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Are Russian Narratives Amplified by PRC Media?

A Case Study on Narratives
Related to Sweden's and Finland's
NATO Applications

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Introduction

After the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, state media in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation have employed similar tactics in their information operations and have often disseminated similar narratives about the war.¹ PRC state media, which insist on referring to the Russian aggression as the 'Ukrainian crisis', have among other things amplified conspiracy theories about purported United States (US) biological weapons facilities in Ukraine and spread Russian narratives claiming US and NATO culpability for the war.² Moreover, Russian officials and commentators significantly outnumber their Ukrainian counterparts in the coverage of state-owned Chinese news organisations targeting foreign audiences, such as Xinhua, the Chinese state news agency, and China Daily.³

The many similarities between the Chinese and Russian media coverage of the war are hardly surprising; the two parties share an apprehension towards NATO and the West at large. Merely three weeks before the launch of Russia's invasion, presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping voiced their opposition

to 'further enlargement of NATO' in a joint statement where they also declared that their friendship had 'no limits'.⁴

One concrete example of the Sino-Russian partnership is collaboration in the information space, where officials have signed several agreements for state media organisations to increase exchanges and mutual support.⁵ In a bilateral agreement signed in July 2021 by both state media outlets and private firms, the parties vowed to jointly promote 'objective, comprehensive and accurate coverage' of international events.⁶ They would, among other things, exchange news content and cooperate on digital media strategies and on the co-production of television shows. There is also evidence that journalists working for Russian state media have helped amplify Chinese narratives.⁷

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has rapidly transformed the European security architecture and prompted Finland and Sweden to initiate their NATO membership applications in the spring of 2022. Following brief governmental consultations, Finland and

Sweden officially applied for membership of the alliance on 18 May 2022. The application process evoked strong negative reactions in Russian and Chinese state-owned media networks, which attempted to frame the move as being fundamentally detrimental for European and even global security.

Considering the shared concern in Moscow and Beijing over new members potentially joining NATO, their collaboration within the information space could be utilised to hamper such an expansion. This report aims to identify the main narratives that characterise the separate coverage of Sweden and Finland in Russia and China from 21 July 2021 to 21 July 2023. The following research questions are analysed and discussed: (1) what are the narratives propagated by both Russia and China to international audiences with respect to Sweden and Finland separately;

(2) in quantitative terms, what is the overlap between Russian and Chinese narratives; and (3) to what extent do the results support the hypothesis that China and Russia are coordinating their strategic communications?

In this report we conduct two distinct analyses, one focused on Sweden and the other on Finland, in examining Russian and Chinese narratives regarding their NATO membership bids. The separation of these two analyses is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the situation, acknowledging that each country's bid may evoke unique narratives due to their different historical, geopolitical, and strategic contexts. While Sweden and Finland share certain similarities in their geopolitical positions, they also possess distinct characteristics and relationships with China and Russia, which could result in divergent narrative strategies from Russian and Chinese media.

Sweden's relations with Russia and China before 2022

Recent historical background to Sweden's relations with Russia

Before 2022 Sweden's relationship with Russia was characterised by a cautious but pragmatic approach. Historically, Sweden maintained a policy of non-alignment and military neutrality, especially during the Cold War, which influenced its interactions with Russia.⁸ Despite Sweden not being a NATO member, its strategic location in northern Europe and its strong defence capabilities have always been significant factors in its relations with Russia.⁹ The post-Cold War era saw a continuation of this cautious engagement, with Sweden often expressing concerns about Russia's military activities in the Baltic region.¹⁰ Incidents such as Russian military exercises near Swedish

airspace and the Baltic Sea occasionally strained relations.¹¹ However, Sweden also pursued cooperative initiatives, particularly in areas of trade and environmental issues.¹²

The relationship took a more complicated turn with Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014. Sweden strongly condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea and its role in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, aligning with European Union (EU) sanctions against Russia.¹³ Despite these tensions, Sweden continued to engage in diplomatic dialogue with Russia, maintaining its long-standing policy of balancing security concerns with diplomatic engagement.¹⁴

Recent historical background to Sweden's relations with China

Sweden's relationship with China before 2022 was predominantly defined by growing economic ties and cautious diplomatic interactions. The establishment of diplomatic relations in 1950 laid the foundation for a relationship that, over the years, saw significant growth in trade and investment.¹⁵ Economically, China emerged as an important market for Swedish exports, particularly in the technology, automotive, and sustainable development sectors.¹⁶ The two countries engaged in various joint ventures and business collaborations, with China valuing Sweden's innovation and technological expertise.¹⁷ However, diplomatic relations were occasionally strained by issues related to human rights and China's internal policies. Sweden, known for its strong stance on human rights,¹⁸ openly criticised China on issues like the treatment of dissidents and the situation in Tibet and Xinjiang.¹⁹ These

criticisms sometimes led to diplomatic friction, with China responding critically to what it perceived as interference in its internal affairs.²⁰

In global politics Sweden often adopted a position that balanced its economic interests with China against broader concerns about China's rising influence in international affairs. The Swedish government's approach towards China was cautious, aiming to maintain a constructive but principled engagement.²¹ By the early 2020s, Sweden's policy towards China showed signs of increasing caution, mirroring a broader European trend of reassessing relations with China amid concerns over security, influence, and human rights.²² This shift was partly influenced by growing awareness of China's strategic ambitions and its assertive foreign policy approach.

Finland's relations with Russia and China before 2022

Recent historical background to Finland's relations with Russia

Before the war in Ukraine, Finland's relations with Russia remained pragmatic, with Finland even receiving praise from Russia as an exemplifier of good relations among European countries. For example, in the Russian Foreign Ministry's yearly foreign affairs report of 2019 (published in March 2020)²³ Finland is the only country in the world described as a good neighbour.²⁴ According to a recent report by Finnish Russia experts, Russia furthermore characterised Finland as a good mediator before 2022 due to Finland's 'neutral' status, although officially Finland has not explicated its position in such terms for decades.²⁵ Russia's conception of Finland's neutrality echoes 'Finlandisation'—a concept developed

during the Cold War and meaning a situation in which a smaller country adapts its domestic and foreign policies in accordance with the interests of its bigger neighbour.²⁶

Finland was characterised as a good neighbour by Russia even in recent years, although the relationship between the two countries was already beginning to fracture before Russia's decision to launch a large-scale invasion against Ukraine. This fracturing is likely to persist, and our research clarifies the early signs of this by looking at Russian state-controlled propaganda channels during Finland's process of joining NATO.

Recent historical background to Finland's relations with China

Not unlike its relations with Russia, Finland's relations with China have developed in a smooth manner ever since the establishment of official relations between the two states in 1950. No serious diplomatic scandals have occurred, and economic interdependence via growing trade and investments between the two states has increased steadily, especially during the post-Cold war era. In the 2020s, China has emerged as Finland's fifth most important trading partner.²⁷

This pragmatism is reflected in the fact that while China's foreign policy has acquired more aggressive overtones during Xi's second term in power, China's approach has remained restrained in Finland. The Chinese embassy in Helsinki almost never openly comments on local political developments, and has completely refrained from aggressive 'wolf warrior diplomacy'²⁸ witnessed in other countries in the region (e.g. Sweden or Lithuania).

Finland for its part has typically avoided direct criticism of Chinese self-defined 'internal affairs', and in general the Sino-Finnish relation can be defined as having manifested 'positive pragmatism' on both sides. Upon visiting Finland in 2017, Xi even defined the relationship as 'an example for peaceful co-existence and friendly exchanges between two countries that are different in size, culture and development level'.²⁹

However, even before the NATO-accession process, Finland's China policy has shown signs of increasing wariness, as has happened in other Western democracies such as the US, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom.³⁰ Official policy publications increasingly frame China as a 'challenge' or even a 'threat' instead of using the earlier cooperative wordings, and the Finnish media discourse on China has taken an overall harder turn, following similar developments elsewhere.³¹

Media systems in Russia and China

Russian media

Russian media demonstrates a common pattern in state propaganda, which consistently utilises mass media as a key tool for its spread. Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews describe the Russian model of propaganda through two distinctive features: 'high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions'.³²

A central component of Russian propaganda consists of high-volume news providers such as Sputnik and RT, which was formerly known as Russia Today. These news providers reproduce narratives put forward by the Kremlin to both domestic and international audiences. Many of these channels, however, are more difficult to access following the large-scale invasion due to limitations imposed by different states and service providers. Consequently, this is likely to alter the ways of Russian propaganda and lead to potentially

catering to different audiences. RT and Sputnik news were chosen as the primary sources for Russian news written in English in our article. They provided the starting point for our Russian news dataset due to being globally recognised media targeting specifically international audiences who may not speak Russian. Irina Khaldarova-Grigor compared the narratives addressed to international and domestic audiences by RT and Russian state-controlled television station Channel One (Первый канал) regarding Ukraine in 2013–14 and noted considerable overlap in narratives targeting these audiences, with differences in emphasis.³³ Sputnik and RT reproduce narratives by employing direct quotes from key Russian political figures and opinionated texts by a range of different authors in support of them.

Russian propaganda is heavily supported by online information activities. Since the advent of Yevgeny Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency in 2013, Russia has been the

forerunner in social media manipulation. Its online propaganda focuses on high-volume, multichannel broadcasting of the Kremlin's narratives, and many countries have attempted to copy this particular model, which can be referred to as the 'firehose of falsehood'.³⁴

Russia also heavily relies on foreign, pro-Kremlin actors—both online and offline—to spread its propaganda, and often employs non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to support its cause. In Finland, for example, Russia has utilised a locally well-known researcher, Johan Bäckman, whose high level of education and Russian-speaking skills have made him one of the best-known pro-Kremlin propagandists in Finland.³⁵ Bäckman has launched several NGOs that have similar names to official actors involved in countering information warfare and disinformation campaigns. These fake channels are then used to spread disinformation and pro-Kremlin narratives.³⁶

Chinese media

The Chinese media system distributes its narrative framings for international audiences through a well-developed, hierarchical, and disciplined apparatus. At the top tier of the system are the official statements from high-ranking Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members, ministers, or ambassadors. Official statements are distributed and elaborated through state-owned media outlets, and increasingly further amplified within social media.³⁷

The most important Chinese newspapers and websites aimed at international audiences include People's Daily Online (the international edition of CCP newspaper *People's Daily*, Xinhua, CGTN, China Daily, and Global Times.³⁸ To generalise, China Daily, Xinhua, and CGTN aim for a more professional, objective journalistic image, while Global Times has been known as a provider of more radical, nationalistic, or even hawkish views. Whether its most controversial views align with the

CCP's official foreign policy line is disputed, but the website can at least be interpreted as representing the most patriotic and jingoistic ideas in Chinese foreign policy thinking.

In addition to these official main websites, CCP propaganda is spread through various proxy actors—for example, by publishing its supplements in foreign newspapers. In Finland, Helsinki Times, a privately owned Finnish news site, publishes CCP propaganda in its 'China News' supplement, whose content is provided by the People's Daily. In addition, the editorial line of the Helsinki Times opinion pieces is biased against NATO membership, and the outlet has also published opinion pieces written by Chinese ambassadors.³⁹

Finally, like most countries, China uses its state-affiliated social media channels to spread different narratives throughout the web. Its approach is very similar to the Russian 'firehose of falsehood' model, where the focus

is on the quantity of the messages rather than their quality. These messages are then amplified by entities who are paid to disseminate specific narratives online.⁴⁰ In recent years the two countries have also joined forces by sharing the same anti-Western narratives on, for example, COVID-19 vaccines and the Russia-Ukraine war.⁴¹ In the latter case, the CCP has been accused of directing the Chinese media not to report information 'disadvantageous to Russia or sympathetic to the West'.⁴²

Previously, the Chinese media focused more on elevating China's reputation abroad, but lately it has also been deploying strategies that discredit and criticise other countries and their foreign policies. This combative and confrontational approach, which loudly denounces criticism towards the CCP and then focuses on counter-attack, is sometimes called the 'wolf warrior' strategy. Furthermore, China has also been accused of adopted the covert spread of conspiracy theories and disinformation,⁴³ something that Russia has already been utilising.

As is the case with Russia, China also occasionally attempts to organise astroturfing campaigns, in which it tries to make the movement and the message seem like they are

organic, grassroots activity. Like Russia, China also utilises embassy and diplomat accounts to spread official narratives to make them seem more credible.

Research has shown that a large share of disinformation on social media is often spread by so-called superspreaders.⁴⁴ Both Russian and Chinese troll farms try to create this type of large account with artificial inflation, and sometimes the accounts are even rebranded from old, popular accounts. One example of this is China's embassy account for Ethiopia, which was rebranded as the embassy account for Lithuania after China-Lithuania relations went sour when Lithuania challenged China on its policy over Taiwan. The account's following was then artificially inflated by troll farms, which also criticised various Lithuanian politicians online.⁴⁵

In addition, China offers Russia its infrastructure in geographical areas where Russia has a strong media presence but no network for broadcasting. For example, a Chinese media and satellite television provider, StarTimes, has broadcast RT in various African countries, and Xinhua has translated articles from the Russian state news service Interfax. This news was then broadcast in countries such as Congo.⁴⁶

Sweden's NATO application

On 16 May 2022 the Swedish prime minister, Magdalena Andersson, announced her government's decision to apply for NATO membership.⁴⁷ Her political party, the Social Democrats, had previously opposed a Swedish bid to join NATO, arguing that the country's non-alignment posture had contributed to peace and stability in Sweden and its neighbouring countries. In a parliamentary debate Andersson suggested that the Russian invasion of Ukraine meant that Sweden now had to be prepared for Russia 'taking similar risks' in Sweden's immediate neighbourhood and that Sweden needed 'formal security guarantees that come with NATO membership'.

Andersson's announcement came the day after Finland had made the decision to apply for membership of the alliance and followed months of close dialogue between the leaders of the two Nordic states related to Russia's invasion. President Putin asserted that the two Nordic states' accession to NATO did not constitute a 'direct threat' to Russia but cautioned that the 'expansion of military infrastructure to these territories will certainly provoke our response'.⁴⁸ President Xi has made no official comment on the matter.

Methods and sources

The current study used content analysis of Chinese, Russian, and Western news sources targeting international audiences in order to identify, quantify, and describe narratives and themes related to Sweden and, more specifically, its bid to join NATO. The content analysis was conducted using the Dcipher Analytics text analytics platform.⁴⁹ All articles in selected newspapers mentioning ‘Sweden’ or ‘Swedish’ from 21 July 2021 to 21 July 2023 were collected and used as a starting point for the analysis. This timeline includes time prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine to enable before-and-after comparison, though the vast majority of articles identified as relevant for the study were published after the invasion.

In total, after removing duplicate articles within the same source, 28,540 articles were collected and used for the analysis: 4321 from Chinese sources, 3678 from Russian sources, and 20,541 from Western sources.⁵⁰ The inclusion of Western sources provides a point of reference and contrast with which to compare

Russian and Chinese sources. Table 1 provides an overview of the total number of articles from each source used as input for the analysis.

After the initial filtering of these news sources, a narrative analysis framework method, as shown in Figure 1, was adopted to extract thematic clusters and conduct narrative analysis. Briefly, a large language model (LLM) was used to summarise the content of each article with respect to Sweden. These summaries were then clustered according to their content, so that similar topics were clustered together. This led to broad themes with respect to Sweden, corresponding to clusters of article summaries, emerging bottom-up from the analysis.

Thematic clusters without any connection to Sweden’s NATO bid, including reporting around various sports teams, athletes, and companies, were eliminated from the data. Broadly relevant thematic clusters, including those related to security, geopolitics, international

News source	Type	Number of articles mentioning Sweden
Sputnik International	Russian source	2143
RT	Russian source	1535
Xinhua	Chinese source	1398
CGTN	Chinese source	929
China Daily	Chinese source	902
People’s Daily	Chinese source	584
Global Times	Chinese source	497
China Plus / China Radio International	Chinese source	11
Reuters	Western/International source	8646
AP News	Western/International source	7179
Washington Post	Western/International source	2363
BBC News	Western/International source	1110
Al Jazeera	Western/International source	927
NPR / National Public Radio	Western/International source	316

TABLE 1: News sources studied for Sweden’s NATO application

relations, energy issues, and social issues—with or without any mention of Sweden’s NATO bid—were kept in the data for further analysis. At the end of this filtering step, 12,877 articles remained: 2461 from Chinese sources, 2837 from Russian sources, and 7573 from Western sources. As a last filtering step, clusters with specific relevance to Sweden’s NATO bid were identified and the remaining clusters were filtered out. This yielded a total of 7206 articles: 1517 from Chinese media, 1859 from Russian media, and 3830 from Western media.

cluster of articles expressing similar narratives or describing similar issues. An LLM was used to summarise and name each topic cluster based on the associated articles. Summaries were generated for Chinese, Russian, and Western news separately to enable qualitative comparison in narrative between the different source types. To prevent hallucinations – instances where the LLM might generate misleading or false information – and other errors, references to the original articles were provided for each statement in the summaries.

Topic detection was performed on the remaining article summaries in two steps: first on the 12,877 articles corresponding to all broadly relevant themes, then on the 7206 articles of specific relevance to Sweden’s NATO bid. Each identified topic corresponded to a

Quantitative measures were generated for each topic, including article volume in total, per source type, and per source. These measures made it possible to investigate the extent to which the focus of the reporting was quantitatively different in the different source types.

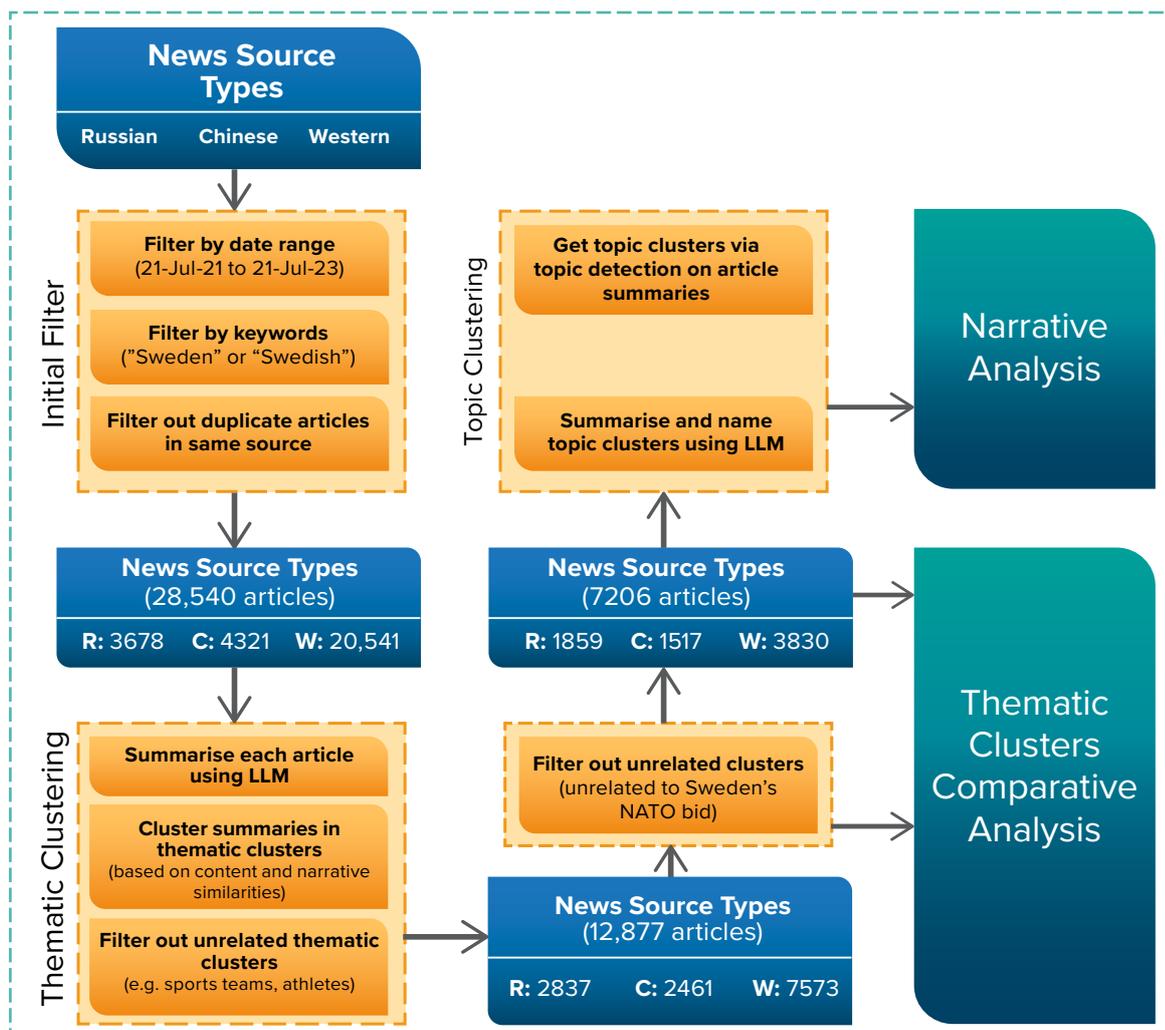


FIGURE 1: Narrative analysis framework method for Sweden’s NATO application

Results

On intensity of reporting

In all three types of sources, the majority of reporting on Sweden's bid to join NATO is factual, simply describing facts and events. However, the intensity of reporting, measured through a theme's share of total reporting, varies greatly between source types. Below is an overview of the biggest themes in the reporting and their share of reporting for each source type.

NATO-related reporting accounts for a large share of reporting on Sweden in Chinese and Russian sources

As shown in Figure 2, topics of specific relevance to Sweden's bid to join NATO accounted for 19% of the total news reporting about Sweden (including reporting on sport, industry, etc.) in Western sources, while being significantly higher in Chinese sources (35% of Sweden-related news) and Russian sources

(51% of Sweden-related news). When calculated as a share of articles related to broadly relevant themes (such as security, politics, energy, international relations, and social issues), articles of specific relevance to Sweden's bid to join NATO accounted for 51% of news reporting about Sweden in Western sources, 62% in Chinese sources, and 66% in Russian sources. This shows that Chinese and Russian sources had significantly more coverage on NATO-related themes compared to Western sources.

Variations in reporting intensity for key themes

Table 2 shows the total article volume as well as article share for large and other noteworthy themes in the reporting, presented separately for Chinese, Russian, and Western sources. The article share is calculated through the number of articles mentioning a theme compared to the total number of articles about broad themes of interest (security, geopolitics,

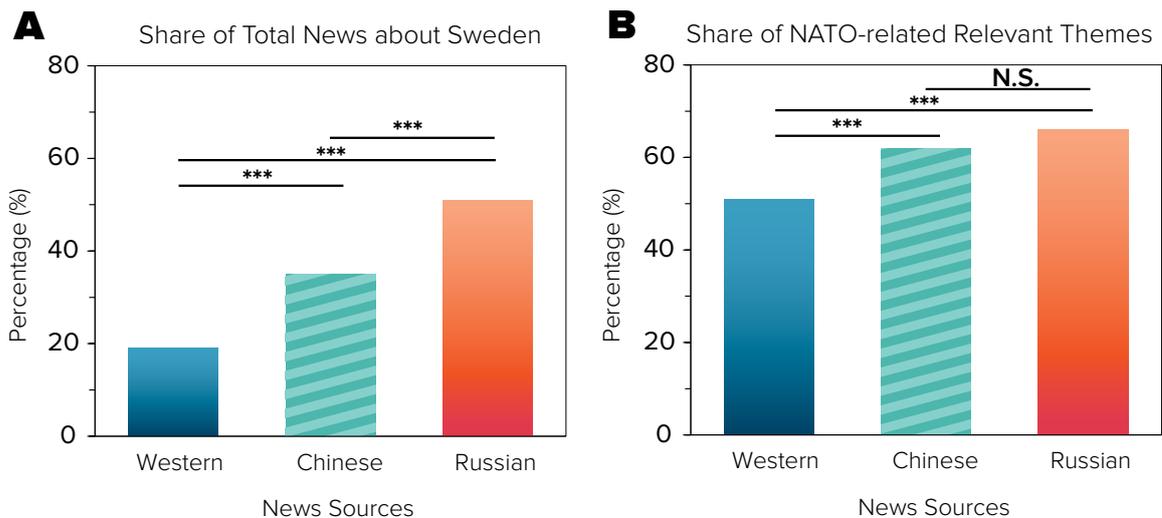


FIGURE 2: Comparison of NATO-related reporting on Sweden in different sources for (A) the share of total news about Sweden and, after filtering, (B) the share of NATO-related relevant themes. Chi-square test for independence p-values indicate statistical significance at 0.05 significance level (**P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001, N.S.: not significant).

energy, etc.). The shares do not sum to 100% because each article can deal with multiple themes, and less noteworthy themes are excluded from the table.

Table 2 reveals the following similarities and differences in the intensity of reporting of different themes:

- Coverage of challenges to Sweden’s NATO bid, through opposition from Turkey and to a lesser extent Hungary and Croatia, was somewhat more frequent in Chinese and especially Russian sources compared to Western sources.
- Both Chinese and Russian sources had a significantly stronger focus than Western sources on major negative events, specifically the sabotage of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and Quran-burning incidents and resulting international outrage.
- Russian sources had a stronger focus than other sources on riots in Swedish cities, though this is a minor theme in absolute numbers.
- Chinese sources had a tendency to amplify the negative views of Sweden’s NATO expansion by citing specific international experts. All Chinese sources studied also covered domestic protests in Sweden against the Swedish NATO bid, an issue that was absent in other sources, though this is a minor theme in absolute numbers.
- Cybersecurity threats to Swedish interests were a relatively strong theme in all three source types, but with a lower share of reporting in Chinese and Russian sources compared to Western sources.

Theme	Number of articles	Article share: Chinese sources (%)	Article share: Russian sources (%)	Article share: Western sources (%)
Opposition and requests from Turkey	4359	33.4	37.2	32.8
The impact on Europe’s security landscape of Sweden’s potential NATO membership	1882	16.7	16.4	13.3
Opposition and requests from Hungary	1609	9.9	14.6	12.6
Cybersecurity threats to Swedish interests	1352	9.0	9.0	11.6
Sabotage of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline	859	9.0	9.7	4.8
Sweden’s involvement in producing weapons for Ukraine’s military capabilities	730	2.6	6.5	7.2
Quran burning resulting in international outrage and diplomatic tensions	599	6.6	8.2	2.7
Energy and cost-of-living crisis	577	5.1	3.3	4.7
Opposition and requests from Croatia	271	2.6	2.4	1.8
Negative views of Sweden’s bid to join NATO by specific international experts	211	6.8	1.1	0.2
Riots in Swedish cities	201	1.1	2.4	1.4
Arctic Council cooperation and the decision to exclude Russia	102	0.5	1.5	0.7
Domestic protests against the bid to join NATO	15	0.5	0.1	0.0

TABLE 2: Noteworthy themes in reports about Sweden in Chinese, Russian, and Western media

On topics and narratives related to Sweden's bid to join NATO

The sections below summarise each source type's version of five major topics identified in the reporting on Sweden's bid to join NATO, and the narratives by the Chinese, Russian, and Western sources associated with these topics. These topics cut across the themes discussed in the section on reporting intensity above; in other words, an article covering a particular theme can cover several topics when doing so. Within each topic, to avoid the narratives being qualitatively and arbitrarily described, the relevant article sources for each narrative were quantitatively identified using a relevance score calculated using an LLM, with the highest-scoring article sources used as narrative descriptors for each source type. Only narratives with a normative component,⁵¹ as opposed to factual descriptions of events, are described below.

Sweden under pressure to abandon neutrality

Chinese sources: Sweden's bid to join NATO is seen as a positive development by the White House.⁵² Sweden, along with Finland, has been under pressure from NATO, the US, and its own elites to join NATO, eroding its appearance of neutrality.⁵³ The decision to join NATO signifies a mindset of standing united against other countries rather than with them.⁵⁴ Sweden's decision to join NATO without a referendum is influenced by external pressure and internal factors.⁵⁵ There are reservations or concerns about Sweden's decision to join NATO due to the end of neutrality and potential challenges faced domestically.⁵⁶

Core of the narrative: The US is forcing Sweden to join NATO, but NATO membership will have negative consequences for Sweden.

Russian sources: Sweden's bid to join NATO, along with Finland, will undermine its independent foreign policy stance and

neutrality, preventing the "Finlandization"⁵⁷ of Europe' and leading to the "NATO-ization" of Europe'.⁵⁸

Core of the narrative: By joining NATO, Sweden will face negative consequences.

Western sources: Sweden is actively seeking to join NATO due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine,⁵⁹ which prompted a reassessment of its previous reluctance.⁶⁰ Sweden's potential bid to join NATO is seen as a significant shift in European security,⁶¹ as the country maintained neutrality throughout the Cold War.⁶² Sweden has made a significant change in its policy of neutrality by seeking membership in NATO, growing closer to the alliance over time.⁶³

Core of the narrative: Russia's invasion has pushed Sweden to abandon its policy of neutrality and join NATO.

Implications for Europe's security landscape

Chinese sources: The inclusion of Sweden in NATO, along with Finland, is seen as a move that will increase NATO's power and pose a new challenge to Europe's security order.⁶⁴ This northward expansion of NATO could escalate tensions and provoke conflict with Russia, leading to a more fragile security status for Europe⁶⁵ and potentially invite disaster.⁶⁶ It would also increase Russia's sense of insecurity due to the significant territorial boundaries between NATO and Russia, especially Finland's 1340 km land border with Russia.⁶⁷ This could potentially spark conflicts and create socio-economic and political problems in Europe.⁶⁸ Overall, Sweden's NATO bid and NATO's expansion have the potential to significantly impact Europe's security architecture, increase tensions with Russia, and potentially destabilise the region.⁶⁹

Core of the narrative: As a result of Sweden and Finland joining NATO, Europe will become more vulnerable, unstable, divided, and insecure.

Russian sources: The potential inclusion of Sweden in NATO, along with Finland, would further expand the alliance and potentially lead to an escalation of tensions and military build-up.⁷⁰ This expansion could provoke Russia and worsen the situation in Europe, increasing the chances of a global conflict and prolonging the conflict in Ukraine.⁷¹ It is argued that instead of adding more members to NATO, efforts should be made to establish a new security architecture that includes not just Europe but also Russia.⁷² The region surrounding Sweden, particularly the Barents Euro-Arctic region, could experience increased military activity and tension due to Sweden's forthcoming accession to NATO.⁷³

Core of the narrative: NATO expansion will lead to tension, conflict, and military build-up. To avoid this, a European security architecture including Russia should be established.

Western sources: The inclusion of Sweden in NATO would strengthen NATO's defences in the Baltic Sea, as Sweden has a strong navy and builds its own fighter jets.⁷⁴ This would provide an alternative route for reinforcement instead of relying solely on the Suwałki Gap.⁷⁵ Additionally, Sweden's membership would increase NATO's access to the Baltic Sea, enhancing its presence in the region.⁷⁶ Furthermore, it would contribute to NATO's presence in the Arctic, which is seen as vital to Russia's security.⁷⁷ However, there are concerns that increased NATO presence in the Arctic could escalate tensions with Russia.⁷⁸ Sweden's decision to join NATO is seen as a positive and favourable move, described as the 'best decision for Sweden'.⁷⁹ Joining NATO would provide security guarantees for Sweden and Finland and strengthen their defences in an uncertain Europe.⁸⁰

Core of the narrative: The inclusion of Sweden as a NATO member is positive and will increase the alliance's capabilities amid tensions with Russia.

Risks and consequences for Sweden associated with its NATO bid

Chinese sources: The risks associated with Sweden's NATO bid include concerns about escalating tensions and increased militarisation.⁸¹ Critics argue that joining NATO could compromise Sweden's non-aligned tradition and peace policy.⁸² Additionally, some analysts express concerns that Sweden's membership of NATO may undermine its foreign policy options and involve the country directly in conflicts.⁸³ The expansion of NATO to Russia's borders, including Finland and Sweden, is seen as a threat to regional stability.⁸⁴ There are also concerns about the impact on Swedish foreign policy, gender equality, civil society, and potential negative social impacts such as increased prostitution around military bases.⁸⁵

Core of the narrative: Sweden's inclusion in NATO threatens regional stability and could affect Sweden negatively in many ways.

Russian sources: The risks associated with Sweden's NATO bid include potential harm to Sweden's image as a small, harmless country with good relations with others, which could lead to significant losses in Swedish exports.⁸⁶ There is also the risk of deteriorating relations with Moscow and being dragged into armed conflicts if tensions escalate in the surrounding areas.⁸⁷ Furthermore, joining NATO may provoke Russia and undermine stability in northern Europe, potentially making Sweden a 'frontier state' in the event of war between NATO and Russia.⁸⁸ Additionally, there are concerns about losing Sweden's nuclear-free status and an increase in taxes to finance military activities instead of social care and education.⁸⁹

Core of the narrative: If Sweden were to join NATO, it could become more vulnerable to geopolitical tension between the US and Russia, and Sweden could be affected negatively in many ways.

Western sources: The risks associated with Sweden's NATO bid include potential retaliatory tactics from Russia, such as spy operations, cyberattacks, violations of Swedish airspace, and attempts to influence lawmakers.⁹⁰ Additionally, there are concerns about potential responses from Russia, including propaganda campaigns and nuclear weapon deployment.⁹¹

Core of the narrative: If Sweden were to join NATO, it could become a target of Russian provocations.

US involvement in Sweden's NATO bid

Chinese sources: The US is seeking to expand NATO and pressure Sweden to join the alliance,⁹² driven by the US policy of global hegemony, which is seen as destabilising and a threat to international peace.⁹³ The US-led military alliance is expected to be further strengthened by the new round of expansion.⁹⁴ US president Joe Biden has expressed support for Sweden's bid to join NATO during his meeting with the leaders of Nordic countries at the White House.⁹⁵ The US welcomes tensions in Europe and wants to see new tensions occur in places like the border between Russia and Finland and the Baltic region.⁹⁶

Core of the narrative: The US is pressuring Sweden to join NATO and fomenting tension in Europe as part of its attempts to remain a global hegemon.

Russian sources: The US views Sweden's membership of NATO as a strategic advantage in the Arctic region and a way to contain Russia.⁹⁷ The US strategy aims to weaken Russia by incorporating Sweden aggressively into NATO, preventing Russia from exploiting natural resources in the Arctic.⁹⁸ The US president has mentioned that the expansion of NATO membership to include Sweden and Finland would turn Putin's hoped-for "Finlandization" of Europe into the "NATO-ization" of Europe.⁹⁹ Western countries, including the US, are pressuring Sweden to give in to

Turkey's demands over its NATO bid.¹⁰⁰ The US is also providing financial incentives to secure Turkey's support, including by offering more than \$11 billion in IMF assistance.¹⁰¹

Core of the narrative: The US aims to contain and weaken Russia, and perceives a Swedish NATO membership as a means to strengthen its own strategic interests in the Arctic.

Western sources: US president Joe Biden has expressed strong support for Sweden's application for NATO membership.¹⁰² This support indicates the US's desire to strengthen ties with Sweden and expand the alliance. Additionally, bipartisan support in the US Congress is expected for expanding NATO, which demonstrates a deep commitment to Ukraine and NATO expansion.¹⁰³ Furthermore, discussions have taken place between NATO leaders and foreign ministers from Sweden and Finland regarding their potential membership bids.¹⁰⁴ These discussions highlight the US's efforts to engage with Sweden and encourage its alignment with NATO.¹⁰⁵

Core of the narrative: The US supports Sweden's NATO bid, as Swedish membership would strengthen the alliance.

Reservations about nuclear weapons and permanent bases on Swedish territory

Chinese sources: Sweden's bid to join NATO is conditional, as the prime minister does not want permanent NATO bases or nuclear weapons in the country.¹⁰⁶ The ruling Social Democratic Party supports joining NATO for the security of Sweden, but expresses reservations about nuclear weapons and permanent bases on Swedish territory.¹⁰⁷ Sweden claims it would not station foreign military bases or weapons systems on its territory if it becomes a NATO member.¹⁰⁸

Core of the narrative: Sweden wishes to join NATO on the condition that allied military

bases or (nuclear) weapons systems are not stationed on its territory.

Russian sources: If Sweden joins NATO, it would oppose the deployment of nuclear weapons and permanent bases on its territory.¹⁰⁹ Bjørnar Moxnes, the leader of Norway's Red Party, opposes Sweden's NATO membership, arguing that it will not contribute to peace and security in the region. He emphasises the importance of maintaining a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Nordic region and expects the Norwegian government to support Sweden's reservations against nuclear weapon deployment and permanent bases on Swedish territory.¹¹⁰ The ruling Social Democratic Party in Sweden supports Sweden's NATO membership bid but opposes the deployment of nuclear weapons and permanent bases on Swedish territory.¹¹¹ The Green Party, as junior allies in the ruling coalition, demands a law against nuclear weapons in Sweden and wants all forms of nuclear weapons to be banned on Swedish territory.¹¹² The opposition Left Party also expresses concerns about the risk of conflict and deteriorating relations with Moscow if NATO deploys nuclear weapons on Swedish soil.¹¹³

Core of the narrative: Sweden opposes the deployment of nuclear weapons and permanent bases on its territory, which could otherwise lead to conflict with Russia.

Western sources: Sweden, like Finland, opposes the deployment of nuclear weapons or the establishment of permanent NATO military bases on its territory.¹¹⁴ The Swedish foreign minister has stated that Sweden would not allow nuclear weapons on its territory, following the example of its Nordic neighbours Denmark and Norway.¹¹⁵

Core of the narrative: Sweden opposes the deployment of nuclear weapons and the establishment of permanent NATO military bases on its territory.

Swedish and international commentators are cited as expert sources of alternative perspectives on Sweden's NATO bid and other issues

Table 3 provides an overview of the most noteworthy experts cited in relation to Sweden's bid to join NATO.

Apart from specific experts, authorities including political parties, NGOs, and unnamed officials and experts were also cited in relation to arguments about Sweden's bid to join NATO. Key arguments and sources are summarised below.

In Chinese sources:

- **Concerns about increased tensions and militarisation:** Several organisations in Sweden argue that joining NATO would not make the country safer and would instead escalate tensions and contribute to increased militarisation.¹¹⁶ They believe that Sweden would be safer outside a military alliance.¹¹⁷
- **Nuclear weapons and arms races:** Organisations like the Christian Peace Movement express concerns about the threat of nuclear weapons and an arms race if Sweden joins NATO.¹¹⁸
- **Impact on Swedish foreign policy:** Critics, such as the leader of the Left Party, have found fault with the government for rushing the decision to join NATO and question potential changes in Sweden's security policy.¹¹⁹
- **Negative consequences for gender equality and civil society:** Organisations like IKFF (the Swedish chapter of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) argue that military alliances do not build peace and that resources should be invested in civil society instead. They express concerns about

potential negative consequences for gender equality and civil society.¹²⁰

In Russian sources:

■ **Alliances instead of diplomacy lead to conflict:** Organisations like the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society oppose Sweden’s NATO membership bid, advocating for a non-aligned stance and prioritising mediation and diplomacy over military alliances.¹²¹ They argue that joining NATO could lead to increased tensions and conflicts in the region.¹²² Additionally, US activist Medea Benjamin argues against this expansion and believes it is not good for the rest of the world.¹²³

■ **Concerns over Sweden’s nuclear-free status:** Some people express concerns about losing Sweden’s nuclear-free status if it joins NATO.¹²⁴ They fear that this could make Sweden a target or escalate tensions with neighbouring countries, particularly Russia.¹²⁵

■ **An increased financial burden:** Critics of Sweden’s bid also highlight potential financial implications, arguing that joining NATO could divert resources away from social programmes and education towards defence spending.¹²⁶

■ **NATO expansion is destabilising:** Russian officials criticise Sweden’s bid, view it as ‘destabilising’, and warn of

Title	Affiliation	Articles in Russian media	Articles in Chinese media	Example comment
Director	Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, Sweden	1	39	‘Sweden will lose even more of its independent foreign policy and will have to spend horrendous sums on adapting to NATO’
Chairman	Belt and Road Institute, Sweden	0	17	‘The UK, US and G7’s efforts to demonise China are based on fear and ignorance of modern China and its 5000-year civilisation’
West Asia coordinator	Schiller Institute, Sweden	0	15	China’s Global Security Initiative can bring the world closer to peace
Vice president and veteran	Stand Together Center for Renewing America	0	2	‘It is not in the national interest of the United States, through NATO, to commit to defending two wealthy European welfare states whose neutrality has kept them safe and prosperous for more than 70 years’
President	Turkish Foreign Policy Institute	3	1	Bagci accused Sweden of trying to ‘sit on two chairs’ by attempting to join the alliance while disregarding an ally’s culture and religious traditions
President	Centre Delàs, Spain	0	6	‘One of the main causes of the current Ukraine crisis is NATO’s eastward expansion since the 1990s and the pressure it has been exerting on Russia’
Former professional officer	‘The German Luftwaffe’	0	2	‘The threat from Russia is nonexistent and is merely a I for NATO’s function as an instrument for maintaining US dominance’
Former head	French Military Mission at the United Nations	2	0	‘The West may be purposefully suppressing the findings of investigations into the Nord Stream blasts’

TABLE 3: Selected commentators quoted in Russian and Chinese media

increased tensions in the region,¹²⁷ and of Russia withdrawing from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.¹²⁸ Oleg Stepanov, the Russian ambassador to Canada, warns that Sweden joining NATO would force Russia to treat Sweden as an adversary and would worsen tensions.¹²⁹ Alexander Grushko, the Russian deputy foreign minister, questions the motivations behind Sweden's ambition to join NATO and expresses concerns about potential changes in NATO's nuclear policy.¹³⁰

- **Russian concerns over legality and consequences:** There are concerns about the legality of Sweden's admission and its implications, with Russia opposing it and seeing it as a mistake with far-reaching consequences.¹³¹

In Western sources:

- **National security:** The ongoing debate emphasises the need for Sweden to join NATO in order to enhance its national security.¹³² The argument is that joining NATO would provide Sweden with

security guarantees and strengthen its defence capabilities in an uncertain European security environment.¹³³

- **Shift in public opinion:** Opinion polls show that a majority of Swedes are in favour of joining NATO.¹³⁴ This shift in public opinion is believed to be influenced by the ongoing NATO debate in neighbouring Finland, where legislators are considering joining NATO.¹³⁵
- **Reconsideration of neutrality:** The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has prompted Sweden and Finland to reconsider their long-held belief in military neutrality for national security reasons.¹³⁶ The argument is that the changing security landscape necessitates a departure from traditional neutrality and a move towards collective defence through NATO membership.¹³⁷
- **Political support:** The Social Democratic Party, which historically opposed NATO membership, has internally debated the issue¹³⁸ and shifted its stance.¹³⁹

Discussion of narratives related to Sweden

The coverage of Sweden in Russian and Chinese state media generally echoes the reporting in leading international media, albeit with substantial differences in terms of nuance and volume. In addition, news about Sweden in Russian and Chinese state media share more commonalities with each other than they do with Western media. While Chinese and Russian media are covering certain issues more than international news companies, and often offer alternative narratives, the extent to which they collaborate or amplify each other's narratives is difficult to assess.

In this section we report on our analysis of the similarities and differences between

Chinese, Russian, and international media coverage of Sweden in general, and its bid to join NATO in particular, in terms of the intensity of reporting, the most common narratives, and the prevalence of Swedish and international commentators cited as expert sources of alternative perspectives.

During the two-year period that we studied, Russian and Chinese media have clearly focused more than international media on NATO-related topics in their coverage of Sweden. Within the NATO/Sweden topic, themes such as potential Russian responses to NATO adding new members and objections

by Turkey and Hungary to Sweden's NATO membership bid are more common.

Prominent themes in the Russian and Chinese news reports, more so than in the international media coverage, relate to friction with other countries. One such example is the outrage in Muslim countries (including Turkey) over protests in Sweden involving the burning of the Quran, and another is the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipeline in September 2022. While seemingly unrelated to the Swedish NATO membership bid, both themes are relevant. The fact that Quran burning was allowed to take place in Sweden, and that there were widespread condemnations in response, seems to have become a major challenge for the government and its relations with Islamic countries such as Turkey, which could also negatively affect Sweden's bid to join NATO. The Nord Stream explosion, for its part, has triggered speculation about the identity of the culprit, and has added to the animosity between Russia, Sweden, and NATO.

Furthermore, we have been able to identify unique traits in the Chinese and Russian coverage, in terms of prevalence of certain themes, nuance, and the selection of commentators that are cited. Chinese state media, for example, have published exclusive news items on protests in Sweden against the country's NATO bid, and on a Greek scholar's assertion that NATO will be weakened if Sweden becomes a member.¹⁴⁰

Common narratives that we have identified include the following.

Chinese state media:

- The US is forcing Sweden to join NATO, but NATO membership will have negative consequences for Sweden.
- As a result of Sweden and Finland joining NATO, Europe will become more vulnerable, unstable, insecure, divided, and assertive.
- Sweden's inclusion in NATO threatens

regional stability and could affect Sweden negatively in many ways.

- The US is fomenting tension in Europe as part of its attempts to remain a global hegemon.
- Sweden wishes to join NATO on the condition that allied military bases or (nuclear) weapons systems are not stationed on its territory.

Russian state media:

- By joining NATO, Sweden will face negative consequences.
- NATO expansion will lead to tension, conflict, and military build-up. To avoid this, a European security architecture including Russia should be established.
- If Sweden were to join NATO, it could become more vulnerable to geopolitical tension between the US and Russia and affect Sweden negatively in many ways.
- The US aims to contain and weaken Russia, and perceives Swedish NATO membership as a means to strengthen its own strategic interests in the Arctic.
- Sweden opposes the deployment of nuclear weapons and permanent bases on its territory, which could otherwise lead to conflict with Russia.

In terms of intensity of reporting, Chinese and Russian sources differ from Western sources on several themes. Higher intensity could be observed for both Chinese and Russian media regarding major negative events, specifically the sabotage of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and Quran-burning incidents, as well as the opposition from other NATO members (mainly Turkey) to Sweden's bid to join the alliance. All Chinese sources studied also covered domestic protests in Sweden against the Swedish NATO bid, an issue that was absent in other sources, though this is a minor theme in absolute numbers. While these were relatively minor themes, Russian sources had the strongest focus on riots

in Swedish cities, and Chinese sources were alone in covering domestic anti-NATO protests in Sweden.

Chinese media often amplify negative views of Sweden's NATO expansion by citing commentators who are critical of Sweden. They therefore use expert commentary more often than do Russian or international media. Mostly they offer viewpoints that differ substantially from the international mainstream and support official Chinese narratives. The commentators

who appear in Chinese media reports are rarely quoted as experts in Russian news coverage, and vice versa. Nevertheless, it should be noted that several commentators who were quoted extensively by Chinese state media during the period of observation—including, for example, the director of the Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, Sweden,¹⁴¹ the president of Centre Delàs, Spain,¹⁴² and 'a former professional officer of the German Luftwaffe'¹⁴³—appeared as expert commentators in Russian state media in 2016–18.

Finland's NATO application

Finland, alongside neighbouring Sweden, officially applied to join NATO on 18 May 2022, which was a significant shift in its foreign policy. Historically, Finland had maintained a policy of military non-alignment, partly due to its extensive 1340 km border with Russia. This policy was a cornerstone of Finland's approach to international relations, aimed at maintaining peace and stability in the region. However, the landscape of European security changed dramatically following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹⁴⁴

The Finnish government's decision to seek NATO membership was driven by a reassessment of the national security environment.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine was a pivotal factor that influenced Finland's stance, leading to a re-evaluation of the benefits of NATO's collective security guarantees. The Finnish president Sauli Niinistö and prime minister Sanna Marin played crucial roles in steering this historic decision.¹⁴⁵ The process of Finland's NATO membership also involved diplomatic negotiations and ratifications by existing NATO member states. Following the necessary ratifications, Finland officially became a member of NATO on 4 April 2023, which marked a new era in its defence policy and regional alignment.¹⁴⁶

Methods and sources

In its source material the report mainly analyses news articles aimed at foreign audiences, but supplements them with posts in social media used for amplifying their impact. Our analysis is based on two datasets consisting of news articles, published in English-language Russian and Chinese state-affiliated news outlets from 21 July 2021 to 1 August 2023 and aimed at international audiences. Most prominent news outlets include Russian RT and Sputnik, and Chinese news sites CGTN, Xinhua, and Global Times.¹⁴⁷

The complete dataset was created by automatically scraping all articles using the keywords 'Finland' and 'Sweden' (and 'Finnish' and 'Swedish') in chosen Russian and Chinese news sites (Table 4). From this mass of 9490 articles, a more limited dataset, containing the keywords 'Finland' and 'NATO', was selected. Relevant articles focusing especially on Finland's NATO process were filtered from this, and a qualitative content analysis was executed on them. To illustrate the process, a keyword search of 'Finland + NATO' for Xinhua news produced 388 hits, of which 119 articles were

Publication	Sweden, Swedish, Finland, Finnish	Finland + NATO (all)	Finland + NATO (filtered)
Global Times	568	87	67
Xinhua	2349	388	119
People's Daily Online	704	98	78
China Daily	1163	141	101
CGTN	955	264	132
Sputnik	2128	576	252
RT	1623	414	236
Total	9490	1968	984

TABLE 4: Keyword hits in Chinese and Russian state media (21 July 2021 to 1 August 2023) used in the research

chosen for closer qualitative analysis based on their content and possible relevance.

Although the period of research extended from July 2021 to August 2023, the bulk of the articles mentioning Finland and NATO were produced around May 2022 when Finland and Sweden submitted their application for NATO membership (Figure 3).

In our qualitative analysis we went through the research data to find the main elements of the narratives propagated by Chinese and Russian news outlets. This meant that we looked for repeated claims, themes, and

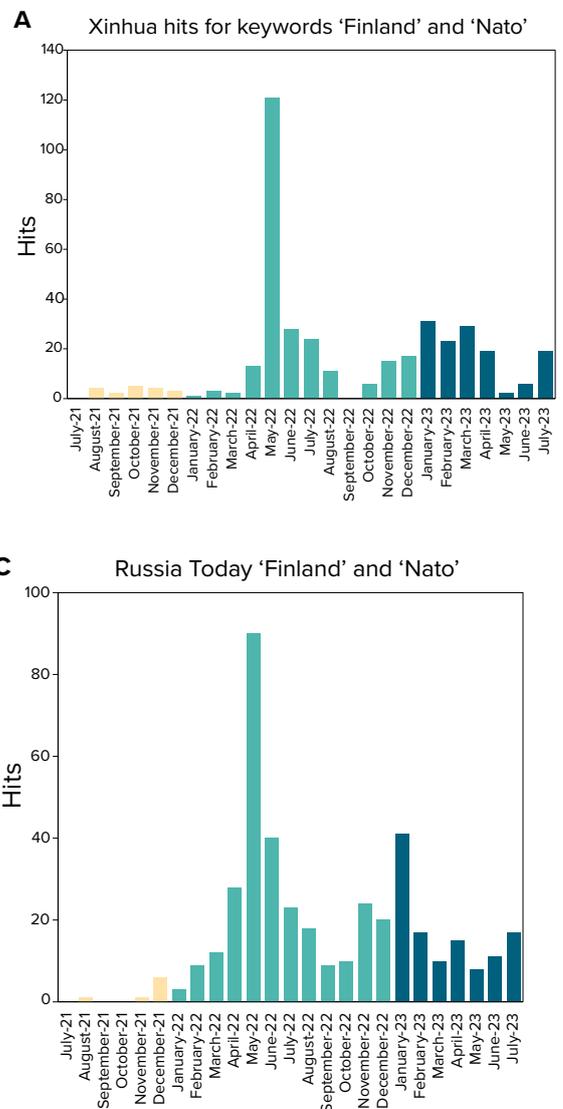


FIGURE 3: Keyword hits for 'Finland' and 'NATO' from 21 July 2021 to 1 August 2023 in (A) Xinhua, (B) Sputnik International, and (C) RT

interpretations that could be distinguished from merely descriptive reporting of events during the time period of the research. Following this approach, we argue, the core elements of both narratives were comparatively easy to identify, and the research material became ‘saturated’ with similar definitions of Finnish membership’s (negative) outcomes.

After identifying the main elements of the narratives (e.g. ‘NATO expansion threatens European security’, ‘NATO expansion is a tool used by the US in its hegemonic ambitions’), we compared both Russian and Chinese narratives and evaluated the degree to which they aligned, or whether Chinese amplification of the Russian narrative was taking place. In the concluding analysis we suggest that although the narratives and even the methods for constructing them are comparatively similar, it remains hard to prove that China is directly or purposefully amplifying Russia’s narratives or their elements.

In addition to news articles we monitored posts and reposts of Chinese diplomats and government officials regarding Finland’s NATO

membership on X/Twitter. This platform was selected because it is often used by politicians and other decision-makers for communication purposes. The tweets were analysed using the ASD Social Data Search tool by the Alliance for Securing Democracy,¹⁴⁸ which until 13 Jul 2023 automatically collected data on tweets, retweets, and likes of chosen state-affiliated accounts.

Below, we first identify the Russian main narrative on Finland’s NATO membership and certain core assumptions underlying it. We then proceed to analyse the core narrative emerging in Chinese state-affiliated news outlets on the Finnish NATO process. Finally, in the concluding subsection, we compare Russian and Chinese narratives, and analyse whether China is indeed amplifying the Russian narrative, or if the similarities in the two narratives can be explained through long-term similarities in both countries’ security framings.

Results

Russian narrative: ‘The US-driven NATO expansion leads to Finland giving up its neutrality’

Russia’s view of NATO expansion

Very soon after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, RT quickly drew a connection between Russia’s ‘special military operation’ and Finland’s intentions to join NATO. On 1 March, RT wrote that ‘Finland, which borders Russia, has opted to supply Ukraine with weapons and lawmakers there are already debating NATO membership.’¹⁴⁹ Both RT’s and Sputnik’s writings regarding Finland and NATO remained somewhat descriptive in the first weeks of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, however.¹⁵⁰

On 19 March, Russia’s foreign minister Sergey Lavrov commented that the US ‘calls the tune’ in NATO.¹⁵¹ Lavrov said that there was ‘little democracy in the Western structures’, which can be interpreted as an attempt to communicate a fractured image of NATO.¹⁵² Sputnik reported in April 2022 that Finland’s NATO membership undermined security in northern Europe¹⁵³ by citing the spokeswoman of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova. A year later, in April 2023, Sputnik reported Dmitry Peskov, the press secretary of the president of the Russian Federation, as still referring to ‘another aggravation of the situation’.¹⁵⁴ These references show that RT and

Sputnik reproduce narratives put forward by the Kremlin by citing these actors.

RT's claim of NATO being driven by the interests of the US was part of the larger narrative and was repeated further on. This position is also prominent elsewhere in the world, and in RT and Sputnik news reporting possibly linked to reaching these target audiences. The role of Finland in the news on NATO was qualitatively not very significant in RT's news. This highlights the fact that Russia's attention had shifted elsewhere and Finland was not seen as a high priority in Russia's foreign policy concerns during the first months following Russia's invasion. These first months show how Finland was integrated into Russia's larger narrative of NATO expansion during the post-Cold War era. This narrative frames NATO expansion as driven by the US. The blame for the changes in the geopolitical situation following Finland's intentions to join the alliance is shifted to the US as an actor, rather than Finland's agency.

'NATO enlargement is led by the US'

Finland and Sweden formally applied for NATO membership on 18 May 2022. Shortly before and after the official applications, we can observe an increase in RT and Sputnik news on the topic. This intensified reporting is noteworthy for identifying any shifts in the Russian narrative. The Nordic countries come to the fore as an area of contestation between Russia and the US. The following quotation citing President Putin summarises the emerging Russian narrative regarding Finland's NATO membership:

Putin said that further NATO enlargement 'is a problem that has been created completely artificially, since it is being done in the foreign policy interests of the United States'. ... Putin, however, emphasised that it isn't the actual accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO that bothers him. 'Russia has no problems with these states, and in this sense, the (NATO) expansion through

*the accession of these countries does not create an immediate threat for Russia. But the expansion of military infrastructure into this territory will certainly provoke our response,' Putin asserted.*¹⁵⁵

Putin here underlines the role of the US in the Nordic countries' applications to join NATO. RT references Putin's statement underscoring the aggravation of the current 'already complicated international security situation'.¹⁵⁶ RT emphasises the perspective of Russia resisting the emergence of a unipolar system led by the US. This framing ties in broadly with Russia's narrative regarding NATO expansion emerging in the 2000s under Putin's rule. RT cites Putin's remarks on the Nordic countries' NATO applications in multiple articles. This is reflective of RT's strategy of communicating the Kremlin's strategic narratives to the international audience. The emerging narrative on the two Nordic countries' applications to join the alliance is connected to the narrative of NATO expansion led by the US being hostile towards Russia.

Putin's comments in May 2022 explicate the following assumptions on Finland's NATO membership: Russia 'will respond accordingly', Finland and Sweden abandon their 'traditions of non-alignment', and NATO is deemed responsible for the aggravation of the 'currently complicated international situation'.¹⁵⁷ News reporting by RT and Sputnik around the time Finland and Sweden submitted their official applications to join the alliance shows the Russian strategic narrative taking shape. RT writes: 'Russia perceives NATO as a hostile tool of Washington's foreign policy and blames its unchecked expansion in Europe for the ongoing crisis in Ukraine'.¹⁵⁸ The narrative indicates emphasis on the broader NATO expansion framed as hostility to Russia. This is also a way to shift attention away from Russia's violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and its unprovoked military aggression as the root causes of Russia's war against Ukraine.

NATO is presented by RT as a hostile foreign policy instrument of the US.¹⁵⁹ The US and NATO are framed by RT as responsible for the 'ongoing crisis in Ukraine'.¹⁶⁰ RT reproduces

the narrative of NATO's 'unchecked expansion' as deliberate long-term hostility towards Russia.

On 16 May 2022 Sputnik cited Putin's comments on 'US-funded biological laboratories on the territories of the former soviet republics'.¹⁶¹ This reflects the wide variety of different false narratives employed in Russian propaganda. The same article once again commented that NATO expansion was driven by the US.

'Not a direct threat, but a military threat'

Putin is cited as saying that 'the expansion of NATO in this direction does not create threats for Russia per se as Moscow has no row with these two countries'.¹⁶² However, according to Sputnik, NATO's expansion of military infrastructure to the territory of Finland and Sweden 'will prompt a response from Russia'.¹⁶³ RT's and Sputnik's articles on the threats that Finland's NATO membership poses to Russia are not perfectly clear. These news agencies echo the Kremlin's rhetoric by saying that Finland's NATO membership is not a direct threat to Russia, but NATO military infrastructure is a threat to Russia. The news articles aimed at international audiences communicate that 'Russia will respond accordingly' but they do not specify what kind of response this means.

RT cites Peskov as saying that NATO membership of Sweden and Finland was not as significant a threat as Ukraine's possible membership.¹⁶⁴ NATO expansion, however, is still framed as a threat to Russia. This is aligned with Russia's strategic planning documents.¹⁶⁵ Finland's long shared border with Russia makes it worthy of extra attention as a security concern for Russia. Russia's military doctrine of 2014 notes that bordering states are threats especially if foreign countries or alliances increase military capabilities within these regions.¹⁶⁶ The technicalities of responses to Finland's NATO membership are not analysed any further by the Kremlin or RT.

In August 2022 RT referenced the 'guarantees' Russia delivered to Western countries in December 2021. This forms a link between the bigger picture and Nordic countries' NATO membership. Once again RT framed Russia as a victim of NATO expansion: 'Before launching its operation, Russia repeatedly said it views NATO's eastward expansion as a threat to its national security'.¹⁶⁷ One of the main narratives RT advanced is condemnation of NATO's eastward expansion by reporting on it as a threat to Russia's security and using this as one of the justifications for launching the 'special military operation'. By repeatedly stressing this narrative, Russian news aimed at international audiences looked to shift the discussion to actions by NATO and more specifically the US. Moving everything under the narrative umbrella of NATO expansion offered a way to effectively deny discussion of Russia's agency in its war of aggression against Ukraine.

Russian narratives on social media

On social media, the Kremlin's online narratives on Finland's NATO membership mainly focused on the alleged opposition from Turkey and Hungary and on Finland 'giving up its neutrality' (Table 5). As mentioned before, Russia often utilises a high-volume, multichannel approach in its information operations. It often uses official, diplomatic, government, and embassy accounts and organisations like the Internet Research Agency to spread propaganda and disinformation online in an organised manner, but as many platforms have taken countermeasures against this, they have come up with new strategies.

Many of the pro-Kremlin narratives have begun to spread aggressively from so-called superspreader accounts. These accounts are usually associated with social media personalities with a large following, media channels with low credibility, and a range of other social media influencers.¹⁶⁸ Previous research on social media and disinformation has shown that the main disinformation narratives are often attributed to a tiny fraction of users; for example,

Grinberg et al. found that during the 2016 US presidential election, 0.1% of Twitter users were responsible for sharing approximately 80% of the disinformation.¹⁶⁹ A 2021 study by the Center for Countering Digital Hate concluded that just twelve accounts, later referred to as the ‘disinformation dozen’, were responsible for almost two thirds of all anti-vaccine-related content circulating on social media.¹⁷⁰ These results show that superspreader accounts can be extremely effective in giving birth to fake narratives and spreading them far and wide.

These accounts also have much better ways to connect with their fanbase than have official and organisation-related accounts, making their connection seem much more intimate. In addition, these accounts also often resort to using rude, disrespectful, or

unreasonable language while interacting with other accounts, something that official accounts rarely do. This combination of intimacy and strong rhetoric has the potential to invoke strong emotional reactions in the audience, something that official channels often fail to do.

This hypothesis on the effectiveness and use of superspreader accounts is supported by the X/Twitter data used in this study: when looking at the official channels, they rarely manage to create a high level of engagement (i.e. combination of impressions, likes, and shares) on the platform. When comparing official pro-Kremlin accounts with superspreader accounts, we quickly see that superspreaders usually dominate the post impressions, gaining hundreds of thousands or even

Date	Tweet text	Retweets	Likes
25 February 2022	URL https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1497234734765780997		
	#Zakharova: We regard the Finnish government’s commitment to a military non-alignment policy as an important factor in ensuring security and stability in northern Europe. 🇫🇮 Finland’s accession to @NATO would have serious military and political repercussions.	5400	2700
16 May 2022	URL https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1526173568920432644		
	Putin on Finland & Sweden joining NATO: Russia has no issue with these countries, their entry does not create a threat—but it will cause a response	323	832
16 April 2022	URL https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1515359360628584448		
	Russia threatens to deploy nukes if Sweden and Finland join NATO More: https://on.rt.com/bvev	208	626
19 January 2023	URL https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1616042487893696512		
	FM Sergey Lavrov to President Lukashenko: We see how NATO is making itself comfortable in Northern Europe (Finland & Sweden), which used to be a neutral territory to a large extent. 🇷🇺 All this is happening close to our borders. 📍 https://is.gd/UUXZFP	66	266
20 May 2022	URL https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1527656466382995458		
	Western experts say that joining #NATO will maximise security of Finland and Sweden. How can it be now in view of proxy war being waged by NATO against Russia? The joining will compel RF to view these 2 countries as an integral part of hostile Alliance. Can it be different?	183	445

TABLE 5: Examples of relatively popular tweets from Russian official and government accounts on the subject of Finland’s NATO membership

millions of impressions in contrast to the few thousands the official accounts usually get. Some examples of the largest accounts regularly spreading pro-Kremlin narratives are Jackson Hinkle (@jacksonhinkle), Russell Brand (@rusty-rockets), Ian Miles Cheong (@stillgray, also a columnist for RT), and Kim Dotcom (@kimdot-com). Their opinions on Finland’s NATO membership have attracted somewhat more engagement and visibility than the official channels (see Table 6). Also, those tweets that sensationalised the topic had much higher engagement than those that reported formally on these events.

Summary of our analysis

Our analysis of RT and Sputnik news articles on Finland’s NATO membership revealed the following aspects of the emerging Russian narrative: (1) the role of the US is emphasised in NATO gaining new member states and (2) RT and Sputnik are vague in communicating the direct implications of Finland’s NATO membership. The reporting shifts from, on the one

hand, accentuating the military threat that NATO expansion poses to Russia and, on the other hand, reporting that Finland’s NATO membership does not pose a direct threat to Russia.

RT’s news articles on Finland’s NATO membership reflect Russian strategic thinking more broadly as they frame smaller states as proxies of the US. Russian propaganda aimed at international audiences frames NATO as an instrument of the US and as the main culprit of what is framed as ‘instability in the international order’. From analysing RT’s news linked to Finland joining NATO, we can observe the following assumptions underlying the main narrative: (1) Finland is giving up ‘neutrality’ and not acting as a sovereign state by joining NATO; (2) the ‘anti-Russian campaign’ has led to Finland joining NATO; and (3) the US has the most interest in Finland joining NATO. These assumptions tie into Russia’s strategic communication that the state-controlled propaganda channels reproduce.

Date	Tweet text	Retweets	Likes
14 May 2023	<p>URL https://twitter.com/jacksonhinkle/status/1525295104033890304</p> <p>Not a good day for NATO & their proxies: – EU ban on Russian oil blocked by Hungary – NATO expansion to Finland/Sweden blocked by Turkey – US arms shipments to Ukraine could end May 19 – Russian encirclement in northern Donbas begins – US gasoline prices reach all time high</p>	1200	3900
6 April 2023	<p>URL https://twitter.com/rustyrockets/status/1643987456252088321</p> <p>Join the conversation as we discuss Finland joining NATO & escalating tensions with Russia; the unhealthy influence of wall street on the housing market AND journalist @aaronjmate joins me to talk disinformation & the Ukraine war 🇺🇸</p>	130	558
1 April 2023	<p>URL https://twitter.com/KimDotcom/status/1641917075869544454</p> <p>Finland joins NATO just before NATO is losing its biggest war while destroying EU industry with a Norwegian leader who helped the US Govt blow up the Nordstream pipelines in an act of war against its own members? Congratulations my fellow Finns. Stop drinking 😊</p>	2900	12,000
12 April 2022	<p>URL https://twitter.com/stillgray/status/1513960526572752896</p> <p>Finland and Sweden set to join NATO following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine</p>	45	98

TABLE 6: Examples of tweets from pro-Kremlin superspreader accounts on the subject of Finland’s NATO membership

RT's and Sputnik's English-speaking news shows that the narratives communicated by central political figures close to the Kremlin are reproduced by the journalists. Putin, Lavrov, Peskov, and Zakharova are unsurprisingly some of the key actors in fuelling narratives. RT and Sputnik then reproduce these narratives and spread them to English-speaking audiences. Additionally, RT and Sputnik publish opinion pieces that are stronger in tone to enforce the official narratives by seemingly unbiased authors. For example, Sputnik news additionally includes articles that were originally published in other sources such as the Global Times.¹⁷¹ The aim of the emerging narrative from these news sources seems to be in shifting the international audiences' attention away from Russia's aggression in Ukraine to the perceived US-fuelled NATO expansion, without giving agency to smaller states.

It seems likely that Finland will be the target of more aggressive Russian propaganda in the foreseeable future. Finland's position in Russia's vision of the international order is changing, and this is also reflected in the strategic narratives put forward by the state-controlled media. Russian state propaganda is likely to further its framing of Finland as a hostile actor while doing this within the larger narrative of the US-led NATO as the bigger enemy of Russia.

Having traced the emergence of the Russian narrative regarding Finland's NATO membership, next we will shift our attention to the Chinese narrative aimed at international audiences.

Chinese narrative: 'Security deterioration caused by the US's hegemonic enlargement'

China's historical posture towards NATO

China's official posture towards NATO has remained stable and consistent throughout the post-Cold War era. In essence China has framed NATO as a remnant of the Cold War, completely out of place in the modern era, and has had a negative attitude towards the alliance's earlier enlargement rounds.¹⁷² The official Chinese vision of an ideal international order, today best represented by Xi's concept of the 'community of a shared future for mankind' (人类命运共同体) envisions an international community of 'win-win cooperation', in which military alliances serve no purpose and should be replaced with cooperative 'partnerships'.¹⁷³

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has mostly remained on the sidelines of China's attention. Yet as the great power competition between China and the US has intensified, the latter has shown increasing interest in forming a global coalition of democracies to

balance against China's rise, thus bringing the Indo-Pacific region onto NATO's agenda.¹⁷⁴ Reflecting this turn, NATO summits of 2022 (Madrid) and 2023 (Vilnius) put forward China as a topic of discussion, and the 2022 Strategic Concept framed China as a 'systemic challenge' for the alliance.¹⁷⁵ Both summits also invited representatives from Indo-Pacific countries (Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand),¹⁷⁶ further alarming China on the possibility of NATO's expansion towards the Indo-Pacific region.

Following this, the official Chinese narrative has increasingly framed NATO not as a defensive alliance but as an offensive and hostile actor, which plans to entrench and expand US hegemony not only over Europe, but within the Asia-Pacific region as well. The threat of the possible 'Asianisation' (亚太化) of NATO has emerged as a recurring theme in Chinese narratives.¹⁷⁷

Against the background of this development, the Chinese official narrative describes NATO and its ongoing ‘northern expansion’ (北扩) as dangerous to European and even global security. China’s official response towards Finland’s NATO accession should thus be seen within the context of the tensing of China–US relations and their increasingly confrontational rhetorical styles, as well as a part of the longer historical continuum of China–NATO relations.

‘NATO expansion causes the deterioration of European and even worldwide security’

Ever since Finland and Sweden started to seriously discuss joining NATO in March 2022, China’s official narrative remained highly consistent. In contrast to the Russian narrative, China’s narrative took shape almost entirely within the news media and social media accounts, as official China has remained almost silent on Finland’s NATO bid. The only open comment on the issue was provided by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian, who bluntly noted that Finnish NATO membership would ‘bring new factors’ to China–Finland ties.¹⁷⁸ The Chinese embassy in Helsinki has also remained silent on the topic.

China’s narrative took shape in ‘opinion pieces’ and columns, but also in more neutral news articles, which attempt to give an impression of objectivity by quoting both domestic and foreign ‘specialists’ and ‘analysts’. Such specialists were often interviewed, but they also provided opinion pieces which were said to reflect the authors’ views and not necessarily those of the media in question, yet the opinions of such specialists were biased towards China’s core arguments regarding NATO’s hostile intentions.

Typical Chinese specialists would be scholars from institutes such as the China Institute of International Studies or the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences who parrot the official line and its talking points. To provide

impressions of international support, foreign experts (a colourful patchwork of fringe ‘scholars’ or political activists whose views align with the CCP) were often quoted. The latter include, for example, Christopher Helali, the international secretary of the Party of Communists USA,¹⁷⁹ and Ulf Sandmark, the chairman of the Schiller Institute, which is known for its support for China’s Belt and Road Initiative, as well as for advocating peace negotiations and even territorial cessions in Ukraine.¹⁸⁰ Finnish experts included, for example, a professor of philosophy from the University of Helsinki who holds strong views against the alliance yet is almost completely absent from domestic Finnish discussions on security policy. In fact, not a single known Finnish expert on Finnish foreign or security policy was interviewed, though a known Russia expert, also a professor at the University of Helsinki, was interviewed for CGTN, possibly due to his earlier critical views of the alliance.¹⁸¹

At the core of the Chinese narrative is the argument that NATO, throughout its existence, has undermined European security, and that the security situation will only further deteriorate with the addition of Finland and Sweden as member states. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO’s expansion has shrunk Russia’s ‘strategic space’ and, according to some views, represents nothing less than ‘encirclement’ of Russia.¹⁸² In this narrative, NATO’s eastward expansion is thus also the main reason for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and NATO is to blame for the ‘conflict’ (the Chinese media always uses the term ‘conflict’ instead of ‘war’). For example, Xinhua’s news analysis claims that ‘NATO has continued to expand eastward after the end of the Cold War, squeezing Russia’s strategic space and alienating Russia-Ukraine relations by inciting “color revolutions,” ultimately triggering the current Ukraine crisis.’¹⁸³

Since NATO’s expansion was already a destabilising factor before the war, adding more members to the alliance will only make the situation worse. The narrative generally acknowledges that Finland and Sweden joining NATO will make the alliance stronger, at least

militarily, and many news articles emphasised the advanced economies and military forces of both countries.¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, the introduction of NATO bases or even tactical nuclear weapons, as Fang Xiaozhi, an associate professor at the National University of Defense Technology, suggested in an opinion piece written for China Military Online, will form a considerable threat to Russia's north-western region.¹⁸⁵

In the Chinese narrative, all this taken together will tilt the balance of power between NATO and Russia in NATO's favour. At the same time, a 'buffer zone' between the alliance and Russia disappears as Finland becomes a member state. These developments, according to the narrative, tighten the encirclement that NATO has built around Russia ever since the end of the Cold War, and further increase Russia's security concerns.¹⁸⁶

Following Finland's accession, Russia has to rebalance the military strategic situation along its north-western border, the narrative suggests. NATO membership thus places Finland and its 1340 km border with Russia (a point often mentioned in the news articles) at the forefront of the new Cold War, and makes Finland's security situation much worse than before.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, NATO's enlargement decreases security not only in Finland, but within Europe as well, the narrative claims. At the broadest scale, it is detrimental even for global security, since increasing tensions between nuclear powers are a global issue.¹⁸⁸ Overall, China's argument on security deterioration aligns very well with the Russian interpretation.

'NATO enlargement as a tool of US hegemony'

The Chinese narrative claims that Finland and Sweden joining NATO will only worsen Nordic, European, and global security conditions, although it serves US interests. In a framing quite similar to the one found in Russian sources, the Chinese narrative presents the US as a hostile actor, pulling the strings on NATO's policies and utilising the

alliance for its objective of maintaining and strengthening its domination of the world. An 'opinion' piece in the Global Times capsulises this line of argument well:

Washington is exploiting the Ukraine crisis to serve its own interests. The country has benefited a lot from the crisis, politically and economically. One of them is to bring Europe back under US control and subject to US' global interests. When more European countries tie closely with the US for security interests, as an exchange, the continent will tend to compromise with the US on other fields, despite their reluctance. This is the result Washington wants to see and it only uses Europe as a pawn to serve its hegemonic strategy.¹⁸⁹

NATO's expansion therefore serves US interests, and according to the narrative, Washington has been hard at work, pushing Finland and Sweden to join by promoting its own 'overstated Russia threat' narrative. Subsequently, Finland, Sweden, and Europe more broadly will have to succumb to US foreign policy in other areas as well, and NATO enlargement will therefore be 'detrimental to the continent's pursuit of strategic autonomy'. This would be detrimental to China's foreign policy interests as well: China has supported European 'strategic autonomy' as it holds the potential to split the transatlantic link between the EU and the US.¹⁹⁰

Still, although NATO expansion seemed to move forward at record pace, the narrative occasionally suggested that there were divisions among EU and NATO countries on both the inclusion of Finland and Sweden and on the alliance's policy towards Russia. Various articles also argued that many European states were supporting NATO's policies only because of concerns of 'political convenience', not necessarily because of any deeper conviction.¹⁹¹ Overall, divisions within NATO were still not strongly emphasised.

‘NATO membership and Finland’s loss of autonomy’

Joining NATO will decrease the autonomy of Finland as well, as Finland will be forced to adjust its foreign policy according to NATO’s and in the end the US’s grand strategy (Figure 4). A Global Times opinion piece asks:

*After joining NATO, can [Finland] continue to determine its Russia policy out of its own national interests? When Finland and Sweden become official members of the bloc, they will have to manage their relations with Russia passively according to the US rather than actively based on their own interests.*¹⁹²

The point was echoed in a CGTN interview with a Finnish professor who warned that ‘NATO members could overrule Helsinki’s foreign policy’, as small countries would not have influence over the alliance’s great power members.¹⁹³

Interestingly, however, even though the US’s hostile hegemony is seen at work, Finland itself is not directly criticised, and nor is it stripped of its freedom of choice in the narrative. In various articles the narrative points out that Finland’s decision to join has enjoyed strong popular support, and that the security concerns of Finland can even be somewhat understood if the country’s history and its previous conflicts with Russia are taken into consideration.¹⁹⁴

Nevertheless, the narrative laments that the Finnish decision is, in the end, irrational, since Russia does not pose a threat to Finland or Sweden.¹⁹⁵ The narrative thus does not take into account a perception prevalent in Finland in which Russia does present a severe and acute security threat, and that Russian claims of not having invasion plans towards Finland should not be taken at face value. Before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine the Kremlin claimed that there were absolutely no invasion plans against Ukraine either. This aspect, that Russia can be perceived as a direct military threat in Finland

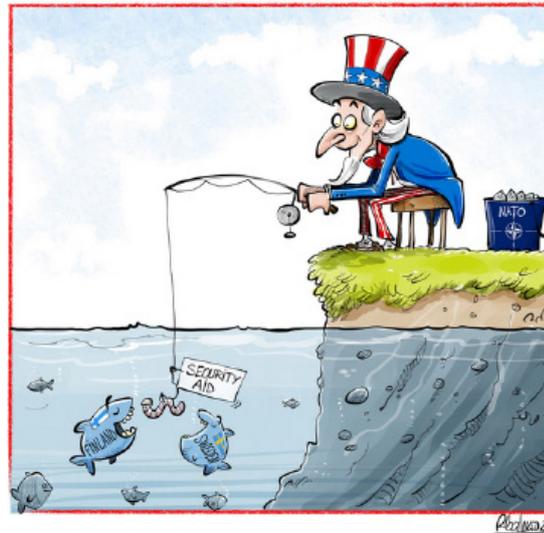


FIGURE 4: ‘America’s bait to the NATO members’, CGTN, 18 May 2002.

based on Russia’s untrustworthiness, is almost nowhere to be seen in the narrative.

Finland’s membership of NATO marks an important turning point in the country’s traditional foreign policy. In China’s narrative this change is set against Finland’s (and Sweden’s) former policy of ‘neutrality’ (or sometimes non-alignment), which is presented in a positive light. The narrative points out that during Finland’s policy of neutrality, the country enjoyed good economic and political relations with Russia, and served as an important diplomatic bridge between East and West. The narrative also often frames Finland as a ‘neutral’ country as late as before the war in Ukraine, although officially Finland long ago (at least since joining the EU in 1995) abandoned neutrality.

Chinese narratives on social media

When it comes to China’s amplification of its own or Russian narratives on social media regarding Finland’s NATO bid, it seems that Chinese state-affiliated accounts selectively shared the Kremlin’s anti-NATO narratives (Table 7). Most of the content they shared was about how Finland’s membership would reduce the ‘general security’ in the area and would ‘represent a threat to Moscow’.

Date	Tweet text	URL
16 May 2022	#Opinion: NATO entry of Finland and Sweden will drag the two countries into a security dilemma. They want to pursue a safer environment, but in the end, it will turn more insecure. https://bit.ly/3ldkSz	https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1526223781970182144
19 May 2022	#Opinion: More divergences emerge within NATO as Turkey & Croatia opposed entry of Finland & Sweden. The tension between US and Russia will lead to bigger security risks for NATO. How many countries are willing to become cannon fodder for US interests? https://bit.ly/3LnYN08	https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1527300448905879552
29 June 2022	Russia's Putin says 'I don't rule out tensions will emerge in our relations with Finland and Sweden after they decided to join #NATO, #Russia will have to answer in kind if NATO infrastructure is deployed to #Finland and #Sweden', RIA reports. #cgtnamerica #Putin	https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1542240055611297793
13 May 2022	BREAKING: Turkey's President Erdogan says his country does not favor Sweden and Finland becoming NATO members	https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1525333406258810880 (retweet) ¹⁹⁶
12 May 2022	BREAKING: Russia says Finland joining NATO would represent a threat to Moscow	https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1524855983935307790 (retweet) ¹⁹⁷

TABLE 7: Examples of relatively popular tweets from Chinese official and government accounts on the subject of Finland's NATO membership

In general, China's X/Twitter presence and engagement on the topic of Finland's NATO membership were relatively modest, and many of the posts by state-affiliated accounts on the platform had little to no engagement with its users. Also, the total number of posts or reposts coming from Chinese media and diplomatic/government accounts on the topic was relatively low – between 21 July 2021 and 21 July 2023, only 1259 related posts or reposts were found.¹⁹⁸

Due to the ineffectiveness of using official channels, China, like Russia, is also probably migrating its online messaging and disinformation to superspreaders. At present there has been no investigation into how these

accounts are enticed to spread any given narratives, and this would be an interesting topic for future research.

Summary of our analysis

Overall the Chinese narrative on Finland's NATO application (and later accession) remained thematically consistent and solid, with all the observed major media actors (Global Times included) pursuing a generally calm and reserved tone on the issue.

The narrative framed NATO as a destabilising actor, whose 'northern expansion' has seriously worsened the security situation not only in Finland, Sweden, and Europe more

broadly, but at the global level as well. NATO is further represented in the narrative as a tool of the US, which utilises the alliance for its hegemonic purposes. Although Finland is not framed in the narrative as a mere mindless pawn of the hegemon, the narrative still suggests that its autonomy and even the autonomy of the EU as a whole will shrink, as both will have to increasingly abide by the US's hegemonic machinations.

Regarding methods, Chinese news sites attempted to give the impression that their narrative reflected broader international consensus. Many articles were opinion pieces provided by non-staff writers drawn from pro-Russian or pro-Chinese fringe elements of European societies. Chinese news sites also used interviews with both Chinese and international scholars who consistently provided NATO-critical viewpoints.

Discussion of narratives related to Finland

The core elements of both Russian and Chinese narratives aimed at international audiences are comparatively similar. Both narratives frame NATO as a hostile actor under the influence of the US that is to blame for the ongoing war in Ukraine. Both narratives furthermore suggest in a similar manner that NATO's expansion to include Finland (and Sweden) undermines European security, as Russia is forced to act against a growing military threat along its western borders.

Besides the subject matter, the methods of constructing the narrative through international news outlets, use of 'independent columnists', and social media are similar. The Russian narrative relies more on official statements by the Kremlin. The Chinese narrative relies less on government statements, since officially China has barely commented on Finland's NATO accession. The Chinese narrative also adopts a slightly more nuanced position, not directly criticising Finland and occasionally even emphasising the robust popular support for NATO membership in the country.

As with the Russian narrative aimed at global audiences, the Chinese narrative does not have any mention of the 'Ukrainian Nazi leadership' or the 'genocide of the Russian population' eminent in Russia's domestic narratives.

Signs of China amplifying Russia's more specific narratives or their elements remain limited or at least hard to prove. The main narrative we find in the Russian and Chinese news sources aimed at international audiences is that NATO enlargement creates a security threat, but China has held such views consistently long before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and can thus hardly be claimed to have started propagating it only to amplify Russian propaganda.

Therefore, our findings suggest that there does not seem to be a straightforward mechanism of China amplifying Russia's narrative, but a more complex convergence of Russia's and China's views of the international order. The wider context of these states' relations with NATO needs to be taken into consideration.

Are Russian narratives relating to the NATO membership bids by Sweden and Finland amplified by PRC media?

This segment synthesises the findings regarding Sweden's and Finland's NATO membership bids to assess the degree of collaboration or amplification between Chinese and Russian narratives in these contexts. The interplay between Russian and Chinese state media reveals both convergence and divergence in their approach to NATO's expansion, with the

narratives on Sweden's and Finland's NATO bids presenting a complex media engagement scenario. While there are clear thematic overlaps in the narratives presented by both countries, particularly in their portrayal of NATO as a destabilising force, there is no direct evidence of collaboration or intentional amplification of each other's narratives.

Sweden's NATO bid: convergence in media narratives

In examining the case of Sweden, the convergence in narratives between Russian and Chinese state media might initially suggest a form of direct amplification, where one country's media strategy is intentionally echoing or bolstering the narrative of the other. However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that determining if this narrative alignment is a result of a coordinated effort or merely a coincidence is not straightforward. The consistency in the narratives' critical stance towards NATO's expansion might be more nuanced than a simple bilateral media strategy.

A key consideration is whether this narrative congruence points to a shared worldview between Russia and China, shaped by similar geopolitical interests.¹⁹⁹ Both countries have shown tendencies to view NATO's expansion, particularly closer to their spheres of influence, with suspicion and apprehension. This common viewpoint could naturally lead to similar thematic expressions in their state-controlled media narratives, without necessarily implying direct collaboration. Alternatively, the narrative convergence observed could be

a manifestation of parallel but independent strategic communication goals of Russia and China. These goals, while not coordinated, may align due to a shared perception of NATO and Western influence in the global geopolitical arena. Each country, within its strategic framework and foreign policy objectives, might find common ground in expressing concerns over NATO's activities, particularly its eastward expansion. This alignment could be reflective of a broader resistance to what they perceive as Western hegemony or an attempt to maintain a balance of power that favours their regional and global interests.

Further complicating this narrative landscape is the consideration of each country's unique historical, political, and cultural contexts, which influence their foreign policy and international media strategies. Russia's approach to Sweden's NATO bid, for instance, could be coloured by its historical interactions with Europe and its long-standing stance against NATO's proximity to its borders. China, on the other hand, while also wary of Western military alliances, might be driven by a more

globally oriented strategy that seeks to counterbalance Western influence while protecting its own burgeoning global interests.

Therefore, the narrative convergence in the case of Sweden's NATO bid presents a multifaceted scenario. It reflects a complex interplay of geopolitical views, strategic

communication goals, and possibly a shared desire to challenge or reshape the narrative on NATO's role in global security. This convergence, whether a result of direct amplification, shared worldviews, or parallel strategic goals, underscores the intricate nature of state-controlled media narratives.

Finland's NATO bid: divergence in narrative strategies

In contrast, when the narratives on Finland's bid for NATO membership are analysed, a significant divergence becomes apparent between the approaches of Russian and Chinese state media, particularly in the tone and nature of their criticism. This divergence is not just a simple variation in perspective but reflects deeper, underlying strategic approaches and foreign policy considerations of both countries.

Russian media narratives have been distinctly direct and critical in addressing Finland's NATO membership bid. Often these narratives frame the bid as a reactive measure to geopolitical pressures, painting it as a departure from Finland's long-standing tradition of neutrality. This portrayal is in line with Russia's broader strategic narrative that views NATO expansion, especially along its borders, with apprehension and as a direct challenge to its regional security and influence. The Russian media's approach is consistent with a more confrontational foreign policy stance, which has been a hallmark of Russia's response to NATO's movements in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region.

On the other hand, while the narrative strategy of Chinese state media shares the theme of NATO being a destabilising force in the region, their criticism of Finland's NATO bid is markedly more restrained. This difference in approach likely stems from China's historical diplomatic relations and economic ties with Finland, which have been characterised by a degree of cooperation and mutual benefit. The

Chinese narratives, while critical of NATO's overall role and actions, stop short of directly criticising Finland's decision to join the alliance. This suggests a more calculated and diplomatic approach, aiming to balance their stance on NATO with the maintenance of a positive bilateral relationship with Finland. This nuanced approach of Chinese media could be indicative of a broader strategy to project China as a responsible global power, one that respects the sovereignty and decisions of other nations while voicing its concerns about the stability of international systems. It reflects an understanding that direct criticism could undermine China's diplomatic efforts and economic interests in a region where it has been increasingly seeking to expand its influence and partnerships.

Furthermore, this divergence in narratives between Russian and Chinese state media over Finland's NATO bid highlights the complexities in the geopolitical landscape. It underscores how state-controlled media narratives are intricately linked to countries' wider foreign policy objectives and strategic considerations. While Russia's approach is more aligned with its immediate security concerns and historical stance against NATO's proximity, China's strategy appears to be shaped by a longer-term view and a more global set of interests, including maintaining stable relationships with European countries like Finland.

Conclusion

The differing approaches in handling Finland's NATO bid between Russian and Chinese media underscore the complexity of the informational landscape. While both Russia and China share apprehensions about NATO, their distinct geopolitical strategies and bilateral relations with European countries influence how they shape and disseminate narratives.

The case of Sweden, where narratives are more aligned, reflects a shared strategic view of Sweden's role in the changing security architecture of Europe. For Finland, the divergence in narratives might indicate a more cautious or strategically differentiated approach by China, acknowledging the nuances in its bilateral relations and long-term diplomatic objectives.

While there is a discernible alignment in the overarching themes of Russian and Chinese narratives concerning NATO expansion, particularly in the case of Sweden, the extent of direct collaboration or mutual amplification is complex and not conclusively demonstrable. The case of Finland further illustrates that while shared geopolitical perspectives can lead to narrative correlations, individual state interests and diplomatic strategies can result in varied narrative approaches. This complexity highlights the importance of gaining a clear understanding of the ways in which state-controlled media develop and spread their narratives.

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