iraq and collaborated in their efforts to limit the U.S. influence in Central Asia (Wishnick, 2001).

Although the political collaboration between China and Russia has become closer, their economic relations remained relatively unfruitful. Russia placed a strict visa policy on Chinese immigrants, which also halted the development of bilateral trade. The Sino–Russian relationship has achieved significant improvements. There are, however, unresolved issues to the long-term development of this bilateral relationship. The lagging economic cooperation has created tension on both sides. Further, the Chinese migration to the Russian Far East, described by Russian media as “quiet expansion” also inflamed social tension in the area (Wishnick, 2001). Chinese and Russian interests also diverge on issues such as conflicts on the Korean Peninsula, Japan’s role in Asia, and relationships with Central Asia.

In their calculation of the post-Cold War foreign policy, China and Russia developed their relationship with the United States in mind. The partnership between China and Russia is a collaborative response to U.S. hegemony. Over the years, American policies on national missile defense (NMD), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion, and the Kosovo intervention pushed China and Russia into strategic partnership and greater military cooperation (Wishnick, 2001). The two countries embarked on their joint efforts to shape a more inclusive multipolar international system.

Dittmer (2000) noted that China, Russia and the United States form a strategic triangle that emphasizes the balance of power (Dittmer, 2000). This triangle has exerted a considerable influence on the international system and will continue to be an important part of the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century. The uprising in Libya in Spring 2011 provides a relevant case study to explore how, if anyhow, a triangular model of public diplomacy may be evolving. It provides a look at the soft balancing and public diplomacy efforts in a multipolar world.
5. A test to the China–U.S.–Russia relationship: Libya’s 2011 uprising

The situation in Libya during spring 2011 provided an excellent opportunity to study how the three countries engaged in public diplomacy and media relations. China and Russia opposed any international intervention in Libya while the United States participated as a member of the NATO-led coalition supporting the rebels. There are many ways to potentially examine the three-way relationship among China, Russia and the United States. The research team decided to test one small part of the relationship by studying how China’s public diplomacy positioned China in relation to the United States and Russia regarding the Libyan crisis.

5.1. Relationships with Libya

Libya is an appropriate case study because it had enacted different relationships with China, Russia and the U.S. The relationship between Russia and Libya has a long history. Russia has a web of interests in Libya, starting from arms sales to the investments in oil industry (Kipp, 2011). However, the outbreak of civil war in Libya jeopardized Russia’s profits (Kipp, 2011).

China also had a history of relations with Libya. In 1978, China and Libya established an official diplomatic relationship (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2010b). In general, the political and economic cooperation between China and Libya dates back several decades. Over the years, China has poured a large amount of money into Libya, along with other African countries, and implemented many projects (Wang, 2011). In fact, Gaddafi’s government had relied on Chinese expertise for Libya’s housing, energy, communication, transportation and other sectors (The Tripoli Post, 2010).

Since 2006, Libya’s official ties with Taiwan have complicated the Chinese–Libyan relationship. Although the Chinese Foreign Ministry urged Libya to cease official ties with Taiwan, China’s opposition had limited results (ChinaView.cn, 2006). In addition, when Libya sent a low-ranking representative to the third FOCAC (Forum on China–Africa Cooperation) meeting held in Beijing, it created a significant stir between China and Libya. Although the relations had been a bit strained over Taiwan, many people were surprised when China ratified UN Security Council Resolution 1970 that imposed immediate sanctions on the Gaddafi’s government.

5.2. Evolving relationships

Sanctions are one thing in international relations but using military force is another matter. It came as no surprise when Russia, along with China, abstained during the vote by the UN Security Council to enforce a “no-fly zone” over Libya. Domestically, Russia had a mixed reaction to the situation in Libya. President Dmitry Medvedev put responsibility for the tragedy in Libya on the shoulders of the Gaddafi government (RIA Novosti, 2011). However, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was not positive in his response to the no-fly zone (RIA Novosti, 2011).

As a result of continuing unrest in Libya, Russia has offered itself as a mediator in the conflict. Russian Foreign Affairs Minister told the media that Russia would not support a new Security Council resolution because it would lead to further escalation of the civil war and further interference from the outside in Libya. However, Moscow would support a resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire, a stop to all violence, and for the two Libyan sides to start negotiations immediately (Socr, 2011). China made similar diplomatic moves in the UN Security Council. It did not use its veto right against the “no-fly zone” resolution. Instead, it abstained, held discussions with representatives from both sides, and made diplomatic calls to Gaddafi and the rebels to negotiate an end to the fighting.

Gaddafi’s position as a party in the negotiations was essentially eliminated when the International Criminal Court in The Hague sought arrest warrants for Gaddafi, his son and brother-in-law on crimes against humanity in mid-May 2011. May 2011 marked the end of Gaddafi as a legitimate leader of Libya who could continue negotiations.

During summer of 2011, while Gaddafi was in hiding, interested nations formed the Libya Contact Group. The Libya Contact Group included members of NATO, the European Union and the Arab League. Russia and China refused to participate. The Contact Group met and agreed to recognize the NTC as the legitimate representatives of Libya. By September 2011, Gaddafi was still in hiding and groups of rebels were running different parts of the country. On October 20, 2011 Gaddafi’s convoy was attacked by NATO warplanes. He was captured, beaten, and killed by NTC forces.

This Libyan case study provides a unique opportunity to study how soft power, soft balancing and the three-part relationship were enacted. There were multiple opportunities for China to enact public diplomacy efforts during the crisis. The next section outlines the methods used to study Chinese public diplomacy.

6. Method of the study

6.1. Semantic network analysis

The idea of semantic network can be traced back to philosopher Charles S. Peirce (Lehman, 1992). Semantic network analysis helps to illustrate positions and principles shared among different perspectives, documents and actors. The idea is that when nation states address issues that are of international interest, different public diplomacy strategies may affect governments’ use of language and framing strategies. For countries such as China, where the ruling political party directly

controls media such as the *People's Daily*, the government's position may be directly reflected in the news coverage. Even in countries such as the U.S., where there is greater diversity in terms of international news, mainstream news agencies often base news stories on the government’s press releases or official statements (Entman, 2004).

This paper examined the Chinese perspective on the crisis using the *People's Daily*, the “mouthpiece of the CCP Central Committee” (Huang, 2003, p. 449). The *People's Daily* directly reports to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and has over 70 agencies around the world. Besides publishing domestically, the *People's Daily* also circulates in over 80 countries and regions (*People's Daily*, 2011). The *People's Daily* is an important channel for China's public diplomacy because it actively initiates public diplomacy programs. In recent years, the *People's Daily* organized international conferences and exchange programs such as “China–Japan Cultural Studies Conference”, “China and East Asian Communication and Media Exchange Conference”, and “China, South Korea and Japan Media Conference”. Since 2000, the *People's Daily* annually initiates exchange programs with media practitioners from over 50 countries (*People's Daily*, 2011).

6.2. Research questions

This paper seeks a multi-polar perspective to public diplomacy. The multi-polar perspective argues that to understand China’s public diplomacy, it is important to examine how China understands and interprets relationships, especially the roles of other superpowers such as the United States and Russia, in international events.

This case study examines how the Chinese government used its media outlet, the *People's Daily*, for image building and conveying the essence of China’s public diplomacy strategy. As China increasingly recognized the importance of building its national image and marketing its worldview, media has played an important role in China's public diplomacy. For example, the *People's Daily* regularly publishes diplomatic discussions by analysts. The *People's Daily* and other party media also publish government white papers on controversial international topics to articulate the government’s position. The research team treated the *People's Daily* as a window to understand how one member of the triangle (China) viewed its role in the Libyan crisis and how it viewed itself in relation to the other two nations. Semantic network analysis allowed the research team to make sense of how actors discuss the world according to their worldviews and beliefs in the media coverage of the crisis (Padovani, Musiani, & Pavan, 2010). The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How did the *People's Daily* cover the relationships of major countries and organizations involved in the Libyan conflict?

This paper seeks to better understand public diplomacy by understanding how one nation linguistically positions its stance on the world stage, especially in a crisis, in relation to other key relational partners. We can gain insight into its motivations underlying public diplomacy efforts. Ego-network analysis in semantic network analysis helps to reveal what words tend to co-occur with focal words (Padovani et al., 2010). This method helps to map a network of words within which the focal word is most likely to appear together or close by.

RQ2: What is the structure of the ego-network of the word: China?
RQ3: What is the structure of the ego-network of the word: USA?
RQ4: What is the structure of the ego-network of the word: Russia?

Finally, it is useful to examine how the three ego-networks (China, USA and Russia) are connected within this structure. In other words, attention should be directed to understanding how the three ego-networks link together and what words help to connect the three networks. Patterns will emerge that tell a deeper story about how China perceived itself and its relationships in the resolution of the Libyan crisis. Will the words connect to similar words or do they share a significant amount of overlap? Therefore, the last proposed question is:

RQ5: How do the three ego-networks connect together in their understanding of the Libya situation?

6.3. Sample

The search function of the China Core Newspapers Full-Text Database was used to download the sample. The keywords: *Libya* (the word for Libya in Chinese) was used. The search was restricted to the period from January 1, 2011 to May 30, 2011. The start date was selected because January 2011 was the beginning of the Arab Spring in Tunisia. The research team selected the last day of May 2011 as the end of the study because the International Criminal Court in The Hague announced its intention to seek warrants for the arrest of Gaddafi; his son Saif; and his brother-in-law for crimes against humanity. The announcement essentially ended any legitimacy of the Gaddafi government as a negotiating partner in resolving the crisis and changed the tone of public diplomacy efforts.

The search results indicated that there was no coverage about Libya in January 2011. Overall, between February 2011 and May 2011, there were a total of 72 articles about Libya in *People's Daily*. There were 20 articles in February, 40 articles in March, 8 articles in April, and 3 articles in May. Starting from June 2011, the news coverage shifted to focusing on the reaction of the international community and the situation on the ground of Libya and thus the stories were eliminated from the study. A preliminary examination of these 72 articles detected four major themes: (1) how the Chinese government and
Chinese army helped Chinese workers be evacuated from Libya; (2) analyses of international politics and interests in Libya; (3) statements of Chinese government officials on the Libyan crisis; and (4) description of the situation in Libya (see Table 1). Among the four themes, themes 2 and 3 deal with China’s position in this international crisis, and provided important insights on the understanding of China’s public diplomacy. Therefore, the 33 articles that fell under the themes 2 and 3 were further analyzed. To focus on China’s description of its relationship with the United States and Russia, a further examination of these articles identified 17 articles that referenced both the United States and Russia in the news about China’s position on Libya.

6.4. Research procedures

In this study, semantic network analysis is applied to examine the co-occurrences of certain words. When there is a strong link among words, their chance of co-occurrence rises (the value range from zero and up) (Danowski, 1993). Given the multilingual context of the current study, the research team followed recommendations of Kwon, Barnett, and Chen (2009) and utilized the ZIPF software for analysis (Elbirt Technology, 2011). ZIPF bases its algorithm on the co-occurrence model and can adapt to a multilingual context.

The first step in this research design was to adjust the original texts for analysis. The revision included several steps. First, date, numbers, suffixes, pronouns, conjunctions and connectives were removed from the texts, thus only leaving nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Second, for languages that have tense and gender, different tense and gender of the same word are replaced by the present tense and the original form of the word. In addition, different expressions of the same words were unified. For example, country, nation and state were regarded as the same words. Fourth, the titles and article numbers were removed. Finally, the texts were saved using UTF-8 unicode format to be fed into ZIPF (see Table 2).

In the second step, texts were processed using ZIPF to create the co-occurrence matrices. The created matrices were then run through UCINET (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002) to create visualization of the networks of words and calculate the centralities of each word. This method demonstrates which words are linked and detects relationships among words and topics. The end goal was to see how China positioned itself in the crisis through the People’s Daily.

7. Results and discussion

This section reports the results of the semantic network analysis and also discusses the findings through the theoretical lens of relationship management and public diplomacy. RQ1 inquired about the ways in which the People’s Daily covered the relationships of major countries and organizations involved in the Libyan issue. After performing the analysis through ZIPF,

### Table 1
Coverage in the People’s Daily.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Description</th>
<th>February</th>
<th>March</th>
<th>April</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Chinese Workers Evacuation</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2: International Interests</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Statements of China’s Position</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 4: Situation in Libya</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>72</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2
Example of text revision.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original text</th>
<th>After adjustment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>本报开罗 4 月 13 日电 ( 记者黄培昭 ) 卡塔尔 多哈 行动 利比亚 联络小组 会议</td>
<td>协调 利比亚 行动 利比亚 联络小组 会议</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>多哈消息：旨在协调各方对利比亚行动的 “利比亚联络小组”会议 4 月 13 日首次在卡塔尔首都多哈举行，会议由卡塔尔和英国联合主持。据报道，有 20 多个国家和组织的代表出席会议，其中包括联合国秘书长 潘基文，北约秘书长 拉斯穆森 英国 外交大臣黑格 美国 德国 西班牙 阿拉伯国家 代表</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>北约秘书长 拉斯穆森 英国 外交大臣 黑格 美国 德国 西班牙 阿拉伯国家 代表</td>
<td>北约秘书长 拉斯穆森 英国 外交大臣 黑格 美国 德国 西班牙 阿拉伯国家 代表</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the words were listed according to their frequency. The total number of distinctive words analyzed was 1043. Among these words, Libya (n = 166), U.S. (n = 106), Muammar Gaddafi (n = 58), European Union (n = 43), and nations (n = 23) were the five most frequently used words. These were countries, people and concepts emphasized in the coverage of the People’s Daily.

The relationships among countries can be seen through the semantic structure of the text. The analysis shows that Libya is clearly at the center of attention of many countries. China is one of the countries solely linked with Libya (see Graph 1). Overall, it has no other relationships. The structure suggests that China is one of many countries that expressed concerns over the Libyan issue, while the United States is at the center closely connected with European countries and the Middle East. Finally, Russia is portrayed as a country that has many interests in the regions of Middle East and North Africa.

It appears that the Chinese framing of the Libyan conflict was frequently discussed in relation to how China communicated with Russia, the United States, as well as Romania, South Korea, Czech Republic, Italy, Australia, and Germany. Notably, the data show that China holds a relatively isolated place within the network, being linked directly only to Libya. Chinese discussions of Russia, on the other hand, are often linked to Middle East, North African countries, Libya, and NATO. Such semantic network makes intuitive sense as Russia has broader interests and concerns in the situation with Libya. Aside from wide economic and political interests in the region, Russia criticized the expansion of NATO and appropriateness of its role in the Libyan conflict. The fact that the UN did not appear on the network as one of the most frequent words in the semantic structure suggests that the conflict was mostly discussed in relation to the U.S.-led NATO alliance’s involvement in the military activities in Libya.

When looking at the position of the United States in this semantic network, one can see that the Chinese most often linked the U.S. to Iraq, Israel, Russia and NATO, without any direct connection to China. When combined with the text, the connection between Russia, the United States and NATO becomes clearer through Russia criticizing U.S. and NATO military actions.

The data suggest that China does not play an important role in the network. This finding is very interesting given the fact that these stories are collected from a Chinese-state media outlet, which should have covered this issue from a more Chinese ethno-centric perspective. Russia is portrayed as a country that has many interests in the regions of Middle East and North Africa, while China is simply one of many countries that expressed concerns over the Libyan conflict. In general, China appears to purposefully keep itself out of general discussion of the conflict in Libya while Russia and the United States appear to be leading different positions on Libyan conflict. The People’s Daily did not devote significant space for placing China in the middle of rhetorical battle over U.S.-led NATO intervention in Libya. Yet, China has interests.

To learn more about the Chinese interests and its role in the Libyan crisis, RQ2 inquired about the structure of the ego-network surrounding the word: China. The analysis found that words closely linked with China included: concerned, turmoil, cease-fire, deputation, resolution, Libyan issue, and freeze [of assets]. This structure (see Graph 2) demonstrated how China proposed solutions to the Libyan conflict and illustrated China’s call for a cease-fire. Through the use of words
such as deputation (the act of representing another group), China positioned itself as a neutral party that has both the power and the means to negotiate peace and cease-fire.

By taking the position of non-intervention, China capitalized on the momentum to build up its soft power by standing close to the international community to resolve the conflict in Libya. China also showed concerns over the social turmoil in Libya. Through the People's Daily, the Chinese government conveyed their preferences for peaceful resolution to the Libyan issue. When compared with the Russian position, China did not position itself as the opposition to the United States and NATO. Instead, it positioned itself as one of the members of international community that is concerned with the bloodshed and its frozen assets in the region. China wanted to be seen by the world as the country that actively seeks a solution and adheres to the strategy of non-intervention. This position is consistent with China's policy described as the “peaceful rise”.

State controlled media outlets not only construct the image of the government that they serve, but also construct the images of other nations in relation to the home country. RQ3 inquired about the structure of the ego-network of the word: United States. The analysis (see Graph 3) showed that the People's Daily connected a much larger group of words to the United States. For example, terms such as military, invasion, anti-American sentiment, crisis, death, step down, cold, exploit, interests, turmoil were all closely linked with the U.S. The People's Daily showed that the United States was deeply involved in the Libyan crisis. A close examination of the textual data suggests that these words fell into four themes: (1) military action (history, invasion, crisis), (2) the social consequence of U.S. military action (e.g., social turmoil), (3) the United States’ motivation (e.g., global power, exploit), and (4) the reaction from the international community (e.g., anti-American sentiment).

The People's Daily did not forget Russia in its consideration of the Libyan crisis. Indeed, Russia was frequently discussed in relation to the Libyan crisis. RQ4 inquired about the structure of the ego-network of the word: Russia. The analysis (see Graph 4) showed that many discussions of Russia were closely linked with words such as Libya, global, NATO, military, Middle East, and North African countries. This structure suggests that China perceives Russia to have considerable geopolitical interests in the region. China believes that the Russian position on the Libyan crisis is motivated by the desire to prevent and condemn any U.S. unilateral actions in the region. As Russia tries to restore its superpower status (hence the word “global”), its foreign policy not only includes cooperation with the United States but also counterbalancing in regions like the Middle East and North Africa. It is interesting that China, as another status-seeking country, was not semantically connected to Russia in the People's Daily news coverage of the Libyan crisis. Russia was portrayed as counterbalancing the U.S. influence, whereas China portrayed itself as a neutral and isolated power seeking peaceful conflict resolution. This finding supports previous reports on China's position in the balance of power game – by downplaying its desires to become a prominent power in the region China contrasts itself with an implicit portrayal of the United States as a unilateralist and portrayal of Russia as a country wanting to regain its superpower status.

The semantic analysis showed how the three different nations were featured in the news stories in the People's Daily. Finally, RQ5 explored how the three ego-networks (see Graph 5) were connected and sought to identify which words help to connect the three networks. The findings suggest that the ego-network analysis of the three nodes show that the People's Daily clearly portrayed the U.S., Russia and China as having three different positions. The United States is clearly located in the center of the issue, and is connected with words such as war, crisis, military actions, and anti-American sentiment. Russia connects with North African countries, NATO, military and Libya. Russia is in a position of protesting U.S. actions and the People's Daily suggests that Russia's policy is motivated by its own interests. The People's Daily coverage creates a different picture for China. In its coverage, China is concerned with the Libyan issue, and works with the international community to reach peaceful resolution to the crisis. The words that connect the United States with China are: Libya, Libyan
issue, concern, freeze, resolution, Gaddafi, and turmoil. Based on the content of the full texts, China is concerned by the social consequences of American actions. The words that connect Russia with the United States revolve around Russian interests in the region: Northern African countries, NATO, global, military and Libya. In reference to the content of the full text, it shows that Russia is concerned by the military actions taken by the U.S. and other NATO countries. The structure also shows that Russia has a tight relationship with Northern African countries. The major word that connects China and Russia is Libya. When interpreting this structure in the context of the full coverage, it shows China and Russia share common ground in their attitude toward the Libyan issue, and their positions are distinctively different from that of the United States. The implications of these findings for understanding a relational approach to public diplomacy are discussed next.
8. Conclusions and implications for public diplomacy in a multipolar world

8.1. Image-building and relationship management: two valuable theoretical frameworks

This study critically reviews the image building and relationship management literature, and argues that both bodies of literature have value for public diplomacy research. First, image building may continue to dominate public diplomacy strategies because of the importance of image and the lack of feasibility for nations to employ other relationship building strategies with mass global audiences. As illustrated in our study, China carefully crafted its image through mass media coverage. The party media framed China as a responsible nation that actively participated in international affairs. Next, the study demonstrates the value of relationship management literature to inform our understanding of nations’ image building strategy. As was found in this study, although a Chinese party media covered the news, China was not in the center of the coverage. In contrast, China positioned itself in relation to other powerful actors such as the U.S. and Russia, and the coverage even deliberately pushed Russia into the spotlight to achieve soft balancing. This positioning served China’s national interest.

8.2. Moving beyond the dyadic approach to relationship management

In much of the relationship management literature, the unit of analysis for research has focused on the relationship between the organization and the public. We believe that the public diplomacy in a multipolar world extends beyond dyadic relationships. Public diplomacy is more than a dyadic relationship between a country and the publics in another nation. Public diplomacy in general, and soft balancing specifically, is about positioning a nation in a wider context and strategically using relationships to accomplish foreign policy goals.

This study adopts a triadic approach to examine how China positions itself in relation to the United States and Russia on the Libyan crisis. It framed its efforts from a perspective of its rising soft power. The findings showed that a public relations approach to public diplomacy must go beyond dyads to understand relationships in a multipolar world. In the international relationship arena, there are many other important triads. It would be naive to believe that other triads are not influencing...
international relations. For instance, Europe has shown great leadership on some issues and emerging blocks of nations may eventually become players in a multipolar world. We hope this paper prompts such considerations. Future studies can extend the approach to examine other triads such as China–Japan–U.S., or U.S.–Europe–Middle East.

The relationship management literature, a potentially fruitful area of research in this topic, needs to evolve to capture the complexities of triads. As was demonstrated in this study, a triadic approach captures more nuances in relationship building and management. China’s soft balancing strategy against the U.S. would not make much sense without Russia in the picture.

8.3. The value of semantic network analysis to public diplomacy research

The findings of this pilot study demonstrated that the semantic network of the coverage from the People’s Daily is highly consistent with the directions of China’s public diplomacy: it wants to be seen as a peaceful rising power. This study illustrates the value of semantic studies to understanding the underlying worldview and purpose of media texts. Sometimes, because of the consideration of national secrets or national policy, it can be difficult to obtain data that can help researchers to understand public diplomatic policies. Semantic network analysis offers a viable approach to this issue and helps to broaden research methods that are available.

Further, this study confirms the powerful influence of public diplomatic policy on semantic relationships and the spatial structure of language. Findings are consistent with other studies in the field, and suggest that semantic structures are not random. Rather, semantic structures, as representations of the relationships that connect words and concepts, could demonstrate the worldview or belief systems behind texts.

8.4. The pervasiveness of multipolar thinking in public diplomacy

This study also reveals the value of the multipolar approach to understanding public diplomacy. As reflected through the media coverage, the formation of China’s public diplomatic strategies demonstrates a profound influence of the multipolar thinking. In other words, China creates its national image in reference to the images of Russia and the United States. In the Libyan issue, the Chinese media framed Russia as another important antagonist to the U.S. that had a key role to play in resolving the crisis. In the coverage, China assumed the role of a responsive and active member of the international community and actively sought peaceful solutions to the Libyan issue. China shows no direct conflict with the United States and NATO but portrays Russia in its old role as an adversary to the U.S. China sides with Russia by criticizing the military actions taken by United States and NATO. It is clear that multipolar thinking, whether implicitly or explicitly, directed the strategic position of China. Future studies should compare the strategic position of the three countries, and examine if the multipolar approach also significantly influences the U.S. and Russia’s public diplomacy efforts.

Further, the current study focuses on how public diplomacy has been used to achieve soft balancing. Although soft balancing is an important function of public diplomatic strategies, there are many other goals that nations may attempt to accomplish with their public diplomacy. Future studies should apply this approach to examine the function of public diplomacy in other contexts.

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References


