

Article

Emotional Geopolitics of War: Disparities in Russia–Ukraine War Coverage Between CGTN and VOA

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Abstract

This study conducts a comparative content analysis of media coverage of the Russia–Ukraine war by China Global Television Network (CGTN) and Voice of America (VOA), focusing on emotional content and framing strategies. Analyzing 4997 articles from CGTN and 4975 articles from VOA, the study examines how each outlet emphasizes emotions such as neutrality, anger, fear, and hope. The findings reveal that CGTN predominantly adopts a neutral and analytical tone, prioritizing geopolitical implications; in contrast, VOA employs a more emotionally charged approach, highlighting the humanitarian crisis and expressing solidarity with Ukraine. While CGTN emphasizes hope and diplomatic solutions, VOA underscores anger and fear to justify international intervention and support for Ukraine. The contrasting framing strategies reflect the geopolitical interests of China and the U.S., with CGTN positioning China as a mediator advocating for peace and stability, and VOA framing Russia as the aggressor to bolster Western democratic values. By leveraging divergent emotional narratives, both media outlets serve the strategic objectives of their countries, shape global perceptions, and garner public support for their respective policies. This study contributes to understanding how emotional framing functions as a strategic tool in international media coverage during geopolitical conflicts.

Keywords: Russia–Ukraine war; media coverage; emotional geopolitics; media framing; CGTN; VOA



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1. Introduction

China and the U.S., two of the world’s most powerful nations, are continually engaged in strengthening their global discourse power through international broadcasting. In 2019, President Xi Jinping emphasized the development of “All Media” across the dimensions of whole-time, whole-technology, whole-society, and whole-ecology to enhance the global dissemination of the Chinese Communist Party’s ideology (Jia & Lu, 2024, p. 488). In response, President Trump labeled China’s media globalization efforts as a state-driven foreign influence operation, requiring its registration under the U.S. Department of Justice. The Biden administration further reinforced the role of the U.S. Agency for Global Media in spreading discourses and narratives rooted in American values, particularly in nations with

limited press freedom and media resources (Jia & Lu, 2024; Wong, 2020). Consequently, considerable academic attention has been directed toward China's and the U.S.'s externally oriented communication strategies aimed at expanding their international influence (Atlantic Council, 2020; Roman et al., 2017).

Despite this scholarly interest, research on China's and the U.S.'s global media has two significant limitations. First, while single-case studies on China's international communication have proliferated (Alpermann & Malzer, 2023; Colley & Moore, 2022; Feng & Li, 2024), systematic comparative analyses of international broadcasting content and styles between China and the U.S.—two dominant yet politically and culturally distinct global rivals—remain scarce (Jia & Lu, 2024). In particular, comparative studies of Chinese and American international media's coverage of international conflicts, which reflect the contrasting national interests of the largest developing nation and the most expansive advanced economy, are lacking. Second, rather than investigating how Chinese and American media employ emotional communication strategies to frame geopolitically significant narratives, existing studies have predominantly focused on counter-hegemonic communication efforts within authoritarian systems (El Damanhoury et al., 2024; Hernández & Madrid-Morales, 2020; Moore & Colley, 2022). This focus, which includes CGTN's "surface neutrality" model that masks pro-China propaganda under a veneer of impartiality and RT's "partisan parasite" model that mimics partisan media in the U.S. to challenge Western news dominance (Moore & Colley, 2022, p. 1306), limits a comprehensive understanding of the role of emotional appeals in the international broadcasting strategies of authoritarian and democratic states.

Against this background, the central research question emerges: How do CGTN and VOA emotionally narrate the Russia–Ukraine war for their geopolitical interests? The Russia–Ukraine war marks China's and the U.S.'s clashes over the global geopolitical order. China and the U.S. have been two prominent players in the battleground of the Russia–Ukraine war—one as an increasingly repressive authoritarian regime that has forged a "no-limits" friendship with Russia and the other as a representative democracy that has imposed massive sanctions against Moscow's invasion of Ukraine—operating distinct political frameworks on international media (Sanjinez et al., 2023). Chinese state media's preference for peace-oriented official discourse in military conflicts has been argued to strategically dispel international suspicion of the "China threat" and legitimize its assertive actions (Li, 2008; Šimalčík, 2020). In contrast, U.S. state-affiliated media's preponderance of vice attributes in war coverage has been contended to blame Russia for the widespread killing of civilians and to emphasize international cooperation in support of Ukraine (Parmelee et al., 2024). As the two great powers remain under intense scrutiny by international actors, with news outlets generating media content that aligns with their respective governments' views (Lee, 2009; Parmelee et al., 2024), it is crucial to examine how they frame international conflicts for global audiences.

CGTN and VOA exemplify contrasting communication styles, reflecting their countries' geopolitical alignments (Jia & Lu, 2024). CGTN, as a state-run Chinese media outlet, mirrors the Chinese government's official stance, prioritizing narratives that align with national interests and advocate for a multipolar global order (Callahan, 2015; Lowy Institute, 2024). Conversely, VOA, a U.S. government-funded broadcaster, aligns with Western perspectives, emphasizing democratic values and international solidarity against aggression (Hachten & Scotton, 2011; Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). This study proposes examining the two flagship media's coverage of the Russia–Ukraine war to map out CGTN's and VOA's use of emotional appeals in their reporting on international conflicts. Such a comparison is essential, as it enables an analysis of commonalities and divergences in the emotional narratives conveyed by the two rivaling powers with politically distinct agendas. The analysis aims to enhance understanding of the cultural and national dynamics shaping

international broadcasting and reveal how both states use emotional persuasion to achieve geopolitical goals during conflicts.

The paper begins with a review of existing research on the international media strategies of China and the United States, focusing on their relevance to the emotional geopolitics approaches of CGTN and VOA (East Asia Forum, 2022; Freedom House, 2022; German Marshall Fund, 2022). It then outlines the theoretical framework adopted and the methodology used to analyze the emotional geopolitical discourses in these outlets' narratives of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Through a comparative content analysis, the study uncovers nuances and contrasts in how CGTN and VOA frame the war, emphasizing their divergent geopolitical objectives and emotional strategies (Hoxhaj, 2023). The paper concludes by synthesizing key findings, reflecting on their implications, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Media Framing in Global Conflicts

Framing has long been a central concept in mass communication research, yet no single universally accepted definition exists (D'angelo, 2002; Reese et al., 2001). Broadly, framing refers to how mass media structure and present issues and events (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005). Scheufele (1999) developed a comprehensive typology of framing research, categorizing it into four types: (1) framing as a dependent variable, (2) framing as an independent variable, (3) analysis of individual frames, and (4) analysis of media frames. Entman (1993) defines media framing as the process of selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and emphasizing them in communication to promote specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and/or treatment recommendations.

The first component of Entman's definition highlights issue salience, focusing not only on whether an issue is present but on the extent to which certain aspects are emphasized over others. In this sense, framing parallels agenda-setting theory. However, the second component of Entman's definition differentiates framing from agenda-setting by emphasizing how framing shapes reality, influences interpretations, and affects audience perceptions of events once they enter the public agenda. Various factors shape media frames, including national culture, political ideology, and journalistic norms and routines (Reese et al., 2001).

Research suggests that journalists adapt international news stories to align with their national audiences. Entman (2004) argued that culturally congruent news frames—those incorporating recognizable, emotionally compelling words and images—have a significant impact on public opinion. Clausen (2003) examined global news coverage of the September 11 attacks and found that journalists in different countries emphasized distinct aspects of the event to fit their local cultural contexts. Similarly, Dimitrova and Strömbäck (2005) found that journalists tend to adopt frames consistent with their political environments. Building on this argument, it is reasonable to expect that journalists in the U.S. and China will employ emotional frames that reflect the political and media systems of their respective countries. Consequently, the selective framing of the Russia–Ukraine war is likely to differ significantly in tone and presentation between U.S. and Chinese newspapers. This study examines media frames in newspaper coverage of the 2022–2023 Russia–Ukraine war, situating the framing of the conflict within the distinct political and media landscapes of the U.S. and China.

2.1. Emotional Framing in Conflict Reporting

Theories of basic emotions (Izard, 1992; Plutchik, 1984) have been widely applied to analyze emotional dynamics in media (Zhao & Zhang, 2024). The emotional tone in conflict reporting plays a crucial role, particularly in shaping the legitimacy of conflicts. Characterized by its intensity and direction, emotional tone in news coverage has the capacity to

guide and even manipulate the emotional responses of audiences (Cho et al., 2003). When viewers' emotions are activated or directed, they can alter their perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral responses to events or issues (Kepplinger et al., 2012; Wormwood et al., 2019). Emotional framing strategically employs emotions such as hatred, fear, love, and hope to influence audiences and convey political messages effectively (Zhao & Zhang, 2024). Historically, emotionally charged propaganda—such as Britain's efforts during World War II—was designed to secure American support for the allied cause (Edwards, 2010).

To examine how emotional tone impacts audience reactions, many researchers have extensively explored the field of emotional framing. Studies indicate that emotional appeals in media reports are not limited to linguistic content but also include symbols, images, and sounds (Leonidou & Leonidou, 2009). This form of communication not only conveys information but also strategically captures audience interest and directs attention toward specific issues. For instance, a “fear” tone might heighten audience concerns about public safety issues, while “sympathy” might elicit support for vulnerable social groups. “Anger” could prompt audiences to critically engage with certain social phenomena or government decisions (Chong & Druckman, 2007). In the digital era, emotions have become more diverse and complex, particularly through visual content. For example, China's use of emotion-laden videos on Douyin to promote state narratives highlights how advanced communication technology enables both state and private actors to wield emotional influence (Satha-Anand & Wongsurawat, 2016).

In international conflict reporting, the use of emotional tone is particularly pronounced, significantly shaping audience support or opposition toward a given side (Gowing, 2013). For example, by portraying conflict victims, the media can evoke sympathy and anger from viewers, thereby fostering strong attitudes toward the involved parties. This emotional framing further affects public perceptions of war, potentially leading to judgments about the motivations and behaviors of the conflict participants (Gelpi, 2017; Ross, 2013). Additionally, emotional tone plays a critical role in constructing the public image of nations or conflict groups. Some reports may demonize one side while portraying the other as just and virtuous (Joseph et al., 2015). This not only impacts a nation's global reputation but can also indirectly shape foreign policy decisions (Baum & Groeling, 2010). While extensive research has been conducted on emotional framing, the interplay between emotions, media, state, and international relations remains underexplored. Thus, this study examines emotional framing as a strategic tool in international broadcasting, aimed at achieving geopolitical objectives.

Building on basic emotion theories that posit a limited set of discrete “basic” emotions (Izard, 1992; Plutchik, 1980) and more recent debates on their status in affective science (van Heijst et al., 2023), this study focuses on six emotion categories that are especially salient in war reporting and international politics: hope, anger, fear, sympathy, humiliation, and neutrality. Research on discrete emotions in news framing and political communication shows that anger, fear, and hope have distinct antecedents and consequences for information processing and political behavior (Nabi, 2003; Otto, 2018; Gellwitzki & Houde, 2022), while work in international relations highlights the geopolitical functions of anger, fear, hope, and humiliation in conflict and coercive diplomacy (Markwica, 2018; Gustafsson, 2021). Hope captures forward-looking appraisals that emphasize the possibility of positive change or successful resistance; anger reflects moral outrage and blame attribution toward specific actors; fear highlights perceived threats and uncertainty; sympathy refers to compassionate concern for victims; and humiliation denotes perceived degradation or loss of status. Neutrality, by contrast, functions as a baseline category indicating the absence of overt emotional evaluation in the journalist's own voice. These categories map closely onto

established emotion typologies in psychology and international relations while remaining specific enough to be reliably identified in news discourse.

2.2. Emotional Framing of China and US in International Conflicts

In an era of globalization and advanced communication technologies, events in remote parts of the world can rapidly reach global audiences through local media. While journalists theoretically have greater access to information resources than before when covering international conflicts such as wars, the relationship between the media and political elites remains largely unchanged during crises. This dynamic is reflected in the news coverage of international conflicts, where government narratives often shape reporting (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005).

International broadcasting functions as a strategic tool for states to articulate foreign policy objectives and expand geopolitical influence (Colley & Moore, 2022). The concept of “epistemic proxy wars” highlights how states compete for influence in online spaces through public diplomacy and state-sponsored disinformation, particularly on social media platforms (Pohjonen, 2022; Madrid-Morales et al., 2024). Scholars have examined how state-affiliated media influence both domestic and foreign audiences, with their operations shaped by geopolitical contexts and media ownership structures. Xu and Wang (2022) categorize state-affiliated media into three groups: revisionist world powers, regional challengers, and liberal democracies. Revisionist powers, such as Russia and China, employ tightly controlled, state-funded media outlets to challenge the existing world order (Colley & Moore, 2022; Moore & Colley, 2022). Regional challengers, including Iran’s Press TV and Qatar’s Al Jazeera, focus on regional influence while promoting counter-Western perspectives (Xu & Wang, 2022). In contrast, liberal democracies, such as the U.S. and the U.K., operate international broadcasters like Voice of America (VOA) and the BBC, which emphasize press freedom, editorial independence, and journalistic objectivity despite being state-funded (Wright et al., 2020; Xu & Wang, 2022). These broadcasters utilize cultural diplomacy to advance national interests while avoiding overt propaganda (Lake et al., 2021).

International broadcasting has historically played a crucial role during conflicts (Price, 2002). A comparison of China Global Television Network (CGTN) and VOA is particularly valuable, as both serve as flagship media outlets for their respective global superpowers, functioning as key government communication and soft power instruments (Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019; El Damanhoury & Garud-Paktar, 2021; Fearon & Rodrigues, 2019). These outlets exemplify how state-affiliated media employ emotional framing during international conflicts. Research has demonstrated that national media outlets frame the same event in significantly different ways (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2005). For instance, a study of the NATO air strikes in former Yugoslavia found that U.S. mainstream media framed the strikes as “humanitarian aid” for Kosovo Albanians, while top Chinese newspapers described them as an “intervention” violating Yugoslavia’s sovereignty (Yang, 2003). The study concluded that government policy and national political interests strongly influence media coverage.

Empirical studies have examined how Chinese and U.S. international media outlets strategically employ emotional framing to advance their geopolitical objectives. El Damanhoury and Garud-Paktar (2021) found that Chinese media generally adopt a neutral and balanced tone when covering international conflicts. However, when reporting on China’s engagement in crises, Chinese media tend to use positive emotions to reinforce China’s global reputation and project neutrality to an international audience. For example, CGTN’s coverage of the 2021 U.S. Capitol riots was restrained and neutral, aligning with China’s non-interference policy (Colley & Moore, 2022). This approach seeks to present pro-China

narratives with a professional veneer (Moore & Colley, 2022), distinguishing CGTN from other authoritarian media outlets such as Russia Today (RT) (Alpermann & Malzer, 2023; El Damanhoury et al., 2024). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, CGTN emphasized China's multilateral cooperation to bolster its global image (Jia & Lu, 2024).

Conversely, U.S. international broadcasters adopt a more overtly emotional approach, particularly when advocating democracy during international conflicts. VOA Chinese tends to express negative emotions toward the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) while actively promoting core American ideological values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, positioning these ideals as counterforces to authoritarianism (Jia & Lu, 2024). Despite aiming for objectivity, VOA has been criticized for its pro-government bias. For instance, during the COVID-19 crisis, a significant portion of its reporting emphasized American national interests, challenging the perception of VOA as a neutral aggregator of Western media content (El Damanhoury & Garud-Paktar, 2021; Wright et al., 2020).

The Russia–Ukraine war provides a contemporary case illustrating emotional framing in state-affiliated media. The U.S.-funded VOA often frames the conflict through the lens of democratic values and human rights, invoking sympathy for Ukraine and moral outrage toward Russian aggression. In contrast, China's CGTN adopts a more neutral stance, emphasizing the need for peace and stability while subtly warning against Western intervention and its potential to destabilize the global order (Breeze & Novoa-Jaso, 2024; Yan et al., 2022).

Despite extensive studies on geopolitical influences in international broadcasting, the emotional dimensions of state-affiliated media propaganda between China and the United States remain underexplored. Given their immense global influence and fundamentally different political systems, analyzing how Chinese and U.S. international media frame international conflicts is essential (El Damanhoury & Garud-Paktar, 2021). Accordingly, this study selects CGTN and VOA as focal cases to examine variations in emotional propaganda amid international conflict, employing the most-different cases design. A comparative analysis of these broadcasters' emotional strategies contributes to the broader scholarship on the intensifying information war between the U.S. and China, a rivalry characterized by the ideological divide between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. This analysis also enriches our understanding of the cultural and national dynamics shaping international broadcasting, revealing how both states employ emotional persuasion to achieve geopolitical objectives during conflicts.

3. Data and Method

3.1. Media Event Selection

We select the Russia–Ukraine war as our focus for the media event. It is chosen for three reasons. First, reflecting the contradictions between Russia's situating hybrid authoritarianism group and the West in a liberal democracy group. It is a crucial moment for the third-party state-affiliated media outlets of the two superpowers with opposing geopolitical interests, i.e., China as a robust authoritarian regime and the United States as a leading liberal democracy to utilize emotional appeals to support their respective strategic objectives concerning normative contestation over sovereignty, renegotiation of international norms, and expansion of geopolitical clout through discursive battlefield. Second, highlighting the historical and chronological contestation of the European security order by Russia since the 1990s, the Russia–Ukraine war provides ample footage to tap into pre-existing emotions such as patriotism and grievances to mobilize public sentiment in the conflict (Blankenship & Ordu, 2022). Third, the Russia–Ukraine war is a focal point in the ongoing information warfare between China and the United States, where both CGTN and VOA, with contesting ideological visions, aim to advance their countries' geopolitical

agenda by manipulating emotional responses and eliciting potential response actions for global audiences in their favor.

3.2. Sampling

The dataset comprises news articles published by CGTN and VOA from 24 February 2022 to 28 August 2023, encompassing 4997 and 4975 articles, respectively. Data collection was conducted using automated web scraping tools to ensure comprehensiveness and accuracy, followed by manual validation to confirm relevance. The technical workflow involved sending HTTP requests to the target websites using the requests library to retrieve web content, followed by parsing and data extraction through XPath expressions implemented via the lxml library. As the target websites lacked robust anti-scraping mechanisms, the implementation proceeded without significant obstacles. This rigorous approach ensures that the dataset accurately reflects the broadcasters' coverage priorities and framing strategies.

3.3. Content Analysis

A qualitative content analysis framework is employed to systematically examine the narratives and emotional framing in the media content. This methodology is well-suited for uncovering patterns, thematic distinctions, and messaging strategies in textual data (East Asia Forum, 2022). The analysis focuses on two core components:

First is narrative frame identification. Narrative frames shape how information is interpreted by audiences. This component identifies the structures and elements defining each broadcaster's narratives, such as conflicts, resolutions, and character roles. Frames are categorized based on thematic emphasis, such as geopolitical rivalries, humanitarian concerns, or economic impacts. The analysis examines how CGTN and VOA construct the story of the Russia–Ukraine war, focusing on its causes, consequences, and potential resolutions (Wang et al., 2024; Oyeleye & Jiang, 2022).

Second, emotional expression analysis. Building on basic emotion theory (Izard, 1992; Plutchik, 1984) and scholarship on discrete emotions in news and political communication (Nabi, 2003; Otto, 2018; Gellwitzki & Houde, 2022; Turska-Kawa et al., 2023), we operationalize six emotion categories that are especially relevant in war coverage: neutrality, hope, anger, sympathy, fear, and humiliation. Neutral articles convey primarily factual information without evaluative language in the journalist's own voice, whereas emotional articles express hope for peace and victory, anger at particular actors, fear of escalation and insecurity, sympathy with victims, or humiliation in the sense of collective loss of status or dignity.

In practice, coders examined multiple textual cues to assign emotional categories. At the lexical level, they focused on evaluative adjectives (e.g., "brutal," "heroic"), verbs (e.g., "slam," "condemn"), and adverbs that signal intensity. At the discursive level, they considered whether the story foregrounded victim–perpetrator relationships, invoked future-oriented scenarios of improvement or catastrophe, or used rhetorical figures such as hyperbole and metaphor to dramatize events. For example, headlines and leads that paired civilian suffering with calls to "hold Russia accountable" were coded as anger, whereas articles emphasizing "unity in defense of freedom" or "collective efforts for peace" were coded as hope. When multiple emotional cues were present, the dominant sentiment was determined based on headline framing, lead paragraphs, and the overall evaluative direction of the story.

Because "neutrality" is a contested concept in both journalism and international communication, we adopted a narrow and explicitly operational definition. Articles were coded as neutral when they (1) primarily reported event sequences, institutional decisions, or statistics; (2) avoided evaluative adjectives or verbs in the reporter's own narrative voice;

and (3) attributed emotionally charged statements to quoted sources rather than endorsing them. This operationalization does not imply that such coverage is fully impartial in a normative sense—especially in the case of CGTN, where “surface neutrality” can coexist with strategic topic selection and narrative alignment (Hoggett & Thompson, 2012; Moore & Colley, 2022; Turska-Kawa et al., 2023). Rather, neutrality functions here as a baseline category against which overtly emotional storytelling can be contrasted.

The final codebook defined six mutually exclusive categories (neutrality, hope, anger, sympathy, fear, humiliation). Articles in which more than one emotion was present were assigned to the dominant category according to pre-specified decision rules (e.g., explicit blame and moral condemnation overriding background references to risk).

This study employed a fully manual coding process, wherein three researchers independently analyzed the emotional framing present in CGTN and VOA coverage. To assess intercoder reliability, a randomly selected 15% subsample of articles from each outlet was double-coded by all three coders. Krippendorff’s α for the six-way nominal emotion classification across this subsample was 0.81, indicating strong intercoder agreement. By embedding these emotional codes within the broader context of narrative construction, the study provides a nuanced insight into how state-sponsored media strategically deploy emotions to influence public perceptions during international crises. The overall distribution of emotional categories, with both absolute frequencies and percentages, is presented in Table 1, while Table 2 provides illustrative examples of news items coded under each dominant emotion.

Table 1. Emotional Distribution in CGTN and VOA News Coverage.

Emotion	CGTN (Number of Articles)	CGTN: % of All CGTN Articles	VOA (Number of Articles)	VOA: % of All VOA Articles
Neutrality	2473	49.49%	998	20.06%
Hope	1656	33.14%	2401	48.26%
Anger	131	2.62%	275	5.53%
Sympathy	82	1.64%	138	2.77%
Fear	632	12.65%	1119	22.49%
Humiliation	23	0.46%	44	0.88%

Note: Percentages are calculated relative to the total number of articles published by each outlet during the period from 24 February 2022 to 28 August 2023. Intercoder reliability for the six-way nominal emotion classification based on a 15% subsample of the data yields Krippendorff’s $\alpha = 0.81$.

Table 2. Examples of news items coded under each dominant emotion.

Emotion	Outlet	Example News Item (Headline and Date)	Illustrative Excerpt/Coding Rationale
Hope	VOA	“Russia Steps Up Attacks as Prelude to Likely Renewed Offensive on Defiant Kyiv” (1 March 2022) (VOA, 2022e)	Short phrases such as “defiant Kyiv” and descriptions of the “battered but still defiant capital” foreground Ukrainian resilience and the possibility of eventual success, justifying a hope code.
Hope	CGTN	“China Calls on UN to Play Positive Role for De-escalation in Ukraine” (3 March 2022) (CGTN, 2022d)	The article highlights that diplomatic efforts can “play a positive role for de-escalation,” expressing optimism that negotiations can ease tensions and lead to a peaceful resolution.
Anger	VOA	“Russia Launches Invasion of Ukraine with Multiple Cities Hit in Initial Missile Strikes” (24 February 2022) (VOA, 2022d)	Expressions such as “unprovoked aggression” and “targeting of innocents” assign blame and moral condemnation to Russia, which are typical markers of anger.

Table 2. Cont.

Emotion	Outlet	Example News Item (Headline and Date)	Illustrative Excerpt/Coding Rationale
Anger	CGTN	“Ambassador Qin Gang Slams U.S. for Double Standards” (11 August 2022) (CGTN, 2022b)	The story criticizes “double standards,” “misleading narratives,” and “manipulation” in Western coverage, expressing frustration toward the U.S. and NATO.
Fear	VOA	Hundreds Attend Funeral for Zambian Killed Fighting for Russia in Ukraine (24 January 2023) (VOA, 2023b)	References to “he was taken to Ukraine where he was killed,” “recruited from Russian prisons to fight on the front lines,” and “it’s illegal for a Tanzanian national to join any foreign army” highlight personal danger, legal risk, and life-threatening uncertainty, consistent with fear.
Fear	CGTN	“Western Sanctions on Russia Create Energy Crisis and Inflation” (24 August 2022) (CGTN, 2022j)	The article warns that sanctions have led to “soaring fuel prices” and “aggravated inflation,” highlighting risks to economic stability and everyday life, consistent with a fear-oriented frame.
Neutrality	VOA	“UN Security Council to Meet Friday on Biological Weapons, at Moscow’s Request” (25 February 2022) (VOA, 2022i)	The report mainly relays official statements and meeting logistics without overt evaluative adjectives in the journalist’s voice, thus coded as neutral.
Neutrality	CGTN	“China Urges All Parties to Exercise Restraint over Ukraine Crisis” (24 February 2022) (CGTN, 2022e)	The article quotes Chinese and UN officials at length and summarizes their positions with descriptive language, without adopting an explicit emotional stance.

Note: Excerpts are paraphrased and shortened for illustrative purposes. Full texts are available through the URLs listed in the reference list.

4. Findings

4.1. Framing Russia–Ukraine War with Different Emotions

CGTN and VOA present contrasting emotional framings of the Russia–Ukraine war, reflecting their distinct geopolitical perspectives and serving specific purposes aimed at shaping the audience’s perception in line with their respective political alignments. This comparative analysis examines their divergent emotional communication strategies in portraying the Russia–Ukraine war, focusing on four main emotional categories: hope, anger, fear, and neutrality. Although neutrality, hope, anger, sympathy, fear, and humiliation were emotions categorized in CGTN and VOA news coverage, it is important to note that sympathy and humiliation were hardly mentioned and, therefore, are not discussed in detail in this section.

Although six emotions were coded in the dataset (neutrality, hope, anger, sympathy, fear, and humiliation), this section concentrates on the four most frequent and geopolitically salient categories—hope, anger, fear, and neutrality. As discussed in Section 3.3, each article was assigned to a single dominant emotion based on headline framing, lead paragraphs, and the overall evaluative direction of the story. For instance, when a report combined detailed descriptions of civilian suffering with strong blame attribution (“unprovoked aggression,” “war crimes”) it was coded as anger, whereas a story that acknowledged hardship but foregrounded “unity in defense of freedom” or “collective efforts for peace” was classified as hope. Articles that provided mainly descriptive updates on troop movements or diplomatic meetings, avoiding evaluative language in the journalist’s own voice, were

coded as neutral. Table 2 presents representative examples of how specific news items were allocated to each category.

4.2. Hope

VOA News conveyed hope in 2401 articles, emphasizing diplomatic efforts, international solidarity, and the resilience of the Ukrainian people. For instance, an article highlighted the United States' continued emphasis on diplomacy despite escalating tensions (VOA, 2022a). The use of language such as "commitment to diplomacy" and "working towards a peaceful resolution" fostered optimism regarding the potential for a diplomatic solution. This type of coverage was designed to instill a belief that, despite the conflict, the international community was actively pursuing avenues to bring about peace and stability.

VOA News also framed Ukrainian resilience positively. Articles like "Russia Steps Up Attacks as Prelude to Likely Renewed Offensive on Defiant Kyiv" portrayed the Ukrainian people as strong and capable of withstanding aggression (VOA, 2022e). Descriptions like "defiant Kyiv" and "defiant capital" were used to build a hopeful narrative around Ukraine's ability to defend itself and persevere.

Additionally, VOA conveyed hope by emphasizing international support for Ukraine, including humanitarian and military aid from the United States and its allies. By highlighting the global commitment to Ukraine's cause, VOA reinforces that hope arises from collective action and solidarity. The U.S. government was frequently portrayed as a key factor for sustaining hope and fostering a positive resolution of the conflict (VOA, 2022j). In an article, the commitment of NATO countries to assist Ukraine was portrayed in a positive light, using phrases like "steadfast support" and "unity in defense of freedom" (VOA, 2022g). This framing was intended to reassure readers that Ukraine was not alone in its struggle and that a united international front was working towards a resolution that favored Ukraine's sovereignty and security. Such hopeful narratives not only encouraged solidarity among Western nations but also motivated the public to support their governments' actions in providing aid and assistance to Ukraine.

In contrast, CGTN conveyed hope in 1656 articles by highlighting peaceful diplomacy by China and other non-Western actors. An article positioned China as a mediator advocating for peace (CGTN, 2022d). Phrases such as "urging restraint from all parties" and "direct dialogues and negotiations" highlighted China's diplomatic efforts, which was intended to present China as a voice of reason, offering a hopeful path towards de-escalation and peaceful resolution. Also, the CGTN has extensively reported on China's 12-point position paper on resolving the Ukraine conflict, which calls for a political settlement and peaceful negotiations (CGTN, 2023a). This narrative positions China as a responsible global actor that seeks to mediate the conflict.

CGTN also promoted the potential for a multipolar world order where non-Western powers could play a significant role in resolving international conflicts. An article highlighted the efforts of emerging economies to mediate the conflict, using language such as "collective efforts for peace" and "global cooperation" (CGTN, 2022c). This framing fostered hope through broader multilateral engagement rather than Western dominance.

Additionally, CGTN conveyed hope by emphasizing humanitarian assistance and the resilience of affected communities. An article focused on the success of establishing safe routes for civilians, using terms like "critical lifeline" and "hope for those in need" (CGTN, 2022g). By focusing on humanitarian aid, such as China's support for United Nations resolutions facilitating assistance to Ukraine, CGTN projects a hopeful message of China contributing to global peace efforts (CGTN, 2022a). CGTN's narratives presented China as a leader, advocating for peace and stability through diplomacy and humanitarian governance.

4.3. Anger

VOA News prominently featured anger in 275 articles, primarily directed at Russia's actions in Ukraine. An article used emotionally charged language like "invasion," "attack," and "violation" to invoke outrage (VOA, 2022d). Such language served not just as factual reporting but as a strategic tool to shape public perception of the conflict and Russia's role in it. Another article describing the destruction wrought by Russian forces in Ukrainian cities (VOA, 2023a) used vivid descriptions of bombings and civilian casualties such as "unprovoked aggression" and "targeting of innocents" to construct a moral narrative of indignation, aiming to rally support for Ukraine and align public sentiment with the stance of Western governments.

In contrast, CGTN's coverage, with 131 articles expressing anger, focused on its frustration on the West, particularly the United States and its allies. An article criticized perceived Western hypocrisy and biased reporting (CGTN, 2022b), by using terms such as "double standards," "misleading narratives," and "manipulation." CGTN also condemned Western sanctions on Russia, describing them as "unilateral measures" that destabilize the global economy (CGTN, 2022j). This framing shifted some of the blame for the crisis onto Western nations, especially the United States and NATO, portraying them as contributors to global turmoil.

Additionally, by attributing blame to Western policies, CGTN framed the conflict as a consequence of NATO's expansion and the United States' efforts to assert global dominance. In an article, CGTN blamed NATO for provoking the war, using phrases like "reckless expansion" and "hegemonic ambitions" to evoke anger towards Western policies (CGTN, 2022f). This narrative was designed to garner support for Russia's position and counterbalance the dominant Western perspectives that prevail in international media. By focusing anger on the West, CGTN aligned with audiences skeptical of Western intentions and sought to present an alternative non-Western viewpoint on the causes and consequences of the war.

4.4. Fear

VOA News framed fear in 1119 articles (VOA News dataset), emphasizing the immediate threat and widespread disruption caused by the conflict. Reports highlighted missile strikes on Ukrainian cities, the closure of Ukrainian airspace, and civilian displacement (VOA, 2022f, 2022h), underscoring the global implications of the war. By framing the conflict as a major threat to international peace, VOA reinforced the potential for further escalation, particularly Western sanctions on Russia and concerns about nuclear risks related to Russia's military strategies (VOA, 2022b, 2024).

Conversely, CGTN's coverage of fear was more restrained, appearing in 632 articles (CGTN dataset). Given China's geopolitical stance and its careful support of Russia, CGTN highlighted the potential risks of NATO's eastward expansion and the broader dangers of Western encroachment. This narrative aimed to stir concerns about the global instability that could arise from increased Western involvement in the conflict (Repnikova, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). CGTN advocated for peace and diplomacy, emphasizing China's commitment to avoiding further escalation. Meanwhile, CGTN underscored the importance of addressing issues like Taiwan's sovereignty within the context of the broader conflict, cautioning against drawing parallels between Taiwan and Ukraine (CGTN, 2022i).

CGTN's coverage also tied the Russia-Ukraine war to broader geopolitical dynamics, particularly deteriorating China-U.S. relations. With reports of U.S. military actions like arms sales to Taiwan and the downing of a Chinese civilian airship, CGTN framed these events as heightening concerns over China's national security (CGTN, 2023c). The

narrative suggested that the ongoing conflict could have far-reaching consequences for Sino-American relations, with potential risks for China's strategic interests and security.

4.5. Neutrality

VOA demonstrated neutrality in 998 articles, often by presenting updates on the conflict without adding explicit emotional or evaluative language. For example, an article focused on factual details such as flight disruptions and official announcements without assigning blame (VOA, 2022h). This neutral stance aimed to maintain credibility for global audiences. Another report detailed the proceedings of the UN Security Council meeting (VOA, 2022i), including statements from various representatives without adopting a partisan tone. Moreover, an article (VOA, 2022c) detailed the geographical locations of Russian forces and their military strategies by using phrases like "Russian troops advanced to the outskirts of Kyiv" and "Ukrainian forces put up resistance." This approach was designed to maintain the appearance of journalistic impartiality while covering a highly contentious issue.

In contrast, CGTN demonstrated neutrality in 2473 articles, often emphasizing diplomatic engagements and China's role as a mediator in the conflict. An article conveyed a balanced message by quoting diverse Chinese officials without expressing explicit support or condemnation (CGTN, 2022e). In another article, CGTN used detailed statements made by UN officials without taking sides (CGTN, 2022h), by using phrases such as "the UN urges both sides to avoid escalation" and "calls for diplomatic negotiations." Furthermore, an article provided an overview of the economic impact of the conflict on global markets, including stock market fluctuations and changes in energy prices (CGTN, 2023b). This approach was aimed at presenting CGTN as a neutral actor in the international media landscape, consistent with China's positioning as a proponent of multilateralism and diplomatic solutions.

The key difference between the two outlets' expression of neutrality lies in the perspectives they chose to emphasize. VOA, targeting primarily Western audiences, focused on military updates and statements from international actors, including Western governments and NATO, which subtly reinforced the Western perspective on the conflict. For example, in the article "NATO Leaders Discuss Response to Ukraine Crisis," VOA provided a detailed account of NATO's deliberations without explicitly endorsing their stance, but the emphasis on NATO's actions implicitly highlighted its key role in addressing the conflict (VOA, 2023c). In contrast, CGTN, concentrated more on diplomatic efforts and China's calls for peace, aligning with its broader geopolitical interests. By highlighting China's diplomatic role and emphasizing the importance of dialog, CGTN sought to present itself as a responsible and balanced international player. This approach was intended to appeal to audiences who viewed China as a mediator and were skeptical of Western intervention, presenting an alternative narrative to the predominantly Western perspectives found in international media.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

This study offers a systematic comparison of how CGTN and VOA utilize emotional framing in their coverage of the Russia–Ukraine war. The distribution of emotions reported in Table 1 shows that CGTN relies heavily on neutrality (49.49% of all CGTN articles) and hope (33.14%), whereas fear (12.65%), anger (2.62%), sympathy (1.64%), and humiliation (0.46%) play a secondary role. By contrast, VOA coverage is dominated by hope (48.26%) and fear (22.49%), with neutrality accounting for only 20.06% of its stories and anger (5.53%), sympathy (2.77%), and humiliation (0.88%) appearing less frequently. These

patterns indicate that both broadcasters use hope as a central resource but differ markedly in their reliance on neutral versus fearful framings.

The qualitative analysis further clarifies how these aggregate tendencies are realized in specific narratives. CGTN's neutral and hopeful articles typically present China as a cautious mediator, quoting officials who call for "restraint," "dialogue," and "political solutions," while avoiding explicit emotional evaluations in the reporter's own voice. When fear is invoked, it is often linked to systemic risks such as NATO expansion, global inflation, and energy insecurity. Anger is comparatively rare and is directed primarily at Western "double standards" and "hegemonic ambitions." In contrast, VOA's hope narratives foreground Ukrainian resilience and international solidarity, while its fear narratives emphasize immediate threats to civilians, potential nuclear escalation, and spillover effects on food and energy security. Its anger is directed mainly at Russia, constructed as an aggressive violator of international law.

Taken together, these results suggest that CGTN's emotional geopolitics foregrounds stability, multipolarity, and China's role as a responsible great power, whereas VOA's emotional repertoire stresses democratic solidarity, humanitarian concern, and moral condemnation of Russian actions. Both outlets therefore use emotions strategically to legitimize their governments' preferred policies and to position their states within a broader global order.

5.2. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Building on these empirical findings, the study contributes to research on media framing in international conflicts by introducing the concept of emotional geopolitics. While prior work has largely focused on strategic narratives and ideological biases in state-sponsored media (Bradshaw et al., 2024; Crilley et al., 2022), our results demonstrate that discrete emotions—especially hope, fear, and anger—are systematically deployed to structure public understandings of war and to signal geopolitical alignments. CGTN's combination of surface neutrality with selective fear and anger toward Western actors supports earlier observations about authoritarian media's efforts to project professionalism while defending national interests (El Damanhoury et al., 2024; Moore & Colley, 2022). VOA's emotionally charged support for Ukraine, in turn, illustrates how democratic states use state-funded broadcasters to promote their values and foreign policy goals even when they emphasize editorial independence (Wright et al., 2020).

These insights have several implications. First, they reinforce the idea that state-sponsored media do more than simply report facts; they actively shape perceptions through emotional framing that links specific actors to hope, fear, or anger. Second, the findings extend research on emotional persuasion in political discourse by demonstrating how emotions operate not only at the level of domestic politics but also in cross-border strategic communication. Third, the analysis sheds light on soft-power competition between authoritarian and democratic regimes, suggesting that emotional appeals are integral to how states seek to build or erode legitimacy in global audiences.

5.3. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, while it offers a detailed qualitative analysis, it does not quantitatively assess the psychological impact of emotional framing on audiences. Future research could employ experimental methods to measure how different emotional frames influence public attitudes toward conflicts. Second, the study primarily focuses on English-language content, which may not fully capture the nuances of domestic propaganda strategies aimed at local audiences. Third, the evolving nature of international conflicts means that media narratives shift over time; a

longitudinal approach could provide deeper insights into how emotional framing adapts to geopolitical developments. Finally, the study does not address the role of social media platforms in amplifying or countering emotional narratives, an important area for further investigation given the increasing influence of digital news consumption.

Importantly, the findings apply specifically to two state-sponsored international broadcasters, CGTN and VOA, rather than to the entire Chinese or U.S. media systems. The American media market is highly competitive and commercially driven, whereas Chinese media operate within a party-state-controlled environment. Caution is therefore warranted when drawing inferences about “Chinese” or “American” media in general from this pair of cases. Nevertheless, because both outlets serve as key instruments of state communication, their emotional framing remains crucial for understanding how China and the United States wage informational struggles over the Russia–Ukraine war.

In conclusion, this study underscores the strategic use of emotional framing in state-sponsored media, illustrating how CGTN and VOA construct distinct narratives around the Russia–Ukraine war to align with their respective geopolitical interests. By analyzing the emotional dimensions of conflict coverage, this research contributes to a broader understanding of global information warfare and the role of media in shaping international perceptions. As the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, future research will be critical for uncovering the changing strategies of emotional persuasion in global news media.

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