

# Exploring Self-Construction of the American International Image: A Conceptual Metaphor Perspective

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**Abstract.** While press releases and cultural transmission materials are common materials for understanding a country's self-construction of international images, to what extent the speeches at international conferences are effective in shaping national images is yet to explore from a perspective of cognitive linguistics? The present study compiles the minutes of 26 meetings of the United Nations Security Council on "the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian issue", from which the speeches by U.S. representatives were selected to establish a corpus, and explores the self-construction of the American international image with conceptual metaphor theory. It is found that JOURNEY metaphor, BUILDING metaphor and so on are instrumental in shaping its image of advocating peace, but SEED metaphor and NEIGHBOR metaphor, etc. reveal its intention to perpetuate the conflict and double standards in dealing with the two conflicting parties.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, international image, international conference minutes

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, discourse analysis texts on the shaping of international image include press releases [1], discourse on foreign cultural communication [2], and statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [3]. However, diplomatic discourse should not be limited to these. Speeches by representatives of various countries at international conferences also have significant importance in shaping national image. Furthermore, the shaping of national image is the result of the joint action of language and behavior. If external actions do not align with diplomatic discourse, positive discourse may have the opposite effect. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a long-standing and highly watched international hotspot issue. The current round of crisis has lasted for over a year and has yet to be resolved. The United Nations Security Council, as one of the main organs of the international stage, plays an important role in the negotiation and resolution of this issue. As one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, the United States holds significant discourse power within this international organization. Therefore, the stance and discourse of the United States representatives are closely related to whether this humanitarian crisis can be resolved smoothly.

## 2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory Framework

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory mainly consists of three components: the source domain, which refers to concrete entities, the target domain, which represents abstract concepts, and the mapping from the source domain to the target domain. Conceptual metaphors can be broadly classified into three categories: structural metaphor, orientational metaphor and ontological metaphor. Structural metaphor emphasizes the structural similarity between the source domain and the target domain. For example, in the metaphor "LIFE IS JOURNEY", the concrete concept "journey" is mapped onto the abstract concept "life". Common expressions include referring to the future of life as "the road ahead" and describing smooth living as "smooth sailing." Orientational metaphors involve mapping spatial orientations onto abstract concepts. Common orientational metaphors include FRONT-REAR metaphor, UP-DOWN metaphor, INSIDE-OUTSIDE metaphor, etc. For instance, "THE TOP IS THE BEST" represents an UP-DOWN metaphor, and related expressions include "top student," "top talent," "high technology", etc. Ontological metaphor refers to understanding one abstract concept or entity as the essence of a concrete concept or entity, emphasizing the essential properties of the target domain concept. In the metaphor "DEBATE IS WAR", war is regarded as the essence of debate. Related expressions

include “verbal battle”. Lakoff and Johnson mentioned in their book *Metaphors We Live By* those metaphors broadly exist in our concepts and even in our subconsciousness, extensively reflected in our language. It can be said that conceptual metaphors are involved in the generation of every sentence, and there is no exception in international conference discourse [4].

### 3. Interpretation of Conceptual Metaphors in U.S. Speech Records

Based upon previous research, the present study compiled the minutes of 26 United Nations Security Council meetings on “the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian issue” (January 5, 2023, to January 12, 2024) [5]. From these records, the speeches by the U.S. representatives were selected to establish a corpus. Using AntConc software, corpus analysis was conducted to explore the overall effect of the main types of conceptual metaphors in the corpus on the self-construction of the American international image, in conjunction with the actual actions of the U.S. The corpus analysis revealed that structural metaphors in the text mainly included JOURNEY metaphor and BUILDING metaphor, while orientational metaphors encompassed UP-DOWN schema metaphor and INSIDE-OUTSIDE schema metaphor. Ontological metaphors included NEIGHBOR metaphor and SEED metaphor. Textual expressions of various types of conceptual metaphors are excerpted in Table 1. The following section elaborates on seven representative metaphors selected from the three major categories of metaphors.

**Table 1.** Conceptual Metaphors in U.S. Speeches at the Tenth Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly

| Structural Metaphors          | Textual Expression  |
|-------------------------------|---|
| JOURNEY metaphor              | the best path to stability; steps to restore calm; remote; find a way                   |
| BUILDING metaphor             | rebuild trust and create a foundation; governance structure; undermines the possibility |
| BODY metaphor                 | the heart of our relationship; at first hand; the heart of our efforts                  |
| Other structural metaphors    | fan the flames of the violence; prevent the war from spreading; giving cover to         |
| Oriental Metaphors            | Example Terms   |
| UP-DOWN schema                | reduce tensions; concern is raised; deepen normalization; downward spiral               |
| INSIDE-OUTSIDE schema         | get out of harm’s way; pour out across our screens; everything in our power             |
| FRONT-REAR schema             | behind our efforts; behind the scenes; Two paths lie before us.                         |
| Other orientational metaphors | live side by side; all sides; unilateral actions  |
| Ontological Metaphors         | Example Terms   |
| NEIGHBOR metaphor             | neighbors; our Israeli friends; partners  |
| SEED metaphor                 | sow the seeds for a lasting peace; plant the seeds for the next war                     |
| MACHINE metaphor              | driving force; accelerate and streamline; drive the parties further apart               |
| Other ontological metaphors   | nightmare; human tragedy; the painful scars;  |

#### 3.1. PEACE PROCESS IS JOURNEY

JOURNEY metaphor often involves projects with continuity and a long-time span. Its essence lies in the perceptible distance mapping to abstract time, which is common in political and diplomatic discourse. For example, in a statement by the spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the 45th anniversary of China-US diplomatic relations, it was mentioned, “Over the past 45 years, China-US relations have weathered storms and moved forward with determination.” French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Catherine Colonna also stated during a joint press conference with Wang Yi, “Vous savez que depuis 1964, la relation franco-chinoise a toujours suivi sa propre voie,” which reflects the concept metaphor of BILATERAL DIPLOMATIC HISTORY IS JOURNEY.

Representatives from the United States consistently reflected the concept metaphor of RESOLVING CONFLICT IS JOURNEY in their remarks at the 10th Emergency Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly. Regarding the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the spokesperson stated, “We stand at a crossroads. Two paths lie before us”: one is the path of violence and terrorism pursued by Hamas, which the US believes, “The path of terror that Hamas is engaged on has not improved the life of a single person or done anything to advance peace and stability. On the contrary, all Hamas has ever brought to the Palestinian people and the region is misery, chaos and destruction.” The other path is through peaceful negotiations, with the US spokesperson repeatedly emphasizing, “Good-faith dialogue is the best path to stability,” while the path of violence and terror leads to “death, destruction, suffering and darkness”. Hence, it is evident that the US spokesperson condemns the path of violence and terrorism while supporting the path of sincere dialogue, believing that the root cause of this conflict lies with Hamas, whose actions diverge from the path of peace, thereby clarifying their own stance while maintaining an international image of advocating peace and opposing violence.

### 3.2. TRUST IS BUILDING

BUILDING metaphor typically involves the mapping from concrete structures to abstract entities such as organizations, relationships, or emotions. Throughout the discourse, there are numerous instances where the concept metaphor of “trust between nations is a building” is reflected. For instance, the spokesperson mentioned, “The United States stands ready to support the parties as they work to rebuild trust and create a foundation for an eventual return to negotiations.” The casualties, economic losses, and psychological traumas caused by wars cannot be erased in a short time. Therefore, the restoration of trust between parties is a long and arduous process, akin to the gradual construction of a large building, brick by brick. Rebuilding trust will serve as the foundation for the edifice of peace negotiations, highlighting the importance of trust rebuilding for further peace talks and foreshadowing that the advancement of peace negotiations will be another major undertaking.

According to the spokesperson from the United States, the lack of trust between nations leads to rampant violence and terrorism, and the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict has further diminished trust among Middle Eastern countries, to some extent resulting in the absence of peace negotiations. Therefore, for the Middle East issue to be peacefully resolved, it is essential to restore trust between different groups, improve the sensitive and fragile psyches of both sides, and eliminate hostility and animosity to discard the mindset of war and seek peaceful solutions. The United States has repeatedly called on the international community to increase economic and medical aid to Palestinian refugees and urged Israel “to take every possible measure to prevent civilian casualties as it exercises its right to safeguard its people from acts of terror. (November 22, 2023, Meeting No. 9484)” However, this statement contradicts its actions. According to the U.S. Department of Defense News, on October 18, 2023, the United States vetoed a ceasefire resolution draft regarding Gaza. During a meeting at the Pentagon on that day, the U.S. Secretary of Defense stated that the United States would increase military assistance to Israel and deploy the USS Eisenhower aircraft carrier to the region alongside the USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group.[6] (He also said he has extended the stay of the USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group in the Eastern Mediterranean and that he has ordered the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group to the region as well.) On February 20, 2024, the United States once again vetoed a humanitarian ceasefire resolution draft. The actions of the United States are not conducive to improving the hostility between the conflicting parties; instead, they exacerbate tensions, further reduce the already scarce trust between Israelis and Palestinians, and provoke strong dissatisfaction from the international community and even domestic citizens of the United States. The misaligned words and deeds of the United States not only hinder the shaping of an international image that advocates peace but also erode its international credibility.

### 3.3. UP IS GOOD, DOWN IS BAD

UP-DOWN schema is a mapping from the spatial meanings of “up” and “down” to a series of contrasting abstract concepts [7]. For example, “up” represents the traditional notion of “good,” while “down” represents the traditional notion of “bad.” “Our emotions are continually rising” is a typical example of the up-down schema metaphor, employing the up-down schema metaphor to associate the change in emotions with vertical spatial direction, expressing the meaning of emotions gradually improving. In this metaphor, the positive change in emotions corresponds to the upward spatial direction, constituting a metaphorical association.

In the record of the 9263rd meeting, the US side metaphorically describes the deteriorating situation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as “a further downward spiral,” using downward directional words to convey the negative development of the situation, indicating US concerns and vigilance towards the tense situation. However, when abstract entities themselves carry negative meanings, the effects of “up” and “down” expressions can be reversed. For example, a US representative calls for “Let us do everything in our power to reduce tensions,” where the abstract concept of “tension” itself carries a negative connotation. This assigns a positive, affirmative value to “reduce,” which originally carries a “downward” meaning.

### 3.4. FRONT IS VISIBLE, REAR IS HIDDEN

FRONT-REAR schema is also a common form of directional metaphor, where “front” and “rear” can represent “future” and “past.” For example, “society is advancing forward.” “Front” and “rear” can also represent “visible” and “hidden,” a metaphor related to human anatomy and experiential activities, where typically people can see things in front of them but not behind them.

The metaphorical use of FRONT-REAR schema in the discourse fully embodies the concept metaphor of “front” as “visible” and “rear” as “hidden.” For example, in the remarks of a US representative during the 9451st meeting, it was stated, “The value we place on civilian life is the driving force behind our efforts to secure the release of hostages held by Hamas and other terrorist groups in Gaza.” The spokesperson believed that compared to “our efforts,” “our value for civilian life” is often overlooked by the international community, hence emphasizing throughout the speech that the US consistently upholds humanitarian principles from ideology to action. However, this statement failed to materialize into action. Furthermore, this directional metaphor also carries a causal relationship, where the “value for civilian life” drives the action of “ensuring the safe release of hostages,” strengthening the logical coherence and persuasiveness of the expression. Another example is when addressing the resolution of the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict, stating, “Two paths lie before us,” where “before” symbolizes “visible,” indicating that the two paths are clearly delineated, while also engaging the audience in the thought process of needing to choose one path.

### 3.5. INSIDE IS CLOSED, OUTSIDE IS OPEN

INSIDE-OUTSIDE schema is another important type of directional metaphor, where “inside” and “outside” typically represent contrasting domains, states, or situations. For example, “inside” can symbolize “closed,” then “outside” corresponds to “open,” describing someone who is not good at expressing themselves or is quiet and steady can be described as “introverted,” while “extroverted” corresponds to a cheerful, lively, and active personality.

Representatives from the United States frequently employ the INSIDE-OUTSIDE schema in their speeches. For example, they often mention helping civilians in conflict get out of harm’s way, where the action of “get out of” has an outward directionality. The speaker believes that a dangerous situation is closed and thus oppressive and restrictive. The US proposing to help civilians escape from dangerous situations demonstrates America’s concern for the fate of civilians, contributing to shaping the US’s image as being committed to humanitarianism internationally. Furthermore, US representatives often express willingness to “do everything in our power” to alleviate tensions between the two sides, promote the implementation of both countries’ plans, facilitate local peace, assist local disadvantaged groups, etc. The preposition “in” in this context limits “everything,” on the one hand, showing that the US is willing to do everything possible to maintain regional peace and firmly defend human rights, and on the other hand, indicating that actions will be within the scope of capabilities, leaving room for other operations in practice.

### 3.6. ALLY NATION IS NEIGHBOUR

The essence of this metaphor lies in the mapping of close micro interpersonal relationships to macro social relationships, reflecting the same nature of international relations and interpersonal relations. When used appropriately, it can effectively bring diplomatic relations closer and evoke emotional resonance. During a regular press conference of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Minister Wang Yi responded to a question regarding China’s stance on the situation in Myanmar, stating, “Any behavior that instigates discord between China and Myanmar, undermines the ‘fraternal’ friendship between the two countries, is unpopular and will not succeed.” “Fraternal” refers to brothers and sisters, and “fraternal friendship” implies the close relationship between China and Myanmar, akin to siblings, indicating China’s firm determination and stance in defending its relationship with Myanmar.

In US discourse, expressions related to the metaphor of “neighbors” are relatively monotonous. The most frequently used terms are “partner” and “partnership,” which appeared 54 times. They mainly cover “US partners (countries),” “Israeli partners,” “other partners (countries) in the region (Middle East),” and “humanitarian partners.” The term “friends” was also used when referring to the Israeli people (our Israeli friends). However, the US spokesperson did not use similar terms for the other party, Palestine, and its people in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. From this, it can be inferred that in the cognition of the US spokesperson, the US-Israel relationship is closer than the US-Palestinian relationship, and this proximity or distance also affects the US stance in the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### 3.7. HAZARD IS SEED

Regarding the inhumane act of the United States vetoing the ceasefire resolution draft, a US spokesperson explained the following during the 9499th meeting:

*As long as Hamas clings to its ideology of destruction, any ceasefire is, at best, temporary and is certainly not peace. Any ceasefire that leaves Hamas in control of Gaza would deny Palestinian civilians the chance to build something better for themselves. For that reason, although the United States strongly supports durable peace, in which Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace and security, we do not support the draft resolution’s call for an unsustainable ceasefire that will only plant the seeds for the next war.*

The US representative believes that a ceasefire amounts to indulging HAMAS terrorists. The hazard of war will persist as long as Hamas exists. A temporary ceasefire is merely superficial soil that cannot suppress or even aids in the germination of the seeds of war. Literally, the United States vetoed the ceasefire resolution draft because its focus is on eliminating hazards rather than protecting civilians. The US did not consider that while eliminating the seeds of war, irreversible harm may be inflicted on other “seeds” such as lives, health, prosperity, development, and progress. In short, the US is constrained by a rigid mindset that regards war as inevitable with winners and losers, and the durable peace pursued by the US is merely the peace of the victor. Considering the historical entanglements between Israelis and Palestinians, the complex situation in the Middle East, and external interference, eliminating Hamas may not necessarily lead to long-term peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

## 4. Conclusion

From the analysis of seven types of conceptual metaphors in the corpus, on one hand, the metaphor PEACE PROCESS IS JOURNEY, UP-DOWN schema, and the accusations of Hamas terrorist activities in the speeches contribute to the US shaping a peacekeeping image, especially in the early meetings. On the other hand, the metaphor ALLY NATION IS NEIGHBOR makes it difficult for the US to avoid suspicion of bias. The intended positive effects of the TRUST IS BUILDING and HAZARD IS SEED metaphors are undermined due to inconsistency with US actions, resulting in a negative impact on the shaping of the US international image.

Compared to media reports on the meetings, meeting records serve as primary sources that can more directly reflect the attitudes and positions of the discourse subjects. Conceptual metaphor analysis can provide deeper insights into the cognitive mechanisms and communicative intentions of the speakers, aiding in a comprehensive evaluation of their impact on shaping the US international image. Of course, future researches on the US attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are expected to refer to other types of data such as reports from international organizations and media agencies, relevant documents and statements from US government departments other than the State Department, as well as comments from media and governments of other countries on US-related statements and actions.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been ongoing for over a year, bringing endless suffering to the people of both countries. The United Nations and other international organizations, as well as countries around the world, should shoulder their respective responsibilities and jointly promote the implementation of the Middle East peace process and the Two-state Solution. As one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council, the United States should uphold its responsibility as a major power, cease military support to the conflicting parties, facilitate the early adoption of ceasefire resolutions through concrete actions, actively participate in humanitarian assistance efforts in the region, and help the people of both countries rebuild their homes.

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