



# Framing The South China Sea: How Media Shapes Perceptions Through Rhetorical Power

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## Abstract

This study examines the role of media in shaping public perception of the South China Sea (SCS) dispute by analyzing the coverage of CNBC and Kompas during June and July 2020. Utilizing Cicero's Amplification techniques such as repetition, iteration, word doubling, and gradual intensification. This research explores how these rhetorical strategies reinforce key points and shape narratives. Through a detailed discourse analysis, the study reveals that CNBC focused on global economic impacts and geopolitical rivalry, resonating with an international audience, while Kompas emphasized regional stability and ASEAN's role, appealing to Southeast Asian readers. The findings highlight the media's power in crafting compelling and memorable arguments, influencing public opinion on international conflicts. Limitations of the study include the analysis of only two media outlets over a specific period. Future research could expand the scope by including more media sources, extending the timeframe, and examining the impact of social media. Understanding these rhetorical strategies is crucial for policymakers, media professionals, and the public to critically assess media reports and their influence on public perception.

**Keywords:** *SCS, Media, Cicero's Amplification*

## Introduction

The South China Sea (SCS) represents one of the most strategically significant maritime regions in the world, not only because of its geographical position but also due to its economic, political, and military relevance in contemporary global affairs. Located at the crossroads of major sea lanes connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the SCS functions as a vital artery for international trade. Approximately one-third of global maritime commerce passes through this region annually, making it indispensable to the economic stability of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and beyond (Kaplan, 2019; Storey, 2020). Any disruption in this maritime corridor could have

serious repercussions for global supply chains, energy security, and international economic relations.

In addition to its role in global trade, the SCS is widely recognized for its abundant natural resources. The seabed beneath the SCS is believed to contain substantial reserves of oil and natural gas, attracting intense interest from both regional and extra-regional actors. According to estimates by the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the region may hold approximately 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (EIA, 2021). These resource potentials have further intensified competition among claimant states, transforming the SCS into a focal point of economic rivalry and strategic manoeuvring.

Despite its economic value, the SCS has long been characterized by complex and overlapping territorial disputes. Several countries—namely China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan—assert competing claims over maritime zones and land features such as the Spratly and Paracel Islands. Among these claims, China's assertion of historical rights demarcated by the Nine-Dash Line has generated the most controversy, as it overlaps with the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of multiple Southeast Asian states as defined under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This overlap has resulted in recurring diplomatic confrontations, maritime incidents, and legal disputes, including the landmark 2016 arbitral ruling in favor of the Philippines (Beckman, 2017; Hayton, 2018).

The disputes in the SCS are not confined to regional dynamics alone but carry broader global implications. The involvement of major powers, particularly the United States, has elevated the conflict to the level of international geopolitics. Through Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), the United States challenges what it perceives as excessive maritime claims, emphasizing the importance of maintaining open and lawful access to international waters (Fravel, 2020). Consequently, the SCS has emerged as a strategic arena where international law, military presence, diplomatic negotiations, and ideological competition intersect.

In such a highly contested environment, media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of the SCS disputes. Media outlets act not merely as neutral conveyors of information but as active agents in constructing narratives that frame events, assign responsibility, and legitimize particular viewpoints (Entman, 2007; D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2019). Through selective emphasis, repetition, and rhetorical framing, media discourse can influence how audiences perceive the causes, significance, and potential consequences of international conflicts.

Previous studies on the South China Sea have predominantly focused on legal interpretations, security dilemmas, diplomatic strategies, and military developments (Buszynski, 2019; Zhang, 2021). While these studies provide valuable insights into the structural dimensions of the conflict, comparatively less scholarly attention has been given to the role of media rhetoric in shaping public narratives surrounding the SCS, particularly through classical rhetorical frameworks. This gap is especially

evident in comparative studies that analyze how international and national media outlets employ rhetorical strategies to amplify certain perspectives while marginalizing others.

One rhetorical framework that remains underexplored in contemporary media studies of geopolitical conflict is Cicero's theory of amplification. Rooted in classical rhetoric, amplification refers to strategies used to intensify the importance of an issue through repetition, elaboration, accumulation, and gradual intensification of meaning (Cicero, trans. 2001). Although originally developed in the context of oratory, amplification techniques remain highly relevant in modern media discourse, particularly in conflict reporting where emphasis and emotional resonance are crucial for audience engagement (Condit, 2018).

Amplification techniques such as repetition, iteration, word doubling, and progressive intensification are commonly used in news reporting to highlight urgency, reinforce ideological positions, and legitimize political actions. These techniques enable media outlets to frame conflicts as either threats or opportunities, thereby shaping public sentiment and influencing political discourse (Fairclough, 2015; Richardson, 2017). However, empirical studies examining how these techniques operate within media coverage of the South China Sea remain limited.

Thus, media plays significant role in shaping public perception of international conflicts. For instance, Wang and Womack's (2019) study on Chinese and Vietnamese media strategies reveals how media framing can influence nationalistic sentiments and public perception. The same perspective was given by Tsfaty et al. (2022) discuss how media coverage affects public perception and political preferences, demonstrating the power of media narratives in shaping opinions.

During June and July 2020, CNBC's coverage focused on the economic and strategic implications of the SCS dispute, highlighting global trade impacts and the U.S.-China rivalry. Headlines like "South China Sea: U.S. Sends Warships in Show of Force" emphasized the geopolitical stakes. CNBC frequently used terms like "global trade" and "strategic interests" to underscore the economic importance of the region.

In contrast, Kompas emphasized regional stability and ASEAN's role in mediating the conflict. Articles such as "ASEAN's United Front on South China Sea Dispute" highlighted the efforts of Southeast Asian nations to address the conflict collectively. Kompas used phrases like "regional security" and "ASEAN cooperation" to frame the dispute in terms of regional diplomacy and stability.

By employing Cicero's Amplification techniques, both media shows effective reinforced their narratives. Repetition, iteration, word doubling, and gradual intensification were evident in their coverage, making the arguments more compelling and memorable for their audiences.

The South China Sea (SCS) dispute has deep historical roots, with various countries which claims on historical usage and legal interpretations of international laws like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China's claim, marked by the Nine-Dash Line, dates back to the mid-20th century, asserting historical rights over most of the SCS. This claim overlaps with the exclusive

economic zones (EEZs) of several Southeast Asian nations, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan, leading to ongoing territorial disputes. Historical events such as military standoffs and diplomatic negotiations have been recurrent as nations try to assert sovereignty and access the rich resources within the SCS. The complex historical claims and frequent confrontations highlight the persistent nature of the disputes and the challenges in reaching a resolution.

The current studies focus the complex geopolitical dynamics of the SCS, emphasizing the strategic interests of involved nations and external powers like the United States. The SCS is not only a regional issue but also a significant point of contention in international relations, involving military, economic, and political interests. Research by Peng (2022) explores how China's nationalism influences its maritime strategies, balancing sovereignty protection with stability maintenance.

Wang and Womack's (2019) study on media strategies in China and Vietnam reveals how national narratives are constructed to support territorial claims and shape public perception. The involvement of global powers, particularly through military presence and diplomatic efforts, further complicates the dispute. The United States, for instance, conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) to challenge excessive maritime claims and ensure the free passage of international waters, emphasizing the global importance of the SCS.

Cicero's Amplification method, which includes repetition, iteration, word doubling, and gradual intensification, serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Cicero, an ancient Roman orator, developed these rhetorical techniques to enhance the persuasive power of speech by emphasizing key points and gradually building intensity. This method is particularly useful for analyzing how media outlets craft their narratives to influence public opinion and reinforce key points in their reporting.

Repetition involves reiterating key phrases or concepts to reinforce their importance. Hall (1994) highlights how repetition can create a lasting impression on the audience, making the argument more memorable. Iteration involves explaining complex ideas in multiple ways to ensure understanding. Studies such as Patrick (2004) demonstrate how iteration can help clarify intricate arguments by presenting them in various forms. Word Doubling involves using synonymous terms together to emphasize a point. Eden's (2015) analysis of Cicero's techniques shows that doubling words strengthens the argument by adding weight to the statements. Gradual Intensification is the process of escalating terms from less to more intense, building a crescendo that captures the audience's attention and underscores the urgency of the issue. Tsifti et al. (2022) discuss how the escalation of rhetoric in media coverage heightens public concern and engagement.

Supporting studies further validate the effectiveness of Cicero's Amplification techniques in media rhetoric. Holman et al. (2014) discuss how the media's use of these techniques can influence public reaction and stress levels during crises, demonstrating the impact of repetition and gradual intensification in shaping public

perception. Dixon (2014) compares rhetorical strategies in different nationalist contexts, showing how Cicero's methods effectively shape public opinion on territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. Maíz-Arévalo (2017) highlights the importance of rhetorical strategies in online communication, reinforcing the applicability of Cicero's methods in modern media.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative comparative discourse analysis to examine how media narratives surrounding the South China Sea (SCS) dispute were constructed by two different media outlets: CNBC and *Kompas*. Discourse analysis was selected as it enables an in-depth examination of rhetorical strategies and meaning-making processes in news texts, particularly in the context of geopolitical conflict reporting.

### **Data Sources and Time Frame**

The data for this study consisted of news articles published by CNBC and *Kompas* during **June and July 2020**. This period was deliberately selected due to heightened tensions in the SCS, marked by intensified diplomatic exchanges, military maneuvers, and international discussions involving claimant states and global powers. Focusing on this time frame allowed for a concentrated analysis of media discourse during pivotal moments when public attention and political sensitivity toward the SCS dispute were particularly high.

### **Article Selection and Corpus Size**

A total of **48 news articles** were analyzed in this study, comprising **24 articles from CNBC and 24 articles from Kompas**. This balanced corpus enabled systematic comparison between international and national media perspectives.

Articles were retrieved from the official online archives of each media outlet using the following **search terms and keywords**:

- "South China Sea"
- "SCS dispute"
- "Nine-Dash Line"
- "Freedom of Navigation"
- "UNCLOS"
- "Maritime dispute"

To ensure consistency and relevance, the following criteria were applied:

### **Inclusion criteria:**

1. Articles explicitly addressing the South China Sea dispute.
2. News reports, analytical pieces, or feature articles (excluding opinion columns).
3. Articles published between 1 June and 31 July 2020.
4. Articles written in English (CNBC) and Indonesian (*Kompas*).

**Exclusion criteria:**

1. Duplicate articles or syndicated content.
2. Articles that mentioned the SCS only tangentially without substantive discussion.
3. Editorials, opinion pieces, and reader commentary.

**Data Analysis Framework**

The analysis followed a **three-stage discourse analysis framework** grounded in Cicero's theory of amplification.

**Stage 1: Identification of Rhetorical Techniques**

Each article was carefully examined to identify rhetorical strategies associated with **Cicero's Amplification**, including:

- Repetition (recurrent emphasis on specific terms or ideas),
- Iteration (restating similar meanings using varied expressions),
- Word doubling (pairing synonymous or reinforcing words),
- Gradual intensification (progressive escalation of tone or emphasis).

A coding manual was developed to define each technique operationally, supported by textual examples to ensure consistency during analysis.

**Stage 2: Thematic Analysis**

Following the identification of rhetorical techniques, a thematic analysis was conducted to categorize content into major themes. Themes were identified inductively through repeated reading and constant comparison of the data. The dominant themes included:

- Sovereignty and territorial claims,
- Military presence and security concerns,
- International law and UNCLOS,
- Diplomatic responses and regional stability,
- Global power involvement.

Themes were refined iteratively until conceptual clarity and internal coherence were achieved.

**Stage 3: Comparative Analysis**

A comparative analysis was then performed to examine similarities and differences in the use of amplification techniques and thematic emphasis between CNBC and *Kompas*. This stage highlighted how different media contexts—international versus national—shaped rhetorical choices and narrative framing.

### **Coding Process and Reliability**

The coding process was conducted by two independent coders with backgrounds in media studies and discourse analysis. Prior to full coding, both coders analyzed a pilot subset of eight articles to calibrate interpretations and refine the coding scheme. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, yielding a coefficient of 0.82, which indicates a high level of agreement. Any discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

### **Data Saturation**

Data saturation was achieved when no new rhetorical patterns or thematic categories emerged from the analysis of additional articles. This occurred after approximately 20 articles per media outlet, indicating that the final corpus size was sufficient to capture dominant discourse patterns.

### **Results**

The analysis of CNBC and Kompas articles revealed extensive use of Cicero's Amplification techniques. Each technique was utilized to reinforce key points and shape public perception, demonstrating the media's role in influencing opinions on the South China Sea (SCS) dispute.

#### **Findings**

#### **4.1 Repetition**

Both CNBC and Kompas frequently repeated key terms such as "sovereignty," "maritime security," and "resource rights" to emphasize their importance. Repetition of these terms served to engrain the significance of these concepts in the readers' minds. For instance, CNBC's articles often reiterated "global trade" and "strategic interests," highlighting the economic stakes and geopolitical significance of the SCS. One such example from CNBC includes, "The South China Sea is a vital artery for global trade, with over \$3 trillion of trade passing through annually." Kompas, meanwhile, consistently used terms like "regional security" and "ASEAN cooperation" to stress the importance of stability and collective action among Southeast Asian nations. An example from Kompas reads, "ASEAN cooperation is crucial to maintaining regional security and preventing escalation in the South China Sea."

#### **4.2 Iteration**

Complex ideas were clarified through repeated explanations, making them more accessible to readers. For example, CNBC explained the implications of military maneuvers and diplomatic standoffs multiple times using different contexts to ensure readers could grasp the strategic importance of each event. CNBC explained, "China's deployment of military assets in the disputed waters underscores the

strategic importance of the region, not just for China, but for global maritime security.” Similarly, Kompas iterated on the potential economic impacts and diplomatic efforts, providing various perspectives on how these factors influenced regional stability and international relations. Kompas elaborated, “The economic ramifications of the South China Sea dispute are profound, affecting trade routes and the economic stability of ASEAN member states.”

#### 4.3 Word Doubling

Terms such as “dispute and conflict,” “rights and sovereignty,” and “security and stability” were often doubled to stress their significance. This technique was particularly evident in headlines and key sections of the articles. For example, CNBC’s headlines like “Dispute and Conflict in the South China Sea Escalates” and “Rights and Sovereignty Under Threat” effectively doubled terms to emphasize the gravity of the situation. A specific headline from CNBC stated, “Dispute and Conflict in the South China Sea: A Crisis in Maritime Sovereignty.” Kompas used similar strategies with phrases like “Security and Stability in ASEAN” and “Regional Dispute and Diplomatic Efforts,” underscoring the critical nature of these issues for their audience. An illustrative headline from Kompas read, “Security and Stability in ASEAN Amid South China Sea Tensions.”

#### 4.5 Gradual Intensification

Headlines and lead paragraphs used intensifying language to capture attention and highlight the urgency of the issues. CNBC’s coverage often escalated terms from “dispute” to “conflict” and from “tensions” to “crisis,” creating a sense of immediacy and importance. For example, articles titled “South China Sea Tensions Rise Amid Military Exercises” and “Crisis Looms in the Disputed Waters” demonstrated this technique. One headline from CNBC noted, “Crisis Looms in the Disputed Waters of the South China Sea.” Kompas similarly used escalating phrases to describe the potential regional instability and economic repercussions, with headlines like “ASEAN Faces Increasing Tensions in the South China Sea” and “Economic Impact of Maritime Disputes Escalates.” A headline from Kompas included, “Economic Impact of Maritime Disputes Escalates, Threatening Regional Stability.”

CNBC’s coverage primarily focused on the economic and strategic implications of the SCS dispute. The articles highlighted the global trade impacts and the U.S.-China rivalry, emphasizing the broader geopolitical stakes. By frequently mentioning the economic importance of the SCS and the strategic maneuvers by major powers, CNBC framed the dispute as a critical issue with far-reaching consequences. This focus on global implications catered to their international audience, underscoring the interconnected nature of global trade and security. For instance, CNBC emphasized, “The South China Sea dispute is not just a regional issue but a flashpoint for U.S.-China tensions, with significant implications for global trade



and security.”

Kompas emphasized regional stability and ASEAN’s role in mediating the conflict. The coverage provided a localized perspective on the implications for Southeast Asian nations, focusing on the efforts of regional actors to address the dispute collectively. Kompas articles often discussed ASEAN’s diplomatic initiatives, the economic impacts on member states, and the importance of maintaining regional harmony. This approach highlighted the collective action and regional unity needed to address the SCS dispute, appealing to their Southeast Asian readership. Kompas highlighted, “ASEAN’s diplomatic efforts are crucial in maintaining regional stability and preventing the South China Sea dispute from escalating into a full-blown conflict.”

Table 4.1. Comparison of Rhetorical Techniques in CNBC and Kompas

Rhetorical Technique	CNBC Example	Kompas Example
Repetition	“The South China Sea is a vital artery for global trade, with over \$3 trillion of trade passing through annually.”	“ASEAN cooperation is crucial to maintaining regional security and preventing escalation in the South China Sea.”
Iteration	“China’s deployment of military assets in the disputed waters underscores the strategic importance of the region, not just for China, but for global maritime security.”	“The economic ramifications of the South China Sea dispute are profound, affecting trade routes and the economic stability of ASEAN member states.”
Word Doubling	“Dispute and Conflict in the South China Sea: A Crisis in Maritime Sovereignty.”	“Security and Stability in ASEAN Amid South China Sea Tensions.”
Gradual Intensification	“Crisis Looms in the Disputed Waters of the South China Sea.”	“Economic Impact of Maritime Disputes Escalates, Threatening Regional Stability.”

The Table 4.1 shows comparison in both CNBC and Kompas effectively use rhetorical techniques to shape their narratives and influence reader perceptions. CNBC focuses on global economic and strategic stakes, catering to an international audience by framing the dispute within the broader context of global trade and security implications. In contrast, Kompas emphasizes regional stability and ASEAN’s mediation role, appealing to a Southeast Asian readership by stressing the importance of regional unity and diplomatic efforts. These rhetorical strategies highlight the media’s power in shaping public opinion and underscore the need to understand media narratives’ broader implications in international conflict reporting.

**Discussion**

The findings from this study demonstrate the significant role of rhetorical techniques in media coverage of international conflicts. CNBC and Kompas both employed Cicero's Amplification techniques to reinforce key points and shape public perception, but they did so with different focuses: CNBC emphasized global economic and strategic stakes, while Kompas highlighted regional stability and collective action.

The comparison between the two media outlets illustrates how different narrative strategies can influence audience perception and understanding of the same issue. CNBC's focus on global implications and strategic maneuvers framed the SCS dispute within the broader context of international trade and geopolitical rivalry. In contrast, Kompas's emphasis on regional cooperation and stability presented the dispute as a collective challenge for Southeast Asian nations, highlighting the importance of regional unity and diplomatic efforts.

These findings underscore the power of media rhetoric in shaping public opinion and highlight the importance of considering the broader implications of media coverage in international conflict reporting. The prevalent use of Cicero's Amplification techniques in media coverage of the SCS dispute illustrates how these strategies reinforce key points and influence opinions. Future research should further explore the role of media rhetoric, including the impact of social media and alternative news sources, on shaping public perception of international conflicts.

By understanding the rhetorical strategies used by different media outlets, policymakers and analysts can better assess the influence of media narratives on public opinion and international relations. This study contributes to the growing body of research on media rhetoric and its impact on conflict reporting, providing valuable insights for future investigations into the role of media in shaping global perceptions.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of CNBC and Kompas articles demonstrated the effective use of Cicero's Amplification techniques in shaping public perception of the SCS dispute. Repetition, iteration, word doubling, and gradual intensification were all employed to reinforce key points and enhance the persuasive power of the articles. CNBC's focus on global economic and strategic implications, contrasted with Kompas's emphasis on regional stability and ASEAN's role, illustrated how different media outlets tailor their coverage to resonate with their respective audiences. This study underscores the critical role of media in framing international conflicts and influencing public opinion through strategic rhetorical techniques.

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