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China's Influence in the Nordic – Baltic Information Environment: Denmark and Lithuania

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List of acronyms

Acronym	Full Name
AAU	Aalborg University
ACED	Association of Chinese Experts in Denmark
ACSSD	Association of Chinese Students and Scholars in Denmark
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ASPI	Australian Strategic Policy Institute
AUKUS	Australia, United Kingdom, United States
BGI Group	Beijing Genomics Institute
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CAST	China Association for Science and Technology
CBS	Copenhagen Business School
CC	Confucius Classroom
CCCCPH	China Cultural Center in Copenhagen
CCCD	Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Denmark
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCPPNRD	China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification Denmark
CFCS	Danish Centre for Cyber Security
CGTN	China Global Television Network
China-CEEC	China and Central European Countries
CI	Confucius Institutes
CPAFFC	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPPCC	Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference
CSC	China Scholarship Council
CSP	Danish Chinese Comprehensive Strategic Partnership
CSSA	Chinese Students and Scholars Association

CWC	Communist Working Cycle
DCBF	Danish Chinese Business Forum
DCCC	Danish Chamber of Commerce in China
DCP	Danish Communist Party
DDIS	Danish Defence Intelligence Service
DI	Confederation of Danish Industry
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
DTU	Technical University of Denmark
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
EMT	Energy Transition Minerals
EU	European Union
FCPAE	Federation of Chinese Professional Associations in Europe
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GIUK	Greenland, Iceland and the UK
IDCPC	International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOotW	Military Operations other than War
MSS	Ministry of State Security
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PET	Danish Security and Intelligence Service
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
RMB	Renmibi
SDC	Sino-Danish Center for Education and Research
SI	Danish Schiller Institute
TTP	Chinese Thousand Talents Plan
UFWD	United Front Work Department
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organization

Introduction: From Partnership to Precaution

The Nordic countries began cooperating with China through diplomatic recognition in early 1950, with Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden all establishing ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC), making them among the first Western nations to do so. The Baltic countries gradually began cooperating with China in the early 1990s after regaining their independence following the demise of the Soviet Union. This provided the ground for multifaceted collaboration that continues to evolve today.

The nations in the Nordic-Baltic region have not taken a common approach to the collaboration with China; nor has China used a uniform approach to the region. Consequentially, bilateral relations have developed on an individual basis over time shaped by events and policy decisions. Beijing's interests in the region have been summarised with these key objectives: promotion of China's core interests, which are non-interference and safeguarding domestic political stability; acquisition of technology and know-how, utilising the region as a door-opener for other arenas, e.g., for politically motivated activities towards the EU; and addressing misconceptions and improving the perception of China.[1]

A decade ago, governments in both China and the Nordic-Baltic states were working on broadening and deepening their cooperation through ambitious agreements and exchanges of high-level visits. Each of the Nordic countries held frequent meetings with Chinese representatives, signed Memorandums of Understanding to expand bilateral cooperation, competed with each other to attract Chinese investments, and welcomed Chinese-led multilateral initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as well as China's growing involvement in the Arctic.[2]

In 2012, as a platform for promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, the China and Central and Eastern European Cooperation (China-CEEC) was initiated, collectively known as the "16+1"-format. The Baltic States became members alongside a diverse set of Balkan and Central European countries. China portrayed the format as an innovative approach to regional cooperation. Although framed as multilateralism, in practice the format was largely bilateral and highly competitive in nature.[3] However, in 2021, Lithuania became the first country to officially withdraw from the format, followed by Estonia and Latvia in 2022 as the hoped-for economic outcomes did not materialize.[4]

Thus, in recent years and across the Nordic-Baltic region, the approach to Beijing has significantly shifted. The earlier political proactivity has changed to precaution with capitals walking a tightrope between acknowledging China as a crucial partner for e.g. trade and for solving global challenges, such as climate change effects, as well as recognizing the country also as a systemic rival and an economic competitor. Although Beijing has become more self-assertive on the international stage, it has toned down its engagement in this region, while still pursuing the political objectives and economic opportunities noted above.

About the report

This report is aimed at understanding China's influence in the Nordic-Baltic region, by undertaking an analysis of China's communication tactics and tools, its strategic narratives and their prevalence in public discourse in the region, illustrated by two country case studies. This is important because, for years, China has employed various techniques to advance its interests worldwide, from classic information operations to suppression of critical voices, and continues to expand its state-controlled media footprint in the global information environment.[5]

This report consists of four parts. The first two chapters are essays, by Professor Marc Lanteigne and Research Associate Larissa Stunkel, respectively, serving to provide context by taking an overall look at how China sees itself and its present role in the world as well as looking at how relations between China and the NB8-nations are evolving. The last two chapters are country case studies of China's approaches to individual countries in the Nordic-Baltic region.

The two country case studies of Lithuania, written by Associate Professor Konstantinas Andrijauskas, and Denmark, prepared by Associate Professor André Ken Jakobsson and Phd. student Christiern Santos Okholm, respectively, examine influence across two dimensions. *First*, it analyses different avenues for which China has been seeking to exert its influence; *Second*, it analyses how China's strategic narratives and activities are reflected in the media space of the target countries. Consequently, the report seeks to understand to what extent China's narratives are converging with the views expressed in local media, and thus potentially influencing public attitudes. This report applies the same methodology used in the previous research report on Chinese influence in the region examining Latvia and Sweden published by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence[6] (Stratcom COE). Thus, the report aims to answer the following questions:

- *How* does China communicate?
- *What* narratives are promoted by China in the Nordic-Baltic region?
- *How* are they reflected in local media?

The Stratcom COE commissioned the report to advance the Centre's work on understanding China's influence in the Nordic-Baltic information environment. The views and opinions contained in this paper are solely those of the authors.

Selection of country case studies

Denmark has had a more ambitious China policy and has closer ties to China than all other Nordic-Baltic countries.[7] In 2008, Denmark, as the only nation in the region and among only a handful of nations in the world, established a comprehensive 'strategic partnership'-agreement with China.[8] This later became the 'Joint Work Programme 2017– 2020' covering 58 concrete joint cooperation areas involving 80 Chinese and Danish state institutions[9]. However, in the latest update of the collaboration, the "Green China-Denmark Joint Work Programme" for the period of 2023-2026, the bilateral agreement was refocused to the promotion of only seven areas of mutual interest.[10] This change may be interpreted as Denmark taking a more cautious approach to its extensive collaboration with China.

Lithuania's experience over the past years is in stark contrast to the relations described above. Neither Estonia nor Latvia has come into conflict with China as much as Lithuania. The small Baltic nation was select-

ed due to its tense bilateral relations with the superpower and its confrontation with China's so-called 'Wolf warrior'-diplomacy. Lithuania was the first nation to officially withdraw from the 16+1 initiative[11]. Further, the relations with China soured after the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius in 2021. In response, Beijing downgraded diplomatic ties with Vilnius and imposed trade restrictions.[12] However, following parliamentary elections in October 2024, Lithuania's new Prime Minister, Gintautas Paluckas, vowed to restore full diplomatic relations with China.

Chinas' eight avenues of influence in the region

The previous Stratcom COE-report on Chinas influence in the Nordic-Baltic region identified **eight avenues to influence the information environment** used by China.[13] The avenues range from overt, fully legitimate activities, such as advocacy through public communication that expresses opinions or interests to covert activities, such as threats in order to influence and espionage. The extent to which each 'avenue' is applied in each of the Nordic-Baltic countries varies and all avenues are not necessarily used in every country. The avenues are outlined in the table below, as the two case studies in this report will elaborate on how the avenues have been used in Denmark and Lithuania.

Avenues	Description
Public communication	China has embarked on massive state-driven communication campaigns to improve its image and communicate strategic narratives around its core interests. Activities deemed as 'soft power' range from ambassadors speaking to foreign media, reaching global audiences with state-funded news broadcasts, entertainment content, and embassy social media accounts. This also involves efforts to counter negative reporting in local language media through direct action by Chinese government representatives, positive and negative incentives for self-censorship, indirect pressure through proxies, and physical or online attacks. Some activities lack transparency in terms of how pro-CCP content reaches foreign audiences through local media and social media.
Diplomatic measures	China uses all tools in the diplomatic toolbox to clearly signal its stances and priorities, including economic retaliation, cancelling state visits or imprisoning foreign nationals like Swedish citizen Gui Minhai for publishing books on the personal lives of CCP leaders.
Parliamentarian relationships	China exerts influence abroad through connections with foreign politicians to obtain insights into the political scene through the International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China. This also involves 'hosting exchanges' with foreign political parties to influence attitudes and policies toward China. The CCP has established connections with several major parties among the NB8 governments (i.e. Finland, Estonia).

Academic relations	China uses a combination of academic relations and the establishment of Confucius Institutes – educational and cultural promotion programmes – based on university campuses around the world to promote the party line. At one point, there was at least one Confucius Institute in every NB8 country. Although many Confucius Institutes have been closed.
Economic investments/ exposure to the Chinese market	China uses economic levers of influence to assert its interests globally either through promises of financial investment or threats to restrict access to the Chinese market. In recent years, the NB8 countries that have hosted the Dalai Lama have been on the receiving end of China's hostile economic measures, such as freezing imports and cancelling investments in infrastructure projects.
Infrastructure development	Over the last decade, China has embarked on several infrastructure projects in the Nordic-Baltic region. Constructing telecommunications and energy links in the region provides obvious financial and security incentives for China, whilst potentially posing risks for the host countries.
'United Front' networks	The 'united front' system – a vast network of actors that works to further the interests of the CCP – is one of the main instruments through which China conducts its global influence operations. The 'united front' network has been increasingly used to influence the Chinese diaspora, politicians, media representatives, and academics who can be co-opted/used to support the CCP's interests. United front networks have been known to monitor Hong Kong and Tibetan activists, for example, as well as conduct intelligence gathering.
Espionage	In addition to traditional intelligence collection, these efforts have focused on industrial espionage (collection of trade secrets) and espionage against Chinese diaspora (coercion of refugees, emigrants, students studying in the NB8). China's modern espionage seeks to exert influence over individuals whom they regard as regime critics.

Research methodology

In order to assess China's influence in the information environment, the methodology of this report comprises steps, applied to the individual countries studied in the case studies. This report carries forward the methodology applied to previous analysis of Latvia and Sweden, showing the validity, relevance and transferability of the methodology.

First, the study identifies eight avenues of influence which are used by China to achieve its strategic interests globally and assesses how each of them have been applied to the national context of Lithuania and Denmark.

Second, the study analyses China's communication efforts aimed at the target country based on Chinese official sources and state media. The analysis identifies the most evident issues in or about the case study country on which China focuses its communication efforts and identifies China's 'official frames'. The report understands 'official frames' as those 'offered by state or other power-holding agencies'.[14]

For the purposes of this research, **a frame** is defined as a central organising idea for 'making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue,'[15] while **framing** refers to the selection of some aspects of perceived reality, making them 'more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.'[16]

Third, the study analyses the target country's media content during two specific timeframes of January-May 2022 and October-December of 2024 to identify convergence between the previously determined Chinese official frames and frames that dominate Danish and Lithuanian media.

This report analyses the coverage of several news topics chosen based on China's official frames and where these frames are likely to be promoted. The coverage of these topics is analysed among the media outlets with the highest readership, along with some niche media of interest. Qualitative frame analysis is carried out to determine whether the convergence with China's official frames can be detected, and in those cases, whether China's official frames dominate the news stories.

Efforts to transmit a specific frame to the foreign media environment are a part of mediatic diplomacy – an essential type of public diplomacy. If the frame is received positively, mediatic diplomacy can be evaluated as successful.[17] By focusing on the frame-building aspects and analysing how and whether China's official frames translate into news frames that are favourable to China's interest, this report aims to generate insights regarding China's agenda-building power in the respective information environments. Recognising that convergence between China's official frames and media coverage of the particular issue does not necessarily suggest that Chinese communication efforts have directly impacted editorial decisions and outcomes, it does signal areas of potential susceptibility to Chinese influence.

China in the (Next) World

*By **Marc Lanteigne,** Professor, Political Science Department of Social Sciences: UiT The Arctic University of Norway*

This essay takes a comprehensive look at how China sees itself and its present roles in the international system. As with other great powers, China is focused on the improvement and expansion of its capabilities, yet what is now changing are the arenas and the stakes Beijing is facing. The Chinese government is making continuous use of an expanded array of tools and narratives to ensure that the country completes its rise as a global power, as the country seeks to further understand both the post-Cold War international system and its place in it, as well as balancing more complex domestic and international policy demands. At the same time, Beijing wishes to ensure that, as President Xi Jinping himself phrased it, China's 'story is told well' through the enhancing of not only the country's diplomatic and military power but also 'discourse power', via effective domestic and international management of communications and information.

Restructuring on the Run

How China can adjust to an international system which has been undergoing rapid power shifts and realignment in the space of less than a year was debated at the annual 'Two Sessions' (the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) meetings of the Chinese Communist Party in March 2025. This was evidenced in the official Work Report presented at these proceedings by Premier Li Qiang, a document which began with touting the success of 'Chinese-style modernisation' and then detailing the successes Beijing achieved in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, while also vowing that, despite the slowdown of the global economy and growing trends towards of protectionism and unilateralism, China would continue to 'ride the wind, break the waves, and go far'.[18]

China continues to abandon any previous hesitation about its global power status, now perceiving itself as a peer competitor to the United States. The elucidation since 2021 by the Xi government of various international-level concepts, including the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilisation Initiative, and most recently the Global Governance Initiative, is indicative of Beijing's preparations for what it sees as an inevitable post-Western world, while countering what Beijing sees as a 'Cold War mentality' stubbornly clung to by the US and Europe.[19]

These concerns have factored into Beijing's renewed efforts to revive the Belt and Road Initiative since the end of the Covid pandemic, while placing more emphasis on rebalancing this megaproject in light of changed economic and geopolitical realities.[20] While some segments of the BRI have failed to produce hoped-for economic and diplomatic results, including in Europe and the Arctic, Beijing nonetheless is hoping for a Silk Road renaissance in developing regions, especially Africa, Latin America, the Gulf Region, and the Pacific. The renewed trend towards American isolationism and protectionism, and the instability of the Russian economy, may be opening more windows for Beijing to further engage the so-called 'Global South'.[21] In March 2024 these interests were best explained in Chinese policymaking as the international system entering a 'Southern Moment' in global governance,[22] with the implication being that the West would continue to wane in capabilities, and Beijing now wishes to be a key player in this perceived power transition. The Chinese government has also placed greater faith in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) assembly, especially now that

it has expanded its membership since early 2024, adding states like Indonesia, Iran, and United Arab Emirates, to become the 'Big BRICS', with Beijing expressing hopes that the group would continue to widen and deepen to become a force for types of Global South co-operation which would place China in a more central role.[23] With cooler relations between Beijing and both the United States and Europe continuing (and the growing possibility of a transatlantic diplomatic split), it is apparent that both non-alignment and southern solidarity will be emerging cornerstones of Chinese foreign policy thinking and the definition of its global position.

Pushing Forward, Pushing Back

The growth of Chinese power, along with concerns about perceived US-led attempts to contain China, directly and indirectly, has led to heightened sensitivities in Beijing towards any actors seen as standing against Beijing's strategic policies. These have included opposition to American attempts to develop security communities to balance Chinese power, such as the 2021 AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States) defence initiative and an unsteady revival of the 'Quad' strategic group, which aligns Washington with Australia, Japan, and India.[24] There have also been numerous government-level responses to perceived slights against the Chinese nation, which in the past decade has resulted in a downgrading of relations with governments as diverse as Australia, Canada, Estonia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden, and ongoing brittle ties with neighbours including India, Japan, and South Korea. One recent phenomenon attached to the sensitivities was the stark appearance of 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, involving Chinese officials, including diplomats, who publicly push back—often using blunt and coercive methods consistent with 'sharp power'—against what are seen as insults to the PRC, its policies, or its institutions.[25] Beijing has also become more sensitive, and at times hostile, to attempts to marginalise Chinese regional global interests through perceived manipulation of international laws and norms, [26] with the South China Sea and Taiwan as two major examples.

China's Military Build-Up

Despite domestic economic headwinds, China has continued to expand its military capabilities, with a steady focus on power projection capabilities. The country's defence budget for 2025, announced at the Two Sessions meetings, was to be raised to approximately RMB 1.81 trillion (US$ 250 billion), although there are frequent arguments that these annual figures are lower than in reality, and do not include mixed civilian/military elements.[27]

China's military expansion has also continued to move away from the strong emphasis in the last century on land-based warfare, in favour of power projection, the virtual realm, and hybrid warfare. Within the People's Liberation Army, there have been specific divisions overseeing cybersecurity and information support since 2024. Under the administration of Hu Jintao, Xi's immediate predecessor, there was a focus on accelerating the development of Chinese naval capabilities as the country sought a greater 'blue water' capability to operate in the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans, while it consolidated its claims on both the South China Sea and the East China Sea, despite ongoing opposition from the United States and its regional allies and partners, including Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. With the United States moving towards distancing itself from its European allies since early 2025, there is unease among many governments in the Pacific Rim over whether they too will need to develop more independent defence policies.[28]

Direct military competition with the West, including potentially matching American levels of defence spending, remains a non-viable option for Beijing. For the past decade the Xi government has sought to expand its doctrine of 'military operations other than war' (MOotW) in areas which include United Nations peacekeeping, disaster relief, and crisis management. However, there are concerns that widening Chinese strategies within the nebulous field of 'non-traditional security' more commonly includes alternative realms of deterrence and an expanding array of 'grey zone' policies designed to expand Chinese security interests, while falling short of provocative 'red line' actions which could trigger a military response from the United States and its allies.[29] In achieving this, Beijing has developed a growing list of tools and assets, including making ongoing use of its formidable geo-economic power to reward or punish other governments, fostering communications media for both propaganda and influence operations.

Added to these areas are methods of hybrid warfare[30] to prevent attempts at overt and tacit containment of Chinese interests and ensure a balancing strategy with the West, as relations with Washington tilt ever further into the arena of zero-sum games. Chinese policymakers, for their part, are concerned that grey zone tactics will become prevalent throughout the Asia-Pacific region, including because of American 'revisionist' behaviour.[31] The importance of effective hybrid warfare operations for Beijing is only growing, with China now facing a more multifaceted set of strategic challenges which extend into both the physical and virtual worlds.

A Difficult Neighbourhood—China and Taiwan

China has sought to redefine itself vis-à-vis Taiwan, as cross-Strait relations have ossified ever since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) returned to power under President Tsai Ing-wen in Taipei in 2016. In May 2024, the DPP formed the third government in a row under Tsai's former deputy, William Lai Ching-te, a move which dismayed Beijing after the Xi government had stepped up various forms of diplomatic and military pressures on the island, which is viewed in China as a renegade province with no right to independence.[32] PRC actions towards Taiwan have included hard-power strategies, such as growing incidents of air incursions near the island's airspace (including full military exercises around the island in April 2024 codenamed *Strait Thunder-2025A*), as well as various forms of influence operations and alternative narrative building to discourage any movement towards *de jure* independence.

For example, at the Two Sessions, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi sought to point out UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 (1971) as legal justification for Chinese sovereignty over the island, a point Taipei argues is a complete misinterpretation. There have been similar attempts by the Chinese government to point to other international legal documents, such as the Cairo and Potsdam Declarations, to provide justification for Taiwan's status as a province of the PRC. Concerns have been expressed in Taiwanese policy circles that Beijing is also seeking more subtle approaches to undermining the island's sovereignty, including grey zone tactics designed to erode Taipei's relations with allies and sow doubt about the island's longer-term security outlook. President Lai has responded by outlining seventeen measures designed to bolster Taiwanese security, including resisting Chinese attempts at 'united front' operations again Taiwanese citizens, and responding to Chinese cognitive warfare techniques. A civilian preparedness guide published by Taipei in September 2025 included cybersecurity tips and disinformation circulated through popular social media.[33] Illustrating the unease over Taiwan's security situation, a miniseries, *Zero Day Attack*, which

described a fictional incremental hybrid warfare scenario leading up to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, prompted much political debate on both sides of the Strait even before the series aired in mid-2025.[34]

China and the War in Ukraine

Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caused considerable harm to many Chinese foreign policies in the West, especially within Europe. Despite Beijing's long established stance against the violation of state sovereignty by other governments, Beijing often echoed Russian talking points about the invasion, including that ending the conflict must include the recognition of the 'complex historical context' between Moscow and Kyiv, implying special circumstances, and that the 'Ukraine conflict' was mainly triggered by NATO expansion and American militarism.[35]

China's canted neutrality stance was best illustrated in February 2023, when Beijing published a twelve-point peace plan including calls for respect for state sovereignty, a rejection of a 'Cold War mentality' (a common term used in Chinese policy circles to express criticism of both American and NATO actions as regressive), a ceasefire and resumption of peace talks, and halting unilateral sanctions (another thinly veiled critique of US and European sanctions levied on Russia since the invasion).[36] The plan neither recognised Moscow's role in instigating the conflict, nor called for the removal of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory. Predictably, the initiative had little sway with Western governments, despite ongoing Chinese interests in acting as a regional peacemaker.

Yet, with the ever-changing dynamics of the peace accord efforts in Ukraine, China must be expected to keep pushing for inclusion in the negotiations to present itself as a mediator in this conflict, as it has in the Middle East and other global hotspots.

Mutual Affection or Mutual Necessity—Sino-Russian Relations

Beijing has been attempting to develop a closer but not interdependent relationship with Moscow, building on a process which began in the 1990s, when the two powers were able to work beyond the tensions of the late Soviet era. Relations between Beijing and Russia continued to warm during the two decades of the Vladimir Putin regime in Moscow, with deepened cooperation promised and planned in the areas of economic, military, scientific, energy, and diplomatic cooperation. In February 2022, on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Presidents Xi and Putin declared a (now notorious) 'no limits' Sino-Russian partnership, a stance which was renewed by the two leaders three years later.[37] Yet, since then the reality has proven to be more complex in the wake of the full Ukraine invasion. Beijing has refused to condemn Russian actions, but it also declined to offer public support for them, and it has not provided overt material assistance to the Russian military, although US officials have accused the Chinese government of providing goods and support which could be converted for military use[38]—claims that, not surprisingly, have been rejected by Chinese officials.[39] Beijing has been content, however, to maintain its civilian trade links, including purchasing fossil fuels from the Russian Arctic.[40] The question now is how US–Russia relations will develop and what impact this would have on Beijing's strategic interests, both vis-à-vis Russia and more broadly.

The US and China—Still Two Tigers on the Same Mountain?

Debates over bilateral economic 'decoupling' persist in both China and the United States, despite the sheer size and depth of the bilateral trading relationship (total Sino-American trade was estimated at US$ 575 billion in 2024).[41]

A trade war instigated by Washington in January 2018 was followed by a 'phase one' Sino-American trade deal in 2020, which brought little benefit to the US economy and failed to unlock Chinese markets.[42] These moves did, however, send a loud signal to the Xi government that bilateral trading relations were being securitised, prompting Beijing to seek ways of reducing its vulnerability to any future US-led trade disruptions. An indication of how this competition is shaping relations with the United States became glaringly visible in January 2025, when the Hangzhou-based DeepSeek firm announced that it had developed an artificial intelligence (AI) model with a far lower budget compared with its American counterparts, and despite US-led restrictions on exports of integrated circuits to China.[43] This was still another sign that China was seeking to lap the US in key emerging technological areas despite growing American protectionism.

Since January 2025, the second Trump administration has also included economic weaponisation and the frequent use of tariffs for unilateral political purposes. In March further tariffs on Chinese goods were implemented, prompting retaliatory actions and threatening a wider trade war,[44] as well as causing uncertainty in the short-term trajectory of bilateral relations. Beijing has responded by targeting key areas of the US economy for retaliatory policies, including restricting American soybean imports and limiting access to Chinese rare earth elements.

China Charting Its Course

In many ways Beijing is still seeking to redefine its foreign policy after almost three years of self-enforced isolationism from the global stage during the pandemic, as the government's draconian zero-Covid policies not only greatly affected the country's domestic economy but also many of its trade patterns and diplomatic initiatives, including the cornerstone BRI.[45]

In considering Western policies of 'de-risking' trade with China, Beijing has prepared several initiatives in the recent past, such as establishing a 'dual circulation' policy designed to bolster the Chinese domestic economy, while still pursuing international economic opportunities. Further, China continues preparing to compete with the West more directly in emerging high-technology sectors such as AI, digital currencies, and quantum computing.

Thus, there is no shortage of storms for Beijing to weather. Although there have been debates about a 'return' to great power politics in the international system for some time, concepts such as spheres of influence, territorial expansionism, and resource competition are being dusted off and repurposed, and in many instances the Chinese government is trying to catch up, all the while seeking to redefine its place in the international milieu.

Taking the Northern Route—Sketching Out China's Engagement with the Nordic-Baltic Region

*By **Larissa Stünkel**, Project Coordinator & Research Associate;*
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For China the five Nordic and three Baltic states[46]— sometimes referred to as the NB8—embody something of a contradiction. While recent years have shown that there is still mutual interest in continuing collaboration with China, there is also a growing wave of unease sweeping through the region's capitals. Nevertheless, the Chinese government appears to have opted to thread the needle with subtle optimism and carefully crafted diplomacy.[47] As Ministry of Commerce spokesperson Wang Yupeng remarked in late 2024, 'We look forward to working with the Nordic countries to uphold the multilateral trading system [...] and jointly oppose protectionism in the field of trade and investment.'[48]

Northern Europe has a strategic place in Beijing's foreign policy, although approaches in engagement differ, which is linked to a domestic dimension that underpins China's foreign policy: 'to achieve great things for China'[49] and to move away from the world's political periphery to, once again, become a central actor globally.[50] Thus, China's interest in the region at large goes beyond mere economic benefit. Regional expertise in policy areas that are of high value for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), such as green tech and the relevant critical raw materials required to fuel the green transition, play an important role. Besides, the region is home to five Arctic nations whose support is necessary when it comes to fulfilling the CCP's ambitions to become an Arctic stakeholder.

Saving Face

Relations between China and Northern Europe have never been truly linear, with highs and lows alternating.[51] Over the last few years, though, the contradictory coexistence of a desire to selectively deepen engagement with Beijing while pushing back against Chinese assertiveness appears to have developed.

On the one hand, there is continuing interest in dialogue and cooperation. Lithuania's former prime minister Gintautas Paluckas mulled the possibility of normalising ties with Beijing,[52] which would represent yet another shift in approach and possibly an effort to rebuild ties with China. In the same vein, Norway[53] and Sweden[54] both sent delegations to China in 2024 to discuss trade, and Latvia concluded another round of 'political consultations' that also zoomed in on 'the promotion of export opportunities for Latvian products to China'.[55] On the face of it, these overtures may appear positive; it is, though, hard to imagine that these might undo the impact of many years of belligerent 'wolf warrior' diplomacy.[56]

On the other hand, various national security agencies the region over are warning against China's possibly harmful intentions.

Sweden's national security strategy of July 2024 explicitly weaves Chinese military advancements and cyber capabilities into a more general threat narrative which posits that Swedish values and interests are being challenged externally.[57] Norway's National Intelligence Service echoes the Swedish assessment, noting that 'Beijing is now using its instruments of power purposefully to replace this "liberal, rules-based" order.'[58] Similar standpoints are also put forth in Denmark and Finland,[59] with both Copenhagen and Helsinki adding more security rhetoric to their engagement with Beijing. The expansion of NATO to now include Sweden and Finland certainly played its part in upping the ante on perceiving China through a security lens.[60] The Baltics, meanwhile, have arguably always been more cautious in their dealings with China, underscoring that their foreign policy choices are primarily guided by both EU and NATO positioning.[61]

For the time being, this dual nature of relations between China and the Nordic-Baltic countries still leaves sufficient wiggle room for all the parties to retain working relationships and work towards achieving their various policy goals.

Alleviating Economic Pressures

Many nations are currently seeking to diversify their trade relations due to shifts in the geopolitical landscape, in China's case to achieve Xi Jinping's promulgated 'Chinese dream'[62]—the idea that China's once prominent position as a trade hub and global power be restored for the benefit of the entire Chinese population. While the ongoing Sino-American feud is anything but new, the more unpredictable environment, including skyrocketing US-imposed tariffs,[63] makes looking to alternatives even more relevant.

Although still small in scale, all five Nordic countries have been hailed as top destinations when it comes to sustainability and green innovation, with local companies promising great strides to reduce overall carbon emissions by virtue of investing in energy alternatives.[64] For Beijing, this burgeoning industry may hold the key to achieving its own 'green transition in all areas of economic and social development' by 2030.[65] Collaborating and trading with China on these issues are also part of the national strategies for the Danish,[66] Norwegian,[67] Swedish,[68] and Finnish[69] governments.

A particular case in point may be a visit to China by Swedish development minister Benjamin Dousa in November 2024 that spoke to the Swedish desire to remain committed to engaging with Chinese businesses, even if intergovernmental relations remain uneasy and strained. The Chinese Ministry of Commerce then proceeded to invite Dousa to take part in round-table discussion, ostensibly to also show openness on its part.[70] Slightly earlier, in September 2024, Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre headed east to mark seventy-five years of diplomatic relations with China. Støre not only returned home with the news that Norwegian citizens would be allowed visa-free travel of up to fifteen days in 2025,[71] but also revealed that both countries plan on bolstering cooperation to tackle climate change.[72] In the same vein, Denmark extended until 2026 its Green Joint Work Programme, which also focuses on 'sustainable green cooperation'.[73] And just like Norwegians, Danish citizens were also granted visa-free entry.[74] Furthermore, in late 2024 the then relatively new Finnish president Alexander Stubb also headed to Beijing, where he witnessed the signing of an educational memorandum of understanding between Tsinghua University and Helsinki University of Applied Sciences, which focuses particularly on technological innovation.[75] And while Finnish citizens were not granted visa-free access, Stubb's visit implicitly underscored that cooperation on environmental issues and cultural exchanges would be priorities for Helsinki.[76]

In sum, it can be noted that although cooperation between China and the Nordics

continues, it is now approached by a far more cautious and realistic foreign policy in all cases, with ambitions far less open-ended than in previous strategy papers.

All the while, the Baltic States do not present China with major investment opportunities and thus may not appear as high on Beijing's priority list, compared with the Nordics.[77] After all, all three Baltic nations, starting with Lithuania in 2021 and followed by Estonia and Latvia in 2022, decided to withdraw from the larger 16+1 framework once touted as an engagement facilitator for Beijing's ambitions in Eastern Europe.[78] Little has changed in terms of economic re-engagement at a larger scale, and it is unlikely that the Baltic region would be climbing the economic priority ladder any time soon. The lack of sufficient overall gains also explains China's current toned-down engagement strategy.

China's Arctic Ambitions

All five Nordic states are also Arctic states, and maintaining a positive and reputable image among them could help China address the pervasive trust issues it faces as it seeks a greater role in Arctic governance. China maintains that its goals in the Arctic region are driven by common interests, including climate research and a strong desire to promote its own domestic energy transition.[79] Beijing has worked hard in recent years to reverse a growing lack of trust by portraying itself as an equal player that prioritises mutual economic benefits for those wishing to engage. And while Nordic businesses have been fairly open to Chinese investment, especially in areas such as environmental protection, sustainable energy sourcing, and shipping, concerns remain that these investments may come with strings attached to the Chinese government.[80] Many projects—such as the redevelopment of the port at Kirkenes in Norway[81] or an elaborate plan to turn Finland's Lapland region into a Polar Silk Road infrastructure hub—have either faced strong political headwinds or fallen through entirely when lavish financial promises failed to materialise.[82]

Ukraine—A Hurdle for Chinese Foreign Policy

China's tacit approval of the ongoing war in Ukraine has done little to appease Northern Europe. This stance is particularly unappealing to the Baltic States, which view China's position on Russia's aggression with great concern—because of both their historical memory and fears that their territorial integrity is at stake in what they perceive as Moscow's expansionist foreign policy. In February 2025 Estonia's Foreign Intelligence Agency reported that China was actively fuelling Russia's military ambitions, calling China a 'primary hub' for evading sanctions placed on dual-use technology. The Baltic States have long been concerned about the growing 'discursive alliance' between Moscow and Beijing. Actively seeking to help Russia by evading sanctions, however, has added to the overall unease.[83] It therefore becomes imperative for Xi's ambitions to look for more subtle ways to engage, without causing too much uproar and by managing expectations from the outset.

Adjusting Ambitions

Northern Europe not only presents China with important economic opportunities in areas that the CCP itself highlights as key national interests. It is also a conduit to broader foreign policy goals, including closer cooperation in the Arctic. Overall, however, China appears to have reordered its objectives in relation to the region as a whole. Once trumped by opportunities and a far-fetched economic outlook, Beijing's actions are now geared more towards managing relations in a more subdued manner, but without losing sight of the long-term domestic goal of reviving China's international geopolitical position. This is especially true now, as Sino-American relations have become more confrontational and more reports emerge of China's active support for Russia's war efforts.[84]

Countries such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark even share common economic perspectives and have opted for a limited commitment to climate protection and the green transition. So far, little has come of these rhetorical commitments, although it may be too early to tell, as these frameworks have only quite recently been proposed. The Baltic States, on the other hand, do not offer the same level of economic benefits as Scandinavia. Nevertheless, maintaining a positive image is still important for Beijing, as even these smaller nations have proven to be disruptive to the CCP on the world stage. Overall, Northern Europe offers both tangible and intangible benefits to the Chinese government, underlining why, despite continued setbacks, the drive to engage remains intact.

China's Influence in the Lithuanian Information Space

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Introduction

Since early 2021 Lithuania has clearly stood out in the Nordic-Baltic region and beyond throughout the Euro-Atlantic part of the world in terms of its relations with China. A downward trend in this bilateral relationship having been seen since 2019, the centre-right eighteenth Lithuanian government that came to power at the close of 2020, and remained there until late 2024, initiated an outright review of the country's policies towards China (henceforth 'the Review'). This in turn led to a series of defining decisions made in 2021, in particular the choice to become the first to opt out from Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China–CEEC, also originally known as '16+1') and to allow Taiwan to open its representative office in the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, under that same name in its Chinese title and that of 'Taiwanese' in its Lithuanian and English variants. As a result of the Review, China began a ferocious and concerted pressure campaign against Lithuania that included partly unprecedented diplomatic, economic, and, notably, informational components (Table 1).

Date	Actions related to Lithuania's Review	China's response
December 2020	Lithuania's eighteenth coalition government enters office, pledging to pursue a 'values-based foreign policy'	Except for continuing restrictions on Lithuanian grain imports since spring 2020, China's reaction to the Review until August 2021 seems to be mostly rhetorical, though also marked by increasingly proactive and assertive messaging
May 2021	The Seimas adopts a resolution blasting China's human rights record and 'genocide against Uyghurs' Lithuania confirms its withdrawal from the China–CEEC platform Lithuania effectively bans Huawei from participating in its 5G rollout	

July 2021	Both Taiwan and Lithuania confirm plans to soon open a representative office of the former in Vilnius	
August 2021		Chinese ambassador Shen Zhifei leaves Lithuania for good Chinese Global Times tabloid suggests that China should punish Lithuania with Russia and Belarusa Lithuanian ambassador to China is forced to quarantine herself in Beijing for weeks before coming back home Disruptions of Lithuanian exports to China and logistics cooperation first reported
September 2021		First disruptions of Chinese industrial imports to Lithuania reported
November 2021	Taiwanese Representative Office opens in Vilnius after some delay	China unilaterally downgrades the bilateral relationship to the level of chargé d'affaires
December 2021	Lithuania amends its National Security Strategy, dedicating an entire paragraph to the threat from China	Lithuanian diplomatic staff forced to move out of the embassy in Beijing Foreign multinationals operating in both countries confirm China's pressure on their ties with Lithuania Chinese customs data reveals a near total collapse of Lithuanian exports to China for this month

Table 1. The timeframe of Lithuania's Review and China's response to it

[a] **'China, Russia Can Cooperate to Punish Lithuania: Global Times Editorial'**, *Global Times*, 11 August 2021.

At the time of writing, February 2025, the Sino-Lithuanian bilateral relationship remains frozen diplomatically, as neither side has an ambassador in the other's capital, and the Lithuanian embassy in Beijing—unilaterally relabelled the 'Office of the Chargé d'Affaires' by the hosting authorities in order to mirror the previous downgrading decision for their embassy in Vilnius—continues to operate remotely. Although it was primarily Chinese economic coercion, particularly 'indirect sanctions' against Lithuanian components in the global supply chains, that attracted international media and scholarly attention due to their primary focus on third-party multinational companies operating in both countries under dispute (see the section on investment and market exposure below), China supported its material pressure on Lithuania by conducting an entire propaganda and disinformation offensive. Since the majority of these measures have already subsided as a result of their thus far limited impact on the policy in question and therefore changed outlook of their authors in Beijing, this case study of China's lasting influence in Lithuania's information space is timely and important. From the perspective of early 2025, such research remains particularly relevant considering that the newly elected and centre-left Lithuanian government may initiate a policy shift on China, reigniting debates and arguments that had been prominent a couple of years ago.

This case study of Lithuania complements the pathbreaking NATO StratCom COE report on Latvia and Sweden published in 2022.[85] Indeed, having long had similar engagement with China as its Baltic neighbours, Vilnius since roughly 2019 has rapidly surpassed not only Riga's but even Stockholm's worsening relationship with Beijing. Moreover, this research supplements a previous comparative study that suggested very limited Chinese influence in the Lithuanian online domain throughout the partly coinciding period from October 2021 to March 2022 inclusive,[86] and also a collective study of Baltic societies' exposure to China's informational activities.[87] The qualitative frame analysis employed here has enabled a more nuanced picture of China's efforts to affect Lithuania's information space, especially in the principal research period of January to April 2022 inclusive.

This paper applies the same methodology as the aforementioned report on Latvia and Sweden by starting with a general outlook on 'eight avenues of Chinese influence' in Lithuania. It then proceeds with the task of defining China's official frames in the Lithuanian information space. Considering the relevance of the case study in question, Chinese messaging throughout the period of 2019 to 2021 inclusive will be specifically assessed in order to coincide with the entire duration of the worsening bilateral relationship when such efforts were also more prominent than before and, notably, afterwards. Despite the fact that China's official publicity within Lithuania has markedly decreased as a result of its own diplomatic downgrade unilaterally implemented in the second half of 2021, many of its official frames had become clear enough by then and were at least in part sustained later by its global media outlets. Therefore, the main analytical task of measuring the presence of these frames in the Lithuanian media space in the first quarter of 2022 will largely and necessarily amount to a sub-case study of Lithuania's review of its relationship with China. The paper's last section will present a brief analysis of the updated research period (October 2024 to January 2025) that coincided with the governmental changes in the country. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, tensions among key Lithuanian political decision-makers, and Donald Trump's re-election in the US would then serve as additional coinciding factors in this account.

China's Activities in Lithuania

Since the establishment of official diplomatic relations in 1991, China's foreign policy towards Lithuania had long been relatively unremarkable in comparison to other Nordic-Baltic or Central and Eastern European countries. As with most of its Western neighbours, Chinese interest in a small and distant Baltic state was arguably driven by the following interrelated reasons: (1) the constant search for new or more susceptible diplomatic partners and valuable political knowledge about a country and its surrounding region that have proven more significant for global politics and security than their sheer size would normally suggest; (2) looking for further access to regional markets (the EU) and, from a more alarmistic perspective, breaches in multilateral political and security arrangements (EU, NATO); (3) the quest for resources, products, and technologies; and, most importantly for the current analysis, (4) waging influence on the normative agenda of the target state and soft power projection towards it.[88] Long characterised by a complex balancing between political scepticism and economic pragmatism on behalf of Vilnius, the Sino-Lithuanian relationship began to worsen in 2019. The following analysis of Beijing's 'eight avenues of influence' in Lithuania will therefore focus on the entire period since the country's intelligence agencies for the first time mentioned China as a threat to its national security in early February 2019, thus both anticipating and contributing to many events that followed soon after. The Chinese United Front work was notably a key initial component of this downward trend.

United Front Networks

The United Front, understood as the collective name for a complex and shadowy institutional system created to further the interests of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) both within and outside the country, had long been somewhat invisible in Lithuania, where the Chinese diasporic community as its usual primary target abroad numbered fewer than 500 people before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and decreased afterwards. However, even such modest figures were apparently important enough to prompt a visit in May 2019 by You Quan, head of the United Front Work Department (UFWD), the party's main agency tasked with such influencing efforts. Although he met with prominent representatives of the Seimas (Lithuanian parliament)[89] and the government,[90] his principal remit strongly suggested that contact with the local Chinese community was the entire journey's real priority.

A fateful incident that occurred barely twelve weeks after You's visit highlighted not only China's novel 'wolf warrior' diplomatic approach, but also its United Front activities in Lithuania. On 23 August 2019 a group of pro-Beijing demonstrators attempted to disrupt a peaceful pro-Hong Kong solidarity event in the heart of Vilnius. Besides the embassy's staff members, this group included a local representative of the Xinhua News Agency present in the country since 2014, the freshly appointed head of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce officially established that same morning, and the head of the Overseas Chinese Association of Lithuania[91] that had apparently functioned as the front's main local institutional manifestation since its creation three years earlier. This incident remains perhaps the most tangible and public manifestation of China's United Front activities in the Baltic States trio so far, having arguably marked the beginning of Lithuania's decisive critical shift towards the Asian giant (see the section on diplomatic measures below).[92]

Beijing's United Front work also extended beyond the diaspora to Lithuanian local elites and academia (more on the latter below). In the former case, the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, a key agency within the UFWD system responsible for twin-city relationships, facilitated the establishment of official contacts between at least eight Lithuanian municipalities and their

Chinese counterparts before the outbreak of the pandemic.[93] Most of those partnerships, however, failed to produce tangible results and fell victim to subsequent health (COVID-19) and bilateral diplomatic crises marked by a comparatively much lower level of contacts between the two countries. Nevertheless, it is safe to conclude that Lithuania had become a target of Chinese United Front activities (size and distance notwithstanding) and that these had an indirect but crucial impact on the bilateral relationship crisis that soon followed.

Parliamentarian Relationships

The Lithuanian legislature, the Seimas, has been a comparatively more China-sceptic branch of the country's essentially parliamentarian government system at least since the beginning of the century. Indeed, it was in 2000 that the visit to Lithuania by Li Peng, then serving as the chairman of the Chinese National People's Congress, was cut short to several hours at Vilnius airport in displeasure at an international meeting on the crimes of communism held in the Seimas at that same time.[94] However, it was especially the thirteenth Seimas, elected in 2020, that came to be associated with some of the most significant initiatives contributing to the Review in question, particularly its Resolution on China's Mass, Systematic and Gross Violations of Human Rights and Genocide Against Uyghurs[95] and the updated National Security Strategy mentioning China for the first time in decidedly ominous tones and describing its 'communist ideology' as contradicting Lithuanian values and national interests.[96]

By the end of the thirteenth Seimas's tenure in late 2024, the Group for Inter-Parliamentary Relations with the People's Republic of China,[97] designed to promote the bilateral relationship on both institutional and national levels, had 27 members (out of 141 parliamentarians overall). At the same time there were also three 'inter-parliamentary provisionary' groups marked by a clear anti-Beijing/CCP stance, namely for relations with Hong Kong (15 members), Taiwan (35 members), and Tibet (11 members). Notably, even participation in the first group does not necessarily imply a pro-Beijing position, although some of its members have indeed become especially vocal critics of the bilateral relations review.[98] No public evidence about any party-to-party relations with China has ever appeared in Lithuania. As a result of the diplomatic crisis, there is no Chinese-Lithuanian inter-parliamentary relationship to speak of, and a growing portion of the Seimas's members prefer their Taiwanese counterparts instead. The latter gradual shift had actually started back in June 2020, when the Taiwanese representative to the Baltic States spoke at the Seimas for the first time ever about his homeland's response to the pandemic, thus legitimising such interactions.[99] In July 2022 Lithuania was tellingly visited by the speaker of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan, You Si-kun,[100] and his Lithuanian counterpart, Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen, reciprocated with a visit to the island the following year.[101]

Academic Relations

China's interest in academic cooperation with Lithuania had slowly but surely increased throughout the three initial decades of official relations, first as a means to project its soft power and then as a way of contributing to its own technological development. In the former case, as elsewhere in the Nordic-Baltic region, the most important institutional manifestation of this trend has been a Confucius Institute[102] established in Vilnius University, Lithuania's largest and most prestigious university, in 2010. In contrast to many other countries, however, no convincing evidence of any adverse impact of it for the host institution or the country at large has been produced ever since, and a telling test of Chinese influence over the university came when the latter organised a widely attended public lecture by the visiting Dalai Lama in mid-2018 with no public reaction from its Confucius Institute prior, during, or after the event. Confu-

cius Classrooms were also opened at Lithuania's two engineering lyceums in the country's largest cities, Vilnius (2014) and Kaunas (2021).

According to previous research conducted in 2022, out of some forty Lithuanian public academic and research institutions, fourteen reported Chinese contacts of some significance, with ten universities, including the country's 'big four', being among them.[103] All of Lithuania's largest and most prestigious public universities accepted potential cooperation by signing memoranda of understanding or similar documents in numerous areas with their Chinese counterparts, including those flagged 'high' and 'very high risk' by the ASPI's China Defence Universities Tracker,[104] in form if not necessarily in practice. While most of those paper initiatives failed to produce anything tangible even before the eruption of the pandemic and the bilateral relationship crisis, several tech-related exceptions have occurred. For instance, suggesting perhaps the most extreme and therefore uncommon pattern, an international collaboration project with a 'very high risk' Chinese partner on a technology with clear-cut dual use potential was led by a Lithuanian scientist with a relatively long history of cooperation with China, recognised by the latter through a series of personal incentives, including talent programmes, awards, and honorary professorships.[105] Despite the adverse impact of the pandemic and the bilateral relationship crisis on this type of influencing, there is therefore sufficient evidence of some disquieting cooperation that goes beyond paper agreements.

Investment and Market Exposure

Despite the sincere efforts of many Lithuanian government and business stakeholders in the 2010s, economic cooperation with China did not meet expectations before the outset of the pandemic and subsequent crisis in bilateral relations. As with neighbouring Latvia, Lithuanian entrepreneurs perceived China, the world's largest and most dynamic emerging market, as a significant opportunity against the backdrop of the 2007–2009 global financial crisis, and as a partial alternative to Russia, which was associated with an increasingly risky business environment since its aggression against Georgia (2008) and especially Ukraine (since 2014). These motives induced Lithuania to join China–CEEC in 2012 with a 'wait and see' attitude. While economically pragmatic and alarmist narratives about China coexisted among key Lithuanian decision-makers for several years, the decisive turn towards the latter came along with the new government in late 2020.

Lithuania's change of heart was at least in part related to the lack of tangible progress in bilateral trade and investment throughout almost a decade of consistent Chinese promises. Indeed, although Lithuanian statistics showed an annual expansion of the country's bilateral trade volume with China by 23.4 per cent in 2020, it actually amounted to roughly € 1.5 billion, which was modest considering the size of the Chinese economy and imbalance of actual interactions, which strongly favoured the latter. Moreover, China took a remarkably lowly fortieth place among foreign investors to Lithuania in 2020.[106]

Despite the fact that most of the above economic interaction figures actually improved in 2021, except for the size of the Lithuanian trade deficit,[107] the apparent lack of the country's exposure to the Chinese market was one of the main factors that emboldened the key authors of the Review at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Seimas. Having experienced China's economic pressure on several occasions previously, Lithuania under its new government felt confident enough to start changing course from early 2021. Beijing's reaction to these policies, especially the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office, however, was much more assertive than anticipated. China's concerted but veiled economic pressure campaign at its late 2021 apex was composed of a freeze on almost all Lithuanian imports, widespread obstruction of Chinese own industrial component exports to Lithuania, cessation of negotiations over further

commercial agreements, and, most uniquely and disturbingly, disruptions of imports to China by multinational companies whose products merely contained Lithuanian components (undeclared 'secondary sanctions'). It was particularly the latest instance of weaponisation of interdependence through indirect market exposure that seemed to have briefly shaken the Lithuanian government's confidence, providing the context for this study's principal research period (first quarter of 2022).

Indeed, at the height of the Chinese multidimensional pressure campaign in late 2021 and early 2022, numerous important representatives of Lithuania's business community, including some household names in its much-esteemed laser manufacturing and German car-making sectors, expressed open criticism of the government's new policy towards Beijing,[108] raising concerns about the country's entire investment environment and long-term development prospects. Hence, even despite a rather limited level of direct bilateral economic exposure to China, the latter has clearly demonstrated its capabilities of causing its target substantial damage.

Infrastructure Development

China's interest in Lithuanian critical infrastructure has long been a feature of the bilateral relationship, sometimes generating debates within the country. In late 2017, Lithuania became one of the last members of the China–CEEC platform to sign a memorandum of understanding on jointly building the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Xi Jinping's flagship infrastructure-focused development mega-project. Within two months, however, the Seimas adopted an updated version of the original 2002 Law on the Protection of Objects of Importance to Ensuring National Security,109 further strengthening one of the most powerful foreign investment screening mechanisms in the Nordic-Baltic region and beyond in Europe. Originally designed to reduce potential Russian infiltration into strategic economic sectors, this law thus came to implicitly curtail China's long-held interest in developing some of the country's critical transportation infrastructure, particularly the Klaipėda seaport and the ongoing Rail Baltica project.

Perhaps the most notable Chinese investment in Lithuania is related to the country's energy sector, traditionally considered as particularly sensitive due to its previous dependence on the inconsistent and politicised pattern of Russia's hydrocarbon deliveries, inherited from the Soviet occupation. Although not entirely a piece of critical infrastructure itself, the Energy Network Institute—one of Lithuania's largest electric facility engineering companies and a significant participant in national electricity transmission projects—has been somewhat controversially majority-owned by North China Power Engineering since 2013.110 In the case of digital telecommunications and surveillance infrastructure, Lithuania has gradually become saturated with Chinese equipment, produced by companies with a somewhat questionable reputation, including Huawei, Hikvision, and Nuctech.

As a key part of the Review, early into its tenure the eighteenth government banned Nuctech from supplying X-ray scanning machinery to Lithuanian airports, over national security concerns.[111] It then openly announced that Klaipėda's deepwater seaport project, long of interest to China, would be postponed 'for at least a decade'.[112] Finally the Seimas passed amendments to the Law on Communications and the above-mentioned Law on the Protection of Objects of Importance to Ensuring National Security, in effect prohibiting 'unreliable' manufacturers and suppliers from operating in the country's digital communications market, with major repercussions for its 5G rollout.[113] Nevertheless, Lithuania remains exposed to potential threats associated with Chinese physical and digital solutions extensively used in such domains as surveillance and communication.

Espionage

In early 2019 the Lithuanian intelligence community was the first among the Baltic States to officially recognise China as posing a threat to the country's national security. This assessment has not changed, mirroring the general downward trend in the bilateral relationship. More detailed warnings expanded from intelligence gathering through attempts to recruit Lithuanian citizens (2019)[114] to malicious activities in the cyber (2020),[115] informational (2021),[116] economic (2022),[117] and technological (2023)[118] domains. In September 2020 a massive data leak from the Shenzhen Zhenhua Data Information Technology, a Chinese open-source intelligence company with strong connections to the country's military and intelligence services, revealed that it had been gathering personal information on at least five hundred Lithuanian politicians, diplomats, journalists, business people, and other prominent individuals over several years.[119] In the meantime the Lithuanian defence community identified numerous security risks in Chinese video surveillance cameras and later accused their smartphone makers of inbuilt censorship capabilities.[120] Nevertheless, at the time of writing there is no publicly available data on any legal cases dealing with Chinese espionage in Lithuania. One can speculate that the bilateral relationship crisis coupled with the downgrade of China's diplomatic activity in Lithuania resulted in the weakening of its intelligence gathering capabilities in the country.

Diplomatic Measures

The unconventional conduct of Chinese diplomats came to the fore in 2019 during the incident on 23 August, as noted above. Despite predictable denials from the embassy, it was later confirmed by surveillance camera footage that the pro-Beijing group of counter-protesters was encouraged by key representatives of its staff, including the defence attaché, his deputy, and the second secretary, with ambassador Shen Zhifei himself observing the commotion from the sidelines. The incident caused widespread uproar across society and the political elite, resulting in the ambassador being summoned to the Lithuanian MFA.[121] Although the embassy subsequently attempted to improve its image by coordinating a shipment of personal protective equipment to Lithuania at the height of the pandemic's first wave the following March, this initiative proved to be largely unnoticed by the host society. As a matter of fact, China's 'mask diplomacy' was soon eclipsed by a row over Lithuanian support for Taiwan's larger involvement in the global fight against the virus.[122]

The Chinese response to the mid-2021 announcement that a Taiwanese Representative Office would be opened in Vilnius was also unprecedented in the diplomatic domain. It took three weeks for Beijing to clearly react to these plans, when the Chinese MFA declared it was recalling its ambassador to Lithuania and demanded that Vilnius reciprocate.[123] This decision curiously coincided with the Lithuanian ambassador, Diana Mickevičienė, landing in Beijing on 10 August upon her return to China from Europe, at which point she had to undergo a mandatory three-week quarantine before leaving the country.

The next stage of the Chinese diplomatic pressure campaign was initiated after the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in mid-November. In response China unilaterally downgraded its official relationship with Lithuania to the level of chargé d'affaires, and asked the staff of the Lithuanian embassy in Beijing to hand in their accreditation cards for review by mid-December. Concerned about the implications for their diplomatic immunity, Vilnius instructed all of the embassy's Lithuanian employees and their family members to leave China on 15 December, in what the international media termed an 'evacuation'.[124] China's approach did not align with the principles of the Vienna Convention guiding diplomatic relations, and was a creative way of asserting diplomatic pressure.

Public Communication

The Chinese embassy in Vilnius has clearly been the main actor for dispersing Beijing's official messaging within Lithuania. As with other countries worldwide, including the three fellow Nordic-Baltic cases studied in the previous and current report, the embassy has proactively sought to influence the content of the Lithuanian information ecosystem by issuing statements, initiating interviews, and placing op-eds and 'sponsored articles' in media outlets. The embassy's public communication with its host society has also included more nuanced means beyond the media environment itself. Notably, even despite the seemingly unfavourable atmosphere resulting from the incident on 23 August 2019, or maybe precisely because of it, the embassy displayed several billboards inviting the residents and guests of Vilnius to attend a firework celebration in commemoration of the PRC's upcoming seventieth anniversary. These were hung exactly one month after the August commotion, only to be soon removed following a reproach by the capital's mayor and general public outrage.[125]

For a comparatively brief period of a couple of years, the embassy had also been active on social media. Several factors, however, suggested the lack of a strategic approach in this regard. To begin with, the embassy's decision in August 2019 to establish a presence on Twitter (renamed X in 2023) seemed to address certain Chinese priorities, rather than match the host nation's market specifics, considering that Facebook is by far the most popular social media in Lithuania. Moreover, the embassy's first Twitter account was under the name of the ambassador, Shen Zhifei,[126] and was deleted at some point soon after his recall back to China in August 2021, and a separate embassy account[127] was set up that month. Despite its higher activity in comparison to that of its predecessor (almost 950 tweets by the end of 2022 and 17,200 apparently bot-like followers), closer scrutiny reveals a remarkable lack of engagement with Lithuania itself, as the vast majority of tweets were unrelated to the host country or bilateral relations, and the same seems to be true judging from the follower patterns, suggesting no significant interaction with Lithuanian users among them. Perhaps most tellingly, the account name is in the Chinese language instead of English, as is common with the PRC's diplomatic outposts elsewhere. These attributes imply that Beijing was never really serious about attempting to win Lithuanian hearts and minds through social media, and that will be further proven in a case study below. The only partial exception, according to the Lithuanian intelligence agencies, derives from the attempts by alleged Chinese spies to recruit Lithuanians through LinkedIn.[128]

Opinion polls reveal that the Lithuanian public perception of China has been affected by the general trajectory of the bilateral relationship. Accordingly, their views of Chinese influence in the world were largely favourable (45 per cent positive versus 33 per cent negative) in 2019, the year of the incident on 23 August.[129] In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, 34 per cent of Lithuanians still thought of China as friendly towards their country, while 26 per cent saw it as unfriendly and 40 per cent were undecided on the matter.[130] The results of a survey published in January 2022 revealed a clear lack of popular support (13 per cent in favour versus 60 per cent against) for the government's review of the relationship with China.[131] However, roughly around the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, almost two thirds (64 per cent) of Lithuanian respondents polled had a negative opinion of China, below only Russia (83 per cent) and Belarus (73 per cent).[132] Mirroring relevant subsequent developments, namely the escalating war nearby and the relative easing of pressure by Beijing, negative opinion of the latter decreased slightly to 57 per cent, while those of Russia and Belarus worsened to 90 per cent and 75 per cent respectively by the end of 2022.[133]

The following section provides an in-depth qualitative analysis of how China attempted to use particular frames to shape how it was seen by Lithuanians.

China's Official Frames in the Lithuanian Information Space

The earliest and more consistent Chinese efforts to affect Lithuania's information space can be traced back to around 2012, reflecting China's growing interest in the larger Central and Eastern European region. The following identification and analysis of China's official frames will focus on its communication throughout the decade since, which can be divided into four phases according to the general trajectory of the bilateral relationship and the goals of this study: (1) the overwhelmingly pragmatic phase of relations (2012 to 2018); (2) the transitionary phase of increasing tensions (2019 to late 2020); (3) the crisis phase of Lithuania's values-based foreign policy, encompassing the Review, and the height of China's pressure campaign in response to it (late 2020 and 2021); and (4) the stalemate phase, which largely coincided with the principal research period for tracking the actual presence of Chinese frames in the Lithuanian information space (January to April 2022).

In general China's messaging towards Lithuania progressively expanded in terms of both its intensity and the means used throughout the first three of these phases that collectively form the focus for the current stage of this study. During the first two phases that preceded the bilateral relationship crisis, the Chinese embassy in Vilnius was Beijing's only notable messenger in terms of public communication. Given the absence of any data on its digital social media activity until as late as August 2021, the only way to identify and assess China's storytelling in Lithuania prior to the crisis requires an in-depth analysis of its efforts to affect the host nation's mass media outlets.

To this study's benefit, the 'Chargé d'Affaires News' section on the embassy's own official website has conveniently provided a lot of data on such attempts since mid-April 2013 (for the main Chinese language version) and mid-April 2015 (for its English interface).[134] The study of the embassy's activity in the Lithuanian information space examined 63 unique news entries (media items) which could be objectively described in terms of performing this attempted influencing function (48 in Chinese and 15 in English). Most of the messages exposed sufficient data for their categorisation according to their type and target media (Table 2), often including their entire textual content and supplementary photos and screenshots of resulting titular pages in Lithuanian media outlets. Notably, the embassy seemed willing to report on its activities in print media as well, which makes such instances interesting given that many of them did not make it to digital versions of those respective outlets.

	Pragmatic phase, 2012–18	Transition phase, 2019–late 2020	Crisis phase, late 2020–2021	Principal research period, 1Q 2022	Total
Op-eds	12	19	10	1	42
Interviews	1	9	4	0	14
Public statements	0	1	5	0	6
Press conferences	0	0	1	0	1

Table 2. Chinese embassy activity in the Lithuanian media environment by number of items produced (according to its website)

The resultant list, though representative, is not fully exhaustive, as the author was able to identify at least a couple of instances when the pro-Chinese content had appeared in the Lithuanian media without any real attribution, merely an indication that it was a 'corporate client's' content.[135] Such an approach could be linked with the embassy's unwillingness to be associated with the message, involvement by intermediary local public relations companies, or both. However, considering that both of these cases were English-language supplements placed in their entirety to promote the China–CEEC platform back in 2017, their actual impact was probably more limited than that of those messages openly authored and tailored by the embassy.

Analysis of the data provided on the embassy's webpage in the time frame from the earliest available entries to the end of this study's principal research period (April 2022) revealed the following characteristics.

First, by far the most popular means of affecting the Lithuanian media were op-eds, called 'signed articles' in the embassy's nomenclature and allegedly authored by its then heads (42 out of 63 entries), followed by interviews with them (14). Except for the interview with China's prime minister Li Keqiang on the China–CEEC platform, all of the entries during the first two phases up to the bilateral relationship crisis were confined to these two types. The subsequent third phase saw diversification of the means to the embassy's four public statements and comments, one republication of the Chinese MFA spokesperson's remarks, and one press conference specifically organised in the premises of the mission, with all of them addressing the developing crisis in Sino-Lithuanian relations.

Second, Chinese messaging clearly intensified in spring 2018 with the arrival of ambassador Shen Zhifei, thus confirming the key role of ambassadors in general and him in particular, as far as 'wolf warrior' diplomacy and its Lithuanian manifestations were respectively concerned. For the sake of comparison, Shen authored three op-eds in March 2018 alone, just after coming to Vilnius the previous month, when a mere four such signed articles and one interview by his two immediate predecessors were registered in the six years prior. Overall, 48 out of 63 entries were associated with Shen's tenure (February 2018 to August 2021) that at least partly covered all three initial phases. The embassy remained active in the Lithuanian information space under Shen's deputy and de facto replacement, chargé d'affaires Qu Baihua—although curiously not throughout this study's principal research period of the first quarter of 2022, with the immediate periods both before and after clearly being more prolific in this regard. Such a gap hints at the embassy's cautiousness during a particularly tense time that coincided with a series of key sensitive events within the host country and the broader region, most importantly Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and resulting shift in Lithuanian perceptions of China.

Third, a brief look at the target media outlets reveals emphasis on long-term partners representing three language groups and both print and digital coverage. Indeed, the embassy seemed to have enjoyed a years-long relationship with *Lietuvos rytas*, traditionally the country's largest daily and the centrepiece of the respective media group focused on Lithuanian-language consumers (27 entries); the *Lithuania Tribune*, an important English-language news portal that for several years administered the English version of *Delfi*, the country's largest news website (13 entries); and *Obzor* (*Обзор*), a significant Russian-language weekly (3 entries). Along with *Litovskiy kur'yer* (*Литовский курьер*) and several other Russian-language outlets (see below), the latter was notably described as 'Russia's instrument of influence' by Lithuanian intelligence in 2015.[136] While any cooperation with the *Lithuania Tribune* seemed to have ended before the crisis phase, that with the two other outlets continued even beyond the principal research period of this study. Notably, the embassy appears to have attempted to compensate for its lost audience by giving more attention to Lithuanian-language media widely considered to be fringe, particularly through re-emphasis on

contacts with the print tabloid *Vakaro žinios* (3 entries) and its parent flagship daily *Respublika* (1 entry), and initiation of cooperation with *Karštas komentaras* (1 entry), a self-described 'alternative media' semi-monthly newspaper. In mid-June 2021 such priorities were visibly demonstrated by the presence of *Obzor* and *Karštas komentaras* representatives at the embassy's reception event organised to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the CCP.[137]

As noted, the crisis phase was characterised by two additional limited means of affecting the Lithuanian information space, namely the embassy's foray into social media and the Chinese state-owned English-language media's content specifically targeting Lithuania. In the former case, however, the embassy's Twitter account, aside from being largely invisible and therefore irrelevant to Lithuanian audiences, barely addressed matters related to its host country. Indeed, given the account's activity rate at roughly two tweets a day, only 17 posts had anything to do with Lithuania from its launch in August 2021 to the end of the principal research period the following April. Such content progressed from relatively neutral and informative initially (7 tweets) to a more assertive jump of activity (8 tweets) during and immediately after the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in mid-November 2021 (as mainly expressed through references to Zhao Lijian, then a notorious 'wolf warrior' spokesperson of the Chinese MFA). It then went silent for two months until late January 2022, and finally registered only two tweets on Lithuania throughout the rest of the principal research period.

Since the beginning of the crisis phase, publicity attacks against Vilnius have become a part of China's own global media outlets, with the ultra-nationalist *Global Times* tabloid, an outlet under the auspices of the CCP's flagship newspaper, the *People's Daily*, clearly serving as the most active and negative messenger. However, given its very limited exposure to Lithuania itself, it cannot be considered as a significant player in terms of affecting the Lithuanian information space.

All told, the actual content of China's official messages that succeeded in reaching Lithuania has attracted the attention of the relevant authorities. According to Lithuanian intelligence, 'sponsored articles' that regularly originated at the embassy before the crisis phase focused on such topics as China's alleged achievements in providing humanitarian aid, benefits of the BRI, criticism towards Lithuanian politicians and activists who publicly raised concerns about Beijing's human rights violations and other authoritarian policies, and defence of the Chinese approach towards and narratives about the pandemic.[138] As could have been expected, China's messaging became even more intensive and assertive throughout the later crisis phase. Hence, the identification of Chinese official frames in the Lithuanian information space particularly focused on the period of 2019 to 2021 inclusive, which conveniently coincided with the entire duration of the worsening bilateral relationship when such efforts were more prominent than before or afterwards. In other words, this period incorporated entirely both the transitionary and crisis phases, with the former often echoing the previous pragmatic narratives. The application of frame analysis for all of the above-selected content revealed the presence of the following four frames, listed roughly according to chronological order and intensifying assertiveness.

Frame 1: China is peaceful, benevolent, successful, and responsible

By far the most lasting and universal frame depicted China as a decent and constructive international role model. Largely mirroring similar traits identified in both the Denmark-focused chapter and the previous report's case studies, this admittedly broad frame conveyed the following interrelated messages about Beijing's principles allegedly applied while dealing with the rest of the world, including Lithuania: (1) focus on absolutely non-threatening 'peaceful development' and rule-abiding multilateralism leading towards a global 'community with a shared future for mankind', as opposed to conflictual 'Cold War mentality' and hegemonic lack of respect for differences; (2) benevolent provision of global public goods in terms of sustainable socio-economic development, global governance, peacekeeping, and tackling key international challenges, such as poverty and hunger, climate change, extremism and terrorism, or the pandemic; (3) highlighting its own alleged success in dealing with these same and other issues, notably including support for human rights and interethnic harmony, in a truly open, transparent, and responsible manner. Except for occasional tacit criticism of the US, the frame's wording was neutral to positive, particularly towards Lithuania. Although present throughout all four phases of the bilateral relationship in question, this frame clearly diminished along with the respective downward trend.

Frame 2: Good relations with China are mutually beneficial and promising

Almost as lasting, the second frame specifically portrayed Sino-Lithuanian bilateral relations as benefiting both sides in general and Lithuania in particular. Again, as with those identified in three other Nordic-Baltic case studies, it disseminated the key message about the need to prioritise the economic relationship with China, allegedly an important contributor to Lithuania's development and a land of further great opportunities for its businesses and people. Thanks to the country's position at the centre of Europe, Lithuania was a natural partner for the BRI and 'win-win' trade, investment, and connectivity-based cooperation with China that would surely serve its objective interests well. On a more ominous note, Beijing was the one to define what 'good' relations stood for exactly, and the full potential of these would only be realised if Vilnius remained open, pragmatic, and respectful of its larger partner. Otherwise, economic costs would result instead of benefits, since China could always look for more committed partners in the region. Aside of such cautionary remarks that logically intensified along with the downward trend in the relationship, this frame's wording was neutral to positive and remained present throughout all four phases. On a broader level, China also seemed to have used it in order to reassure foreign actors, Lithuania included, of its continuing commitment to reform and further market opening in reaction to major systemic challenges, particularly escalating economic tensions with the US and the pandemic.

Frame 3: Lithuania's actions are irresponsible, irrational, and illegitimate

Although the embassy's targeted criticism of Lithuania's public discourse on China occasionally surfaced before 2019,[139] it was the transitionary phase in the relationship that brought such a frame to the fore. As with the three other Nordic-Baltic countries studied, the most lasting message in this particular case was that various Lithuanian allegations against China were biased and completely unjustified. Considering that Lithuania had actually made a series of policy choices based on those allegations throughout the transitionary and especially crisis phases, the frame shifted towards criticism of actions, presenting them as (1) irresponsibly provocative decisions initiated in delusion or even bad faith; (2) irrationally counterproductive and self-defeating from the perspective of Lithuanian economic and other objective national interests writ large; and (3) illegitimate or illegal in the sense of not being truly representative of societal wishes, the positive trajectory of the EU–China relationship, and the letter of official bilateral agreements between Vilnius and Beijing. Both partners' allegedly mutual emphasis on the 'One China principle' and non-interference into each other's domestic affairs were especially highlighted in the last—legalistic—argument. This frame's wording was naturally much sharper, increasingly leaning towards the negative, as shown by the transition from cautionary notes against alleged 'politicisation' of various issues on the bilateral agenda, and Lithuania's supposed embrace of the 'China threat theory' in general, to tacit threats associated with serious consequences that Lithuanian policies would supposedly bring on their people in particular.

Frame 4: Lithuania is an irrelevant, isolated, and dependent troublemaker

China's most radical frame targeted Lithuania as a whole, and not concrete actions or decisions made by policymakers on the country's behalf. Among other Nordic-Baltic case studies, only Sweden witnessed something of the kind. Given that this frame largely targeted the identity of the Lithuanian state and society as such, it was also the most indirect in terms of the channels employed. With the embassy being much less visible in this case due to the rather obvious reasons of certain diplomatic constraints that had to be followed even by 'wolf warrior' diplomats, this function was performed by Chinese global English-language media outlets and the party-state's notorious spokespeople with official credentials and a huge domestic social media following. Normally these messengers would not be regarded as relevant for the Lithuanian information space itself, but their talking points at least partly penetrated the latter through critical, mocking, or merely reporting pieces about such articles published by the mainstream media and through fringe outlets that seemed to have spread some of those narratives. Largely coinciding with the third crisis phase, this wholly negative frame heavily borrowed from Russia's state propaganda, presenting Lithuania as (1) an irrelevant or even failed state on the wane; (2) a lone and isolated troublemaker, singlehandedly responsible for the dire state of bilateral relations; (3) a blindfold servant of the US; and (4) a sinister and xenophobic country with a long track record of human rights abuses.

Reporting on the Bilateral Relationship Crisis in the Lithuanian Information Space (January–April 2022)

The principal research period commonly chosen for this study is peculiar in the Lithuanian case, especially in comparison to a wide range of China-related messages spread through several previous years in Lithuania. Indeed, the Lithuanian public debate in the time frame of January to April 2022 inclusive was particularly strongly focused on the dire state of the bilateral relationship in question, which had become one of the most important domestic political topics at least before the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in late February. Therefore, this section will specifically concentrate on analysis of the convergence between China's official frames, identified above, and frames that dominated the Lithuanian media while the bilateral relationship crisis was being discussed in the first quarter of 2022. As noted, this principal research period partly coincided with the beginning of the stalemate phase between the two countries that was also marked by a clear reduction of China's proactive messaging, and therefore proved timely and conducive for the purposes of this study.

Methodology

Following the pattern established by previous research on Latvia and Sweden, this study focused on outlets representative of Lithuania's digital media environment in terms of both generality and diversity, consisting of (1) the mainstream 'big five' with the highest readership (15min.lt, delfi.lt, lrt.lt, lrytas.lt, and tv3.lt);[140] (2) the primary business news website *Verslo žinios* (vz.lt); (3) the most popular outlets for Lithuania's two largest 'national communities' (ethnic minorities) legally based in the country during the principal research period, or mainstream media versions in those secondary languages, namely Polish (*Kurier Wileński*, kurierwilenski.lt, and lrt.lt/pl/wiadomosci) and Russian (*Litovskiy kur'yer*, *Obzor*, *Ekspress nedelya* [*Экспресс неделя*, nedelia.lt], delfi.lt/ru/, and lrt.lt/ru/novosti); and (4) the largest Lithuanian-language outlets that are considered to be fringe or self-described as 'alternative', and marked by a certain history of cooperation with the Chinese embassy, namely *Respublika* (respublika.lt) and *Karštas komentaras* (komentaras.lt). Notably, besides the latter two, the dataset included both mainstream outlets with somewhat larger exposure to the embassy's messaging, usually the country's most popular news website *Delfi* (delfi.lt) and *Lietuvos rytas* (lrytas.lt). At the more China-cautious end of the spectrum, one would expect to find the country's public broadcaster, Lithuanian National Radio and Television (lrt.lt), with other outlets being in between.

Given the sheer amount of data on the bilateral relationship crisis, especially throughout the first two months of 2022, several conscious decisions were taken on the selection of media items for analysis. Rather than relying on random sampling of the entire media landscape, only the most relevant items fulfilling

any of the following conditions were selected in the case of each outlet: (1) its own editorials and news or investigative articles; (2) public statements of and interviews with important stakeholders and observers; (3) op-eds by outside (non-staff) contributors; and (4) supplied or critically reviewed content of foreign origin, including both Western and Chinese. In each of those types, only original entries of the outlets were selected, as opposed to general news features that were authored by Lithuania's two main news agencies, BNS and ELTA, and usually found their way to several outlets at roughly the same time, often producing specific reaction there. Finally, considering that many outlets have various content-sharing agreements among themselves and function in several media domains, only the most relevant, recurring, and textual items were examined in this case. All of these content types were expected to highlight certain differences among the outlets associated with their varying editorial policy choices and potential susceptibility to China's official messaging.

Depending on the particular outlet, the actual selection of relevant media items in the time frame of 1 January to 30 April 2022 was conducted using their own integrated or Google-based search engines or title-focused review of the entire content, if it was small enough. In the former case, the search was performed by first looking for the Lithuanian, Russian, or Polish equivalents of 'Chin(a/ese)' in the title, and then choosing only those original items that clearly suggested the Sino-Lithuanian relationship as a topic covered there. Qualitative content analysis was then applied for the entire dataset to identify convergence between the four previously determined Chinese official frames in the Lithuanian information space and the frames that were actually used as the Lithuanian media depicted and discussed the bilateral relationship crisis throughout the first quarter of 2022. In other words, besides tracking convergence as such, this task also implied definition of counter-frames that narrated the topic in question very differently. Each media item was thus categorised as (1) converging with China's official messaging, (2) focused on alternative or opposing frames, or (3) presenting no dominant frame at all.

Analysis

The resultant primary dataset thus consisted of 163 media items, with the vast majority of them representing the mainstream (121) and a closely related business category (26). It is indeed remarkable that the hot topic of Sino-Lithuanian relations seemed at first glance to be absent as a subject of original deliberation in four out of twelve outlets initially chosen for the sample, with those outlying ones

preferring instead to use the overall descriptive content of the two above-mentioned news agencies (kurier.lt) or ignoring the matter outright (respublika.lt, komentaras.lt, nedelia.lt). A closer contextual analysis, however, revealed more complexity in one case, as six relevant media items authored by the fringe *Respublika* were gathered from *Vakarų ekspresas* (ve.lt), the main local outlet in the seaport of Klaipėda, a city long of particular interest to Chinese investors. That is to say, although *Respublika*'s older content was not searchable on its website, at least some of its characteristic coverage on the topic was obtained from a comparatively more mainstream regional entity belonging to this parent outlet.

Hence, the actual working sample was reduced to nine outlets, including secondary language versions of two of them, with only one among the latter (LRT in Russian) producing an original media item. The working dataset compiled after removal of those entries that were repetitive (particularly prominent among the mainstream outlets), topically irrelevant (not having anything to do with Sino-Lithuanian relations, despite mentioning both countries), or neutral (content without any discernible frame) was therefore reduced to 136 unique media items with at least one identifiable frame (Table 3).

Media outlet	Website	Category	Primary dataset (items)	Working dataset (items)
15min	15min.lt	Mainstream 'big 5'	11	11
Delfi	delfi.lt	Mainstream 'big 5'	29	24
LRT	lrt.lt	Mainstream 'big 5'	53	45[a]
Lietuvos rytas	lrytas.lt	Mainstream 'big 5'	19	13
TV3	tv3.lt	Mainstream 'big 5'	9	8
Verslo žinios	vz.lt	Business	26	20
Respublika	respublika.lt	Fringe	6	6
Kurier Wileński	kurierwilenski.lt	Polish	5	4
Obzor (Обзор)	obzor.lt	Russian	5	5

Table 3. The dataset by outlet and number of media items.
[a] Including one item in Russian.

All of the items were then classified as negative (pro-China), positive (China-sceptic), or balanced (without clear predominance of a couple or more competing frames) regarding the Lithuanian review of the relationship (Table 4). In other words, opinion about the Review was generally expected to be inversely related to opinion about China—the more negative coverage of this policy turn there was, the greater the possibility of being susceptible to the pro-Chinese official frames, and vice versa.

Media outlet	Negative coverage (items)	Positive coverage (items)	Balanced coverage (items)
15min	5	4	2
Delfi	14	9	1
LRT	17	25[a]	3
Lietuvos rytas	7	5	1
TV3	6	2	0
Verslo žinios	8	12	0
Respublika	6	0	0
Kurier Wileński	1	3	0
Obzor (Обзор)	5	0	0
Total	69	60	7

Table 4. Breakdown of coverage of the Review by general outlook
[a] Including one item in Russian.

The analysis revealed several overall traits that were logically expected and some truly surprising ones. In temporal terms, the vast majority of the items (119 versus 17) belonged to the period before the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, which naturally distracted everyone in Lithuania (Table 5; Figure 1). While negative coverage of the Review was clearly more prominent than positive coverage before that unforgettable day, the later subperiod was marked by a predominantly positive outlook on the policy, suggesting weakening of the country's exposure to Chinese messaging. Even before 24 February, however, the general narrative about the negative implications of the relationship crisis with China had gradually evolved from more to less alarmist and less critical of the Review.

As far as the messages' actual content was concerned, the heated nature of the debate was exemplified by a surprisingly small overall proportion of balanced coverage (5 per cent), with the vast majority of media items clearly representing one of the opposing positions, negative (51 per cent) or positive (44 per cent) towards the Review. Indeed, before the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine full-scale war, it actually seemed as if every single stakeholder in Sino-Lithuanian relations had something to say on the topic. Only two outlets clearly displayed their stance on the policy in question, and in both cases it was decidedly negative without any frames that would support the Review. While the fringe *Respublika* expectedly produced by far the most critical coverage of all, the Russian-language *Obzor* merely targeted the government in a rather satirical fashion common to it. Considering the much-debated economic costs of the Review and disturbing revelations from a similar Swedish case study, the results from *Verslo žinios*, Lithuania's flagship business outlet, were rather surprising. As a matter of fact, it was only one of the three outlets (along with LRT and *Kurier Wileński*) where positive coverage of the Review prevailed over negative.

Media outlet	Coverage before 24 February 2022			Coverage after 24 February 2022		
	Negative	Positive	Balanced	Negative	Positive	Balanced
15min	5	3	2	0	1	0
Delfi	14	5	1	0	4	0
LRT	15	22	3	2	3	0
Lietuvos rytas	7	4	1	0	1	0
TV3	5	2	0	1	0	0
Verslo žinios	7	9	0	1	3	0
Respublika	6	0	0	0	0	0
Kurier Wileński	1	2	0	0	1	0
Obzor (Обзор)	5	0	0	0	0	0
Total	65	47	7	4	13	0

Table 5. Breakdown of coverage of the Review by sub-periods and number of items

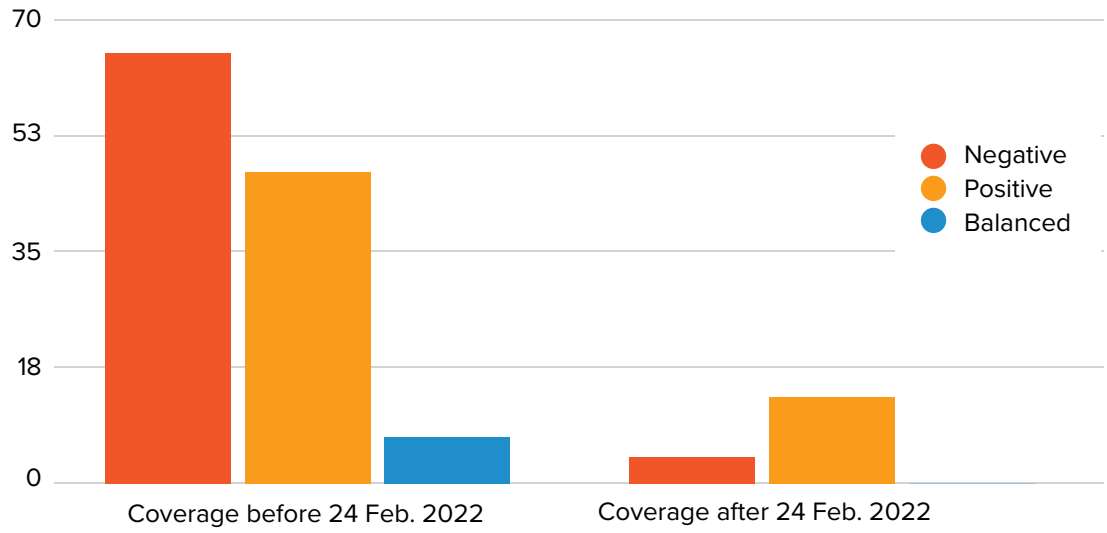

Figure 1. Breakdown of coverage of the Review by sub-periods and number of items

The exact measurement of the convergence between the Chinese official frames and the frames used to describe the condition of Sino-Lithuanian relations in early 2022 was not straightforward due to the decidedly charged general background surrounding the topic. Therefore, as expected, the truly affirmative messages associated with the initial two Chinese frames ('China is peaceful, benevolent, successful, and responsible' and 'Good relations with China are mutually beneficial and promising') were entirely absent. Rather,

only their less neutral messages were traced in the form of the following two respective sub-frames: 'China is (too) big and important (to be messed with)' and 'Worsening relations with China is costly.' Closely interrelated with the latter, the third Chinese official frame ('Lithuania's actions are irresponsible, irrational, and illegitimate') was practically mirrored by two other sub-frames targeting the current Lithuanian government as incompetent authors of the Review, and separately presenting this policy as breaching both international and the country's own domestic law. Finally, China's last official frame was most clearly, though less commonly, represented in the Lithuanian media, depicting their country itself (1) as irrelevant/small, (2) as isolated because of the Review, and notably even (3) as acting on behalf of the US in breach of its own independence and sovereignty (Table 6).

Chinese official frame	Related negative (sub-)frames on the Review
1. China is peaceful, benevolent, successful, and responsible	1. China is big and important
2. Good relations with China are mutually beneficial and promising	2. The government is incompetent 3. The government's Review is costly
3. Lithuania's actions are irresponsible, irrational, and illegitimate	4. The government's Review is illegal
4. Lithuania is an irrelevant, isolated, and dependent troublemaker	5. Lithuania is small 6. Lithuania is isolated (nobody will help or follow it) 7. Lithuania followed the US

Table 6. Chinese official frames and their Lithuanian manifestations during the principal research period

The analysis revealed that the four most prominent sub-frames present in the Lithuanian media emphasised the costs of the Review (71 instances); criticised the current government for its incompetence (and/or irrationality, short-sightedness, rashness, arrogance, and lack of responsibility, unity, and consistency) (53 instances); and depicted China as too big, powerful, and important (22 instances), especially to quarrel with for such a small country as Lithuania (8 instances) (Table 7; Figure 2). While the first two sub-frames were present throughout the entire media spectrum, one could not easily dismiss the impact of the less prominent ones either, particularly considering that some references to Lithuania as small and isolated[141] or even following the US[142] were amplified by prominent former or current national politicians. Notably, the author of the latter allegation, Ramūnas Karbauskis, is a wealthy businessman and the former head of the main political party that formed Lithuania's preceding governing coalition (2016–20). In general, however, it is imperative to highlight that an anti-Review/government position did not automatically entail a pro-Chinese one, although its proponents often attempted to frame it as one, and certain correlation was indeed present in such cases.

Anti-Review (sub-) frames	Mainstream	Business	Polish	Russian	Fringe	Total
1. China is big and important	16	4	0	0	2	22
2. The government is incompetent	38	3	1	5	6	53
3. The Review is costly	52	7	1	5	6	71
4. The Review is illegal	2	0	0	0	0	2
5. Lithuania is small	6	0	0	1	1	8
6. Lithuania is isolated	3	0	0	0	0	3
7. Lithuania followed the US	0	0	0	0	2	2
Total	117	14	2	11	17	161

Table 7. Lithuanian (sub-)frames critical of the Review by media type and number of items

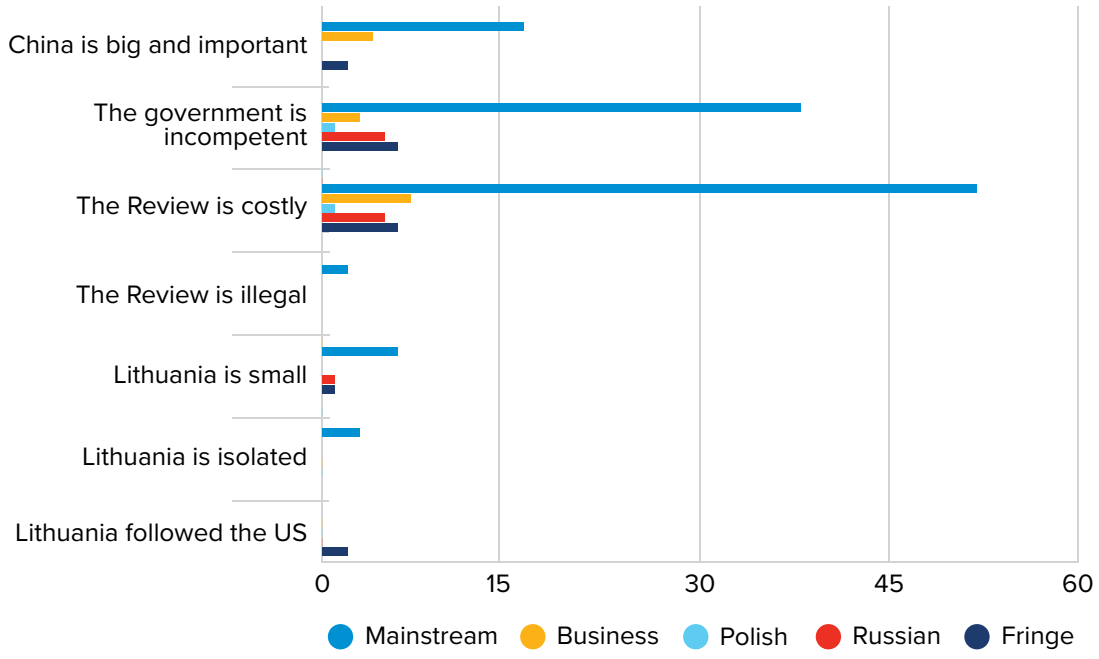

Figure 2. Lithuanian (sub-)frames critical of the Review by media type and number of items

The analysis exposed the presence of four counter-frames defending the Review that relatively neatly targeted the Chinese official frames (Table 8; Figures 3 and 4). The most prominent narrative (46 instances) countered the claims of Lithuania's isolation by depicting the Review as conforming to the latest policy shifts in the West in general and the EU in particular, and highlighting support from 'like-minded' partners, including Taiwan, which was often depicted as presenting huge potential for truly productive economic and technological cooperation. Partly in reaction to Chinese verbal attacks against the Lithuanian government and even the country itself, the next most common counter-frame depicted China as a threat to Lithuania and the rest of the democratic world due to its allegedly malign and assertive domestic ('autocratic human rights abuser') and foreign policies ('ally of Russia'), as well as inherent structural instability derived from its internal political, economic, and pandemic-related challenges (34 instances). Curiously the pro-Review legal and political evaluation of the bilateral dispute was comparatively less prominent, with counter-frames defending the policy itself ('Lithuania is right' or more usually 'Lithuania has not done anything wrong') and depicting resultant Chinese actions against the country as illegal merely registering 17 and 8 instances respectively.

Pro-Review counter-frames	Mainstream	Business	Polish	Russian	Fringe	Total
1. China is a threat, malign, or unstable	28	3	2	0	1	34
2. China acts illegally	6	2	0	0	0	8
3. Lithuania is right	15	1	1	0	0	17
4. Lithuania is not alone	37	8	1	0	0	46
Total	86	14	4	0	1	105

Table 8. Lithuanian counter-frames defending the Review by media type and number of items

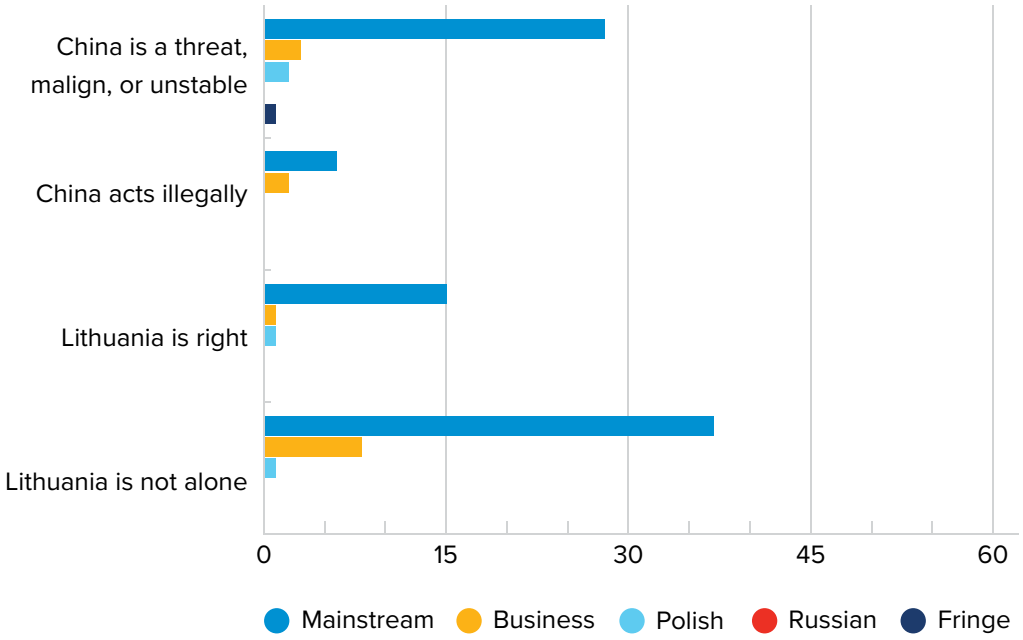

Figure 3. Lithuanian counter-frames defending the Review by media type and number of items

As has been pointed out above, positive coverage of the Review gradually increased throughout the principal research period, with critical voices becoming rather muted after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In a telling fashion, articles put out in late April 2022 across different media reported on the EU's € 130 million support for Lithuanian businesses affected by China's economic coercion;[143] published an extensive interview with the Taiwanese foreign minister Joseph Wu, who pledged more investment to Lithuania and scolded Beijing for its recent conduct against Vilnius and regarding the Russia-Ukraine war;[144] and even declared that China had actually lost the 'war' against Lithuania, in the words of one of the country's most China-sceptic politicians.[145] From the perspective of three years on and refraining from such simplistic phrases, it seems safe to conclude that Lithuania has indeed withstood Chinese diplomatic, economic, and informational pressure. The following updated analysis of the Lithuanian information space confirms the latter point.

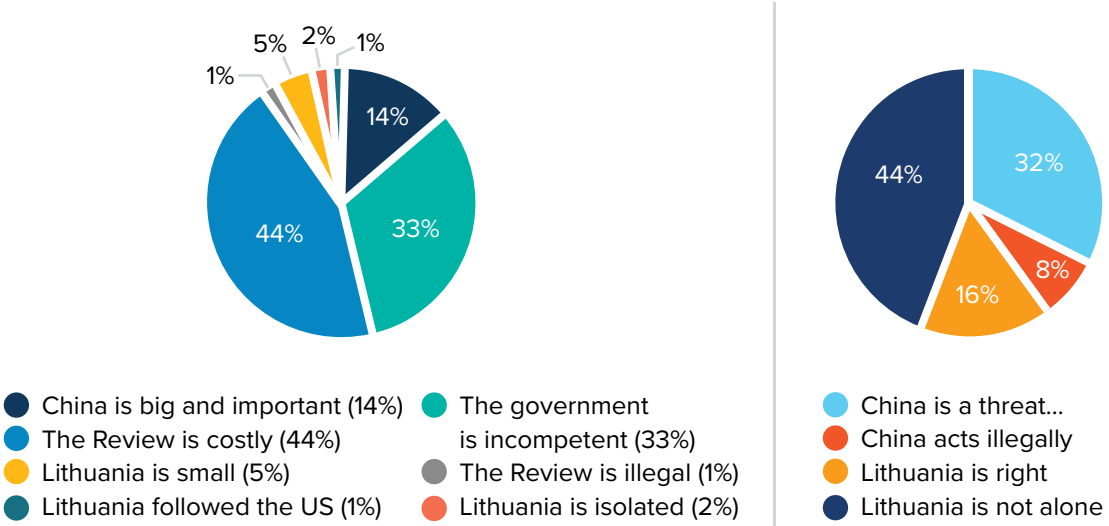

Figure 4. Anti-Review (left) and pro-Review (right) coverage by total (sub-)frame items (sample size adjusted)

An Update on Reporting during the Governmental Transition (October 2024 to January 2025)

In October 2024 Lithuanian voters elected centre-left political parties that formed the country's nineteenth coalition government in December that year. Given that Lithuania's review of its relationship with China had been arguably the most controversial part of the previous government's foreign policy, it was logical to expect that the issue of the crisis in bilateral relations would re-emerge in the public and political debates during the country's electoral season in general and the settling in of the new cabinet in particular. The time frame chosen for this update covers four months, like the principal research period analysed above, and includes the immediately pre-electoral, negotiation, and government-forming phases in the most recent Lithuanian political process, along with the first fifty days of the government's tenure. In the broader context, the period chosen conveniently coincided with the election and bedding in of Donald Trump's new administration in the US. The updated research period thus started with the PRC's national day (1 October 2024), which marked the party-state's seventy-fifth anniversary, and ended on the day that the European Commission asked the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to again suspend its three-year-old case over China's trade restrictions on Lithuania (31 January 2025).[146]

Before analysing Lithuanian reporting on the Review in the updated time frame, it seems apt to briefly review China's messaging since the principal research period covered above, that is after April 2022. Considering unfavourable conditions stemming from the Chinese choice to downgrade the status of their diplomatic mission, and negative overall publicity regarding their alleged role in the Russia-Ukraine war, it was logical to expect that—as with the months immediately prior—the embassy's messaging would remain infrequent, less emotional, and confined to traditional rather than social media.

According to both the English and Chinese versions of the embassy's official website, throughout the resultant 33-month-long period (May 2022 to January 2025) it made at least 20 attempts to affect the Lithuanian information space. These could be divided into two main types: (1) proactive promotion of China's general policies and doctrines (Global Security and Global Civilisation initiatives, Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence) or of the CCP itself, usually presented in op-eds with no specific mention of Lithuania (the *Lietuvos rytas* daily remained a regular platform for these), and (2) reactive comments and some op-eds critical of the relevant Lithuanian, Lithuania-related (NATO's 2023 Vilnius summit), or wider developments (the G7's remarks on Taiwan) contradicting Beijing's political and security interests. While the former logically used positive language associated with the first official frame defined above ('China is peaceful, benevolent, successful, and responsible'), those of the latter that specifically referred to Lithuania employed a 'carrot and stick' approach, primarily reflected in the respective mixture of the second ('Good relations with China are mutually beneficial and promising') and third ('Lithuania's actions are irresponsible, irrational, and illegitimate') official frames.

Although a clear softening of Chinese official messaging was visible throughout the first two months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, coinciding with the latter part of the principal research period (late February to April 2022), the embassy returned to its 'wolfish' modus operandi immediately afterwards. For instance, the op-ed authored by the interim chargé d'affaires Qu Baihua, published in *Lietuvos rytas* on 3 May in reaction to the Lithuanian government's 2021 Annual Work Report submitted to the Seimas, used elements of all four official frames and defended China's special relationship with both Russia

and Belarus, while implicitly criticising Western sanctions imposed on its strategic partners.[147] The fourth official frame, specifically targeting Lithuania rather than its government's actions towards China, was also present in the embassy's mid-June press release in reaction to the Seimas's criticism of Hong Kong's political situation, where the Lithuanian human rights record was described as 'deplorable' along with a predominantly made-up brief portrayal of it.[148]

During the rest of the updated research period, the embassy remained critical of various aspects of Lithuania's foreign policy related to China. However, in late January 2025, it unexpectedly issued an op-ed on the 'past, present, and future' of bilateral relations authored by Fang Mei, councillor of the Chinese Mission to the EU, and designed to send a message about her country's readiness to solve the diplomatic dispute. This last item within the timeline was in stark contrast to the one that opened the updated research period in May 2022, signalling China's charm offensive built on references to common cultural links, denying allegations about a state-led economic coercion campaign against Lithuania, and presenting the Asian country as neutral and friendly to both adversaries in the ongoing 'Ukraine crisis'.[149] The op-ed could be interpreted both in the Lithuanian domestic context as an attempt to affect the new government's foreign policy decision-making and also as a broader effort to influence the European Commission's deliberation on whether to prolong its WTO case against China in defence of Lithuania. While the latter attempt was successful in part due to the case's suspension, the former appears to have thus far failed.

Analysis of the resonance between the four Chinese official frames and the Lithuanian media's reporting on the bilateral relations review throughout the updated time frame (1 October 2024 to 31 January 2025) produced the following results. In comparison to the principal research period and more specifically its first stage before the late February eruption of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (1 January to 23 February 2022), the same selected Lithuanian outlets dedicated considerably less attention to the topic of the Review, with such coverage characteristically spiking after several related pronouncements or events, particularly expression of the need to fix the bilateral relationship by the country's would-be prime minister Gintautas Paluckas in late October 2024,[150] reaction to the outgoing Lithuanian MFA's late November decision to expel three Chinese diplomats,[151] and reflections on the prolongation of the WTO case in late January 2025.[152]

Without general news items, characterised by a neutral tone and authorship on behalf of Lithuania's two main news agencies, the resultant sample composed of original entries was decidedly small. In fact, the 'big five' mainstream outlets and the primary business website barely produced anything original at all. While some less radical sub-frames about the Review naturally reappeared in the coverage of politicians' debates on the issue, the general public discussion was much less heated than during the principal research period analysed above, suggesting a certain level of acceptance of the anomalous situation in the bilateral relationship. Of all the media outlets chosen for the study, the only exception in this regard was the fringe tabloid *Respublika*, which issued at least four original items touching upon the subject throughout the updated research period and tellingly published in its entirety Fang Mei's late January op-ed on correcting the relationship.[153] All these items could be characterised as op-eds authored by regular contributors to the outlet, including its editor-in-chief. While none of them specifically focused on the Review, all four targeted the former Lithuanian government, notably using not only already familiar negative sub-frames ('the government is incompetent'[154] and 'Lithuania followed the US'[155]), but also their more malign variation ('the Review was a result of political corruption'[156]). All of this suggests, however, that China's influence in the Lithuanian information space remained limited in the critical period of the change in government.

Conclusions

The study of China's influence in the Lithuanian information space has revealed a curious, dynamic, and nuanced situation. While Lithuania had long being relatively unremarkable in comparison to its fellow Nordic-Baltic countries, since 2019—and particularly after the initiation of its values-based foreign policy towards Beijing in early 2021—it has rapidly emerged on the receiving end of some of China's most assertive and unprecedented economic and diplomatic practices worldwide. The principal research period covering the first quarter of 2022 thus largely coincided with the most intensive phase of unusually fierce domestic debate over the government's review of the bilateral relationship, which subsided only because of Russia's shocking full-scale invasion of Ukraine and China's little-noticed retreat from using its most disruptive, damaging, and unique measures of economic pressure, especially its undeclared 'secondary sanctions' against Lithuanian components in global supply chains.

Despite such an apparently suitable context, the analysis of China's influence in the Lithuanian information space strongly suggests that it has been limited. Besides the general lack of the country's exposure to Chinese messaging due to the local absence of its mass media outlets, relevant social media activity, and then much of the embassy itself, Beijing's own 'wolf warrior' conduct and multidimensional pressure campaign against Vilnius both seem to have brought about counterproductive results. This has been pointedly revealed by a comparatively indirect and narrow convergence between Chinese official frames and the actual storytelling about China in the Lithuanian media. The truly positive messages about China were absent, and those critical of the bilateral relationship review arguably reflected Lithuanians' disillusionment with their eighteenth government's overall unpopular policies during the polycrisis, rather than indicating Beijing's informational influence over them. As a matter of fact, Lithuania's decade-long complex balancing between political scepticism and economic pragmatism in its relations with China has shifted towards the former. This trend is also reflected in the media.

In this context, however, it is important to acknowledge that interpretation of the results must take into account the hardly avoidable methodological decisions made considering the relative scarcity (before 2022) and particularity (in the first quarter of 2022) of data on China's official messaging in Lithuania and its impact on the latter's information space respectively. In other words, the apparent lack of resonance between Chinese official frames offered for several years prior to the principal research period, on the one hand, and the subsequent Lithuanian four-month-long media debate surrounding the bilateral relationship crisis, on the other, should not automatically mean that some of the earlier frames were irrelevant in the target society, particularly in the case of those that had less to do with the Review in question.

Meanwhile, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war is expected to further damage China's already low reputation among Lithuanians due to the increasingly widespread association between the two Eurasian autocracies, although a specific study is required to confirm this empirically. Further research should naturally focus on the later (post January 2025) informational activities by the Chinese embassy, as the international context under Trump's second tenure has arguably provided Beijing with a lot of new room for manoeuvre. It will be particularly interesting to observe China's further messaging in reaction to the new Lithuanian government's possible outreach with the aim of 'normalising' the bilateral relationship. Lithuania's case study has also hinted at a globally observed trend of intensifying cooperation between the Chinese and Russian propaganda machines, a topic that merits closer attention. Finally, the inability to track more relevant coverage in Lithuanian fringe outlets was a significant limitation to this study, and one that naturally suggests the need to find a means of researching consciously hidden contexts. It is the author's hope that the rabbit hole there is not too wide, dark, and deep.

Chinese Influence in the Kingdom of Denmark: Shadow Wolf Warrior—Directing the Backstage, Shunning the Frontstage

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Introduction: The Shadow Wolf Warrior and Three Phases of Danish–Chinese Relations

In December 2020 the Danish parliamentarian Uffe Elbæk posed an intriguing question that continues to occupy security and intelligence services at an accelerating pace. His inquiry goes to the heart of this case study on Chinese influence in the Danish realm. He asked: 'I don't wish to wear a conspiracy hat, but how many back doors does China have into Denmark?'[157]—a concern that has loomed over Danish–Chinese relations and has only become more salient as China is increasingly seen as a geopolitical adversary by Denmark and its allies. It is also a concern that has remained underexplored as long-established and vested interests have disregarded risks, coercion, and infiltration. In other words, the avenues of Chinese influence are wide and well travelled. One critical example is how this study is the first to conduct an exploratory mapping of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) influence through its United Front networks in Denmark and to show decades of presence growing into influential relationships with a broad spectrum of societal actors. United Front networks directed by CCP officials pursue vulnerabilities and advantages at several levels of government, business, and civil society, from espionage and covert access to coercion and harassment—often at the expense of Emore or less unwitting foreign counterparts. Characteristic of hybrid warfare and influence campaigns, the activity on these avenues combines both legitimate and illegitimate tools with overt and covert actions, which in sum reveals a strategic effort of expanding China's influence in and leverage over Denmark. The activity on these avenues of influence further helps to demonstrate the infrastructure of Chinese influence potential and the existing inroads China has made in Danish society, which can be marshalled for current and future geopolitical goals.

The Shadow Wolf Warrior

Insights from this case study's analysis of eight avenues of Chinese influence[158] and the framing analysis of official People's Republic of China (PRC) communication from January to May 2022 (of particular interest because of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine), combined with comparative analysis of change in 2024, results in the authors of the study iden-

tifying and coining the 'Shadow Wolf Warrior' as a new diplomatic concept. This expands on the previous conception of China's 'wolf warrior' diplomacy by offering a more subtle perspective of similar though hidden practices. This introduction of the Shadow Wolf Warrior diplomatic concept is an analytical gesture to sociologist Erving Goffman's distinction between backstage (expression of the truer self without public scrutiny) and frontstage (observation of expected norms under public scrutiny) behaviour.[159] This study suggests that the Shadow Wolf Warrior behaviour observed in the Danish case purposefully shuns the frontstage in order to direct the backstage. When in recent years news and academic discourse have converged on labelling a change towards aggressive Chinese diplomacy as wolf warrior diplomacy, the focus has been on the public frontstage displays. It has generally been displayed through actions like 'robustly defending PRC policies when criticized abroad, emphasizing the hypocrisy of foreign critics and standing up to "the West" (particularly the United States), often using insulting language'.[160] A number of wolf warriors stand out, such as former ambassador to Sweden Gui Congyou, former ambassador to France Lu Shaye, and former ambassador to Germany Wu Ken.[161] The public display aspect on the frontstage is thus usually a defining point of wolf warrior diplomacy and has contributed to it being traced as starting at the time of the outbreak of Covid-19 in China and slowly dwindling down again after Xi Jinping called for a 'loveable image of China' in May 2021.[162] Meanwhile, following this toning down of frontstage confrontation there has been an increase in spy scandals in the UK, US, and Australia, emphasising a turn away from the frontstage.[163] Denmark has not been regarded as exposed to wolf warrior diplomacy because of the frontstage focus. But as this study suggests, by looking beyond public engagements on the frontstage and unearthing official Chinese interaction on the backstage, it may inform a more nuanced understanding of Chinese diplomatic practices and the links between the two stages.

The study provides this insight through the *Shadow Wolf Warrior* concept defined as the diplomatic practice of pursuing foreign policy interests and goals on the backstage through aggressive and coercive signalling. Shadow Wolf Warrior is akin to frontstage wolf warrior diplomacy, in that it maintains its aggressive posture, but is not intended as a broader public signal to domestic or foreign audiences. Instead, it relies on making demands, threats, and hostile actions directly and privately through informal meetings and communication, that is, the backstage of diplomacy. Keeping itself to the backstage, Shadow Wolf Warrior diplomacy avoids the sanctions of violating public norms of host countries and foreign audiences, while still delivering the same messages to the primary recipient, foreign actors with decision-making power. The sanctions avoided could include public condemnation, that is, worsening public relations between the CCP and the host country's public and raising the reputational costs of collaboration for national elites and partners. Hence, staying on the backstage offers Chinese diplomacy more flexibility and direct access to national elites.

Activation of the Shadow Wolf Warrior is contingent on diplomatic circumstances, and when avenues of influence are wide and well travelled, the circumstances are welcoming. However, obstacles to unfettered Chinese access have appeared since 2018, prompting reflection on fluctuations in the Danish–Chinese relationship.

Three Phases: Neoliberal Engagement, Opportunistic Expansion, and Critical Revision

The categorisation of three relationship phases is instructive in contextualising this study. Taking stock of the modern and maturing Danish–Chinese relationship would see China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 as a path-defining juncture for business opportunities. That was also the year Anders Fogh Rasmussen was elected

Danish prime minister and would put Denmark on a path towards a partnership agreement in 2008. The first phase, between 2001 and 2008, can thus be labelled the '*Neoliberal Engagement*' phase, which saw a growing attraction between the two states as witnessed by increased diplomatic engagement, high-level visits, and significantly increased bilateral trade.[164]

The second phase starts from the signing in 2008 of the relationship-defining Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). Denmark was then, and is still, the only Nordic country to have entered this high-level partnership to pursue a framework within which further capitalisation on the unique Danish position could take place through increasingly elaborate cooperations in both the public and private sector. This phase from 2008 to 2018 includes the 2009 diplomatic crisis caused by a visit by the Dalai Lama to Denmark, which was solved by Denmark officially opposing the independence of Tibet. This period also covers the massive Tibet scandal of the authorities violating pro-Tibetan protesters' constitutional rights in order to protect Chinese political and cultural sensitivities. This study labels this decade as the '*Opportunistic Expansion*' phase, in which Danish decision-makers maintained a neoliberal sense of opportunism on trade and deepening cooperation, despite growing public concerns over compromising on Danish values vis-à-vis Chinese demands and actions.

The third phase was covertly inaugurated in 2015, when Danish self-reflection and scepticism began to set in as the Tibet scandal grew to require an investigative commission, and Hong Kong protests garnered global attention. The year 2018 was a critical juncture which covers a debate in the Danish parliament, 'On the increasing pressure from China',[165] and the Danish Defence Intelligence Service (DDIS) publicly pointing to the national security risks of using Huawei for 5G networks. This third phase is ongoing and this study labels it the '*Critical Revision*' phase, which is characterised by a growing securitisation of the relationship driven by Danish politicians, along with intelligence reports, and includes the introduction of legislative measures on investment screening, a significantly heightened attention and vocal positioning from the Danish intelligence services, and critical reassessment of existing and future engagements.

The Danish information space must also be contextualised considering the internal relations and split responsibilities within the kingdom. The Danish realm consists of three separate political entities, with Denmark having by far the largest population and economy, Greenland having the smallest economy but huge geoeconomic potential and geopolitical importance, and the Faeroe Islands being dependent on fisheries exports while also being located in the middle of the military-strategic GIUK gap between Greenland, Iceland, and the UK central to the defence of Europe—and all of which shapes possibilities and avenues available to Chinese influence. While both Greenland and the Faroe Islands have extensive political autonomy, decision-making on foreign policy and security-related issues is the prerogative of the Danish government. This is a continuous cause of friction within the realm and is exacerbated as relations with China are increasingly seen through a lens of national security, and thus risk being decided in Copenhagen instead of Nuuk or Tórshavn—a point of friction that constantly fuels debates on seeking full independence from Denmark. Significant changes might be on the way, as legal possibilities for the Faroe Islands joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) on its own are being assessed[166] and a future Greenlandic exit from the Danish union is becoming increasingly more likely.[167] Both developments come with a process risk of subversion of the integrity of political decision-making within the constituent parts of the Danish realm. Each entity will be exposed to increased international pressures during and after these processes, while the political costs of arriving at unified responses across the realm increase. Those are situations where Chinese avenues of influence become particularly valuable. In addition to the Northern regions of the Danish realm, a new Chinese hybrid front has opened in the Baltic Sea, as Chinese-connected vessels have been involved in cable-cutting in-

cidents. First, *Newnew Polar Bear* damaged the Balticconnector natural gas pipeline in the Gulf of Finland in October 2023,[168] and, second, *Yi Peng 3* in November 2024 was also involved in cutting Baltic sea-floor cables, which prompted an onboard investigation, made possible in part through the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) assuming a facilitating role in negotiations between Finland, Sweden, Germany, and China.[169] These incidents taken together with Russian cable cutting in the Baltic Sea have inserted a novel dimension of hybrid threats from Chinese actors—and forced Danish intelligence services, defence actors, and politicians to re-evaluate preconceived assumptions about Chinese support of Russian war efforts.

Directing the Backstage: Avenues of Influence

This section explores the varied ways in which China seeks and exercises influence in the Danish realm. It shows how avenues of influence have been wilfully designed and endorsed by Danish political and business elites to the effect of naturalising types of relations and access which in hindsight should have warranted critical scrutiny and conscious risk management. Throughout all the avenues, the one recurring key actor is the Chinese embassy, including the Chinese ambassador. The embassy has a long-running history of functioning as a hub and coordinator of the Chinese diaspora and expats in Denmark, as witnessed by its role in managing United Front activities. But its influence extends greatly beyond this and reaches far into, for example, business networks, shaping political and bureaucratic perceptions of China, and formalising institutions that allow questionable operations to remain unquestioned. Examining the eight avenues of influence covers United Front networks, espionage, academic relations, economic investments and exposure to the Chinese market, infrastructure development, parliamentary relationships, diplomatic measures, and public communication. And what is found reveals a Chinese *modus operandi* focused on expanding options for backstage direction through Shadow Wolf Warrior diplomacy.

United Front Networks

The year 2023 was a turning point for public discourse on United Front activities in Denmark. At a critical juncture of public intelligence communication, the *Danish Security and Intelligence Service*'s *Assessment of the Espionage Threat to Denmark, the Faroe Islands and Greenland 2023*[170] dedicated a special section to explaining the Leninist roots and CCP motivations behind United Front undertakings. This section provided a new level of direct language on how the *United Front Work Department* (UFWD) aims to surveil, control, influence, and coerce Chinese people living overseas, and for the first time states that UFWD activities take place in Denmark. The assessment points to the Chinese embassy in Denmark as a network hub for UFWD activities, as it maintains 'close contact with local Chinese civil society, e.g. via associations, programs and financial support schemes [which can be] used to register, control and possibly exert pressure against Chinese in Denmark, including Chinese dissidents'.[171] It is important to note that United Front activities are not solely targeted at the Chinese diaspora but also at influencing and alliance-building with domestic actors in the country of operation. The report prompted a stern rejection from the Chinese embassy, calling the accusations groundless, ridiculous, and confrontational.[172] United Front work has not been publicly scrutinised in Denmark as in some European countries,[173] so this official acknowledgement provides both a common frame of reference and impetus for further inquiry.

United Front activities in Denmark assume a two-pronged approach. Firstly, United

Front related activities are substantially coordinated and active through Chinese civil society organisations, but often in an opaque manner with plausible deniability, making it difficult to label these exclusively tied to the party-state run UFWD. And, secondly, Chinese party-state officials more openly affiliated with the Chinese United Front system engage in high-level relations to build public perception shaping projects through Danish stakeholders.

The first type of activities revolves around *the Chinese Association*[174] (Den Kinesiske Forening). It functions as an umbrella organisation for other specialised associations, has extensive ties to the Chinese embassy, and engages in public relations outreach, positioning itself as speaking on behalf of the Chinese community in Denmark while advancing pro-Beijing stances. Founded in 1975 as the *Chinese Friendship Association*, it gained its current name in 2002 and has hosted many high-level visits from Chinese officials, including a 2010 symposium with vice chairman Lu Zupei of the 'peak United Front body'[175] *All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese*.[176] In 2024 Swedish media covered a leaked list of people outside China connected to the United Front system which was corroborated by a consortium of journalists. The list identified 18 individuals in Sweden and further investigation found at least 103 United Front organisations in Sweden.[177] This leaked list also contains names of persons in Denmark and their associated organisations. The above-mentioned *Chinese Association* is one of these.[178][179]

Focusing on associations generally recognised as closely affiliated or integrated in the government-directed United Front system, three such stand out. First, the *Association of Chinese Students and Scholars in Denmark*[180] (ACSSD) as a national variation on the *Chinese Students and Scholars Association* (CSSA). In line with United Front procedure, it is run in cooperation with the Chinese embassy in Copenhagen. The first ACSSD executive committee meeting in 1998 took place at the embassy[181] and the association states that it functions under the guidance of the embassy's Education Department,[182] where Chinese students were also encouraged to register themselves.[183] As research on the CSSA has noted, they may be used for protests or counter-protests in alignment with CCP policies.[184] A notable example took place in 2004 when the ACSSD convened at the embassy's Education Department for a joint signing session in opposing the Taiwan 320 referendum.[185]

The second association of interest is the *China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification Denmark* (CCPPNRD), which, like other national councils of the global United Front CCPPNR system, seeks to advance unification with Taiwan on terms dictated by the CCP. *The Chinese Association* is in full compliance with the councils' stances and according to its own records has been cooperating since 2003, jointly hosting events and issuing statements against Taiwanese independence.[186] Danish connections to another 'peak United Front forum'[187] were forged early in the life of the CCPPNRD when a delegation in 2004 went to Beijing to see Luo Haocai, former vice chairman of the *National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference* (CPPCC).[188] In the run-up to the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, *the Chinese Association* and the CCPPNRD council, according to its own reporting, mobilised nearly 100 people to defend China[189] at a public event on Chinese human rights violations which was organised by a local chapter of Amnesty International.[190] The CCPPNRD organised participation and prepared propaganda material to distribute at two Amenesty events on April 8 and 10.[191] The CCPPNRD also touted participation in the largest Danish–Chinese rally ever, as *the Chinese Association* brought together hundreds of Chinese people[192] in support of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, protesting a potential Danish boycott.[193] The boycott, in light of the 2008 momentum of *Opportunistic Expansion* in Danish–Chinese relations, never materialised.

The third organisation is the *Association of Chinese Experts in Denmark* (ACED), founded in 2000 as the *Association of Chinese Engineers in Denmark*.[194] ACED claims to be the largest Chinese professional association in

Northern Europe, with more than 300 members working to help Chinese people integrate, while also strengthening scientific and technological exchange between Denmark and China.[195] When ACED entered into a recruiting station agreement with the city of Chengdu in 2016, the delegation to Copenhagen was headed by the chair of the Chengdu United Front. ACED also has recruitment agreements with several other local governments in China.[196] In 2016 ACED held the rotational chair position of the *Federation of Chinese Professional Associations in Europe* (FCPAE), which claims to have more than 20,000 members in 12 countries. The FCPAE is either connected to the United Front system[197] or directly part of the United Front network with ACED identified as a component body, according to the Australia-based historian Geoffrey Philip Wade.[198] During the FCPAE chairing, ACED organised the 8th FCPAE Europe Forum with a specific focus on making Denmark join the *One Belt, One Road* (*Belt and Road Initiative, BRI*) and extend technological cooperation. Co-organisers included the Copenhagen Business Confucius Institute of Copenhagen Business School and the Danish MFA, while the Chinese embassy and the *China Association for Science and Technology* (CAST) were on the advisory committee.[199] As a subordinate unit of the CPPCC,[200] CAST functions as part of the UFWD.[201]

The somewhat intricate nature of United Front affiliations within such associations has been described as 'synthetic civic groups managed by Beijing'[202] and 'as *government-organised* non-governmental organisations'.[203] In contrast to these opaque connections to the information space of the Danish realm stands the government-level *Danish Chinese CSP*,[204] which has been integral in shaping official relations since 2008. This partnership was upgraded in 2017 through the *China-Denmark Joint Work Programme (2017–2020)*[205] containing 58 areas of cooperation between 35 Danish and 45 Chinese agencies.[206] (See the 'Diplomatic measures' section below for details on the watered-down CSP 2023 agreement). One of the many 2017 initiatives cemented the official Danish relationship with the *Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries* (CPAFFC), which experts on Chinese influence describe as a CCP organisation working to 'make the foreign serve China', in addition to being 'the public face of the UFWD'.[207] The initiative aimed to strengthen regional and local leadership exchanges, including business partners and researchers,[208] as a follow-up to the large increase in Danish–Chinese friendship city agreements.[209] It specifically advanced the CPAFFC project *China Denmark Regions and Cities Forum* established in 2016 and held in Denmark in 2018.[210] In 2022 the CCPPNRD issued a statement on the visit to Taiwan by American House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, denouncing American policy and the Taiwanese 'conspiracy' of independence. The statement was hosted on the Chinese embassy's website.[211] The logic of these friendship agreements functions according to the CCP phrase 'use the local to surround the centre' to cultivate relationships with lower-level business and political actors who have decision-making power but lack foreign policy knowledge, thus leaving them vulnerable to targeted influencing.[212] The fundamental risk and observed consequence is a mirroring effect of the CCP approach where Chinese civil society and professional actors are vehicles for subversive political efforts, which in turn effect a conversion of Danish actors into proponents of CCP policies—ranging from the unwitting to fully conscious endorsements.

The two-pronged approach of United Front activities in Denmark thus includes both (synthetic) civil society associations and official intergovernmental cooperation.

Espionage

The Danish approach to Chinese espionage has until recently been limited in scope, allowing China to operate comparatively undisturbed in contrast to Russia, for example. Surveillance of pro-China Maoist groups between 1963 and 1978 was not, according to the authorities, conducted out of fear of espionage but simply to ensure order.[213] It was only around 2016 to 2017 that a dedicated China in-

telligence section was established within the PET[214]—a late addition, considering the long pedigree of highly organised Chinese espionage efforts in Denmark, stretching back to at least the 1950s. Experts assess that at the time the Chinese embassy likely functioned as a network hub from which to organise and manage Northern European intelligence operations.[215] Its prime location was based on the China-friendly Danish political environment, as reflected in Denmark being among the very first Western countries to recognise the PRC, on 9 January 1950, a fact that is regularly brought up by the Chinese side in its official communication.

The year 2020 was, however, a busy time for public exposure of Chinese covert activities, as can be observed from this study's coverage of academic relations. This contributed to the current phase of Critical Revision in Danish–Chinese relations building momentum. Additionally, 2020 saw two Chinese intelligence-related cases. First, the Zhenhua database leak gained global attention, as the database had catalogued millions of people from criminals and celebrities to businesspeople and politicians, with a possible view to conduct intelligence or hybrid warfare operations.[216] The leaked database contained more than 700 Danes, including the daughter of a member of parliament.[217] It also detailed more than 60 people from Greenland, including board members from Air Greenland, and 160 persons from the Faroe Islands.[218] And yet, as a testament to the largely unacknowledged threats from Chinese espionage, it proved challenging for some of the high-profile individuals to process the reasons for any Chinese interest in them.[219] The second case saw the Danish daily *Information* reveal industrial espionage conducted against the Danish biotech giant Novozymes in 2015 by a head of engineering in its China office.[220] While it only received limited media attention, it was a significant case because it actually became publicly confirmed knowledge through a review of Chinese court documents. In 2014 Novozymes was among a number of Danish companies targeted by cyber espionage. Experts were quick to point to Chinese state-sponsored operations, with one of them stating he knew of at least four large companies that had been attacked and lost intellectual property potentially worth billions of Danish kroner.[221]

Renewed attention to espionage threats from signals intelligence in light of Russia's war on Ukraine had the Danish *Centre for Cyber Security* (CFCS) issue an internal handbook instructing ministers, permanent secretaries, and other key ministry employees in the safe use of mobile devices.[222] The handbook was not initially public, but as the European Commission in February 2023 decided to ban the Chinese app TikTok on staff devices, the CFCS publicly stated its own recommendation in the handbook not to have the app on work devices.[223] This prompted a vigorous debate on the risks of Chinese espionage and resulted in a large number of public and private organisations banning TikTok from being installed on work equipment—including all Danish universities.[224]

The 2023 PET espionage threat assessment echoes the CFCS on TikTok, citing risks from data collection authorised by Chinese intelligence law.[225] It also states that 'the Chinese state is willing to go to great lengths to pursue its strategic interests in the scientific and technological field', including through illegal transfers of knowledge or tech[226]—tactics that are not limited to signals intelligence, as shown by the failed human intelligence attempt to recruit Jonas Parello-Plesner, the former head of Chinese policy at the Danish MFA, who at the time was working at a British think tank. The recruitment process was described as a LinkedIn honey trap which took place in 2011–12 and later progressed to a business meeting in Beijing, which escalated to tempting offers of 'access to any top Chinese official' and finally appealed to greed by offering research funding.[227] By 2023 the human intelligence aspect had potentially reached an industrial scale in Danish academia, as that year there were 270 Chinese doctoral students with funding from the *China Scholarship Council* (CSC).[228] Funding demands signing a contract, with a loyalty pledge requiring the recipient to abide by all dictates coming from the Chinese embassy,[229]

to protect the honour of the motherland, to return to work in China for at least two years, and to face repayment demands if terms are broken.[230] Revelations of these scholarship conditions resulted in Danish universities suspending any new employment of CSC-affiliated students, while current students could finish their projects.[231]

Another type of Chinese espionage targets Tibetan exile communities. The Swedish case of Dorjee Gyantsan, a Tibetan refugee turned Ministry of State Security (MSS) informant and directed by a secretary, Lei Da, from the Chinese embassy in Warsaw, also connects to Denmark.[232] In 2009 Gyantsan reported to Lei Da on the Dalai Lama's visit to Denmark, and Lei Da contributed to an anthology with a Danish editor published by the *Nordic Council of Ministers* in Copenhagen.[233] This unusual case highlights the extent of problems with Chinese surveillance and threats against the Tibetan community in Denmark which are so far underexplored.

Avenues of Chinese espionage are thus plentiful in Denmark, but a rapidly growing acknowledgement of the threat and conscious counterintelligence efforts could improve the situation.

Academic Relations

Danish–Chinese academic relations are extensive, and the growth of research cooperation, exchanges, and publications was politically accelerated via the 2008 *CSP*, the 2008 *Action Plan Denmark-China*[234] cultivating new partnerships, and not least the 114-page 2008 *Strategy for Knowledge Cooperation between Denmark and China*, which lists 245 ongoing research projects and activities. A sizeable number of the Chinese universities listed here are categorised as risky by the *ASPI Chinese Defence Universities Tracker*,[235] and the strategy also details projects with two *Seven Sons of National Defence* universities in addition to the *4th Military Academy, Xi'an*.[236] This increase in academic relations has produced a host of new activities, including the Danish universities' partnership with China through the *Sino-Danish Center for Education and Research* (SDC), formally established in 2010,[237] which produced 448 publications in 2023.[238]

This enthusiasm phase of academic relations saw only a few bumps in the road for the first ten years. However, critical media coverage of the Aalborg University (AAU) student exchange programme with the University of International Relations in Beijing[239]—linked with the Chinese MSS and the training of intelligence officers—foreshadowed fundamental change to public scrutiny and policy. When in 2020 the newspaper *Politiken* launched a deep dive exposure of Danish universities' ties with Chinese researchers,[240] AAU once again attracted attention as it had been working with researchers from the *People's Liberation Army* (PLA) on power supply systems for naval vessels and radar technology, as well as surveillance algorithms in connection to Hikvision.[241] The investigation also found research from the Technical University of Denmark (DTU) produced in cooperation with the PLA's National University of Defence Technology with clear dual-use potential.[242] The DTU has historically functioned as a hub for Chinese students and researchers active in the ACSSD. Media coverage prompted a critical debate, and the head of the Danish Defence Intelligence Service (DDIS) publicly warned about larger strategic implications of helping China compete in the global tech race.[243] When *Politiken* uncovered a slew of researchers enrolled in the Chinese *Thousand Talents Plan* (TTP) working at Danish institutions,[244] it sparked further urgency on countering illegal or illegitimate knowledge transfer and industrial espionage—particularly concerning issues for the global success of the Danish wind energy industry, as TTP affiliations were also uncovered in this important field.[245] A closely related issue is how the Danish authorities have continuously provided scientific know-how on green transition technologies and energy grid integration, including wind energy, to Chinese partners.[246] This may be seen as a lock-in effect of the CSP, which Denmark, according to foreign minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, cannot leave without 'sending a negative signal that would not be

in Denmark's interest'.[247] The latest iteration of the joint work programme has narrowly refocused on climate, energy, and the green transition.[248]

Academic relations have furthermore been pursued through the controversial *Confucius Institutes* (CIs), which are 'overseen with heavy involvement from the UFWD'.[249] A majority of Danish universities rejected hosting CIs, except for AAU[250] and Copenhagen Business School (CBS), which opened only the second *Business Confucius Institute* in the world in 2008 and whose Danish head in 2012 welcomed increased Chinese soft power in Denmark.[251] Among the CBS CI's official partners were also *the Chinese Association* mentioned in the United Front Networks avenue.[252] An overview of Nordic CIs in 2019 found Denmark to be hosting two active CIs (including a unique *Music CI*) and five *Confucius Classrooms* (CCs), while Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden in total hosted five CIs and three CCs.[253] In 2025 one CI is in operation at *Kolding International Business Academy*[254] which promotes a network for regional businesses interested in China, and in 2022 hosted a visit by the Chinese ambassador.[255] A new CC was inaugurated in 2022 at NEXT Education Copenhagen[256], which highlights differences among the Nordic countries—all Confucius activities were closed down in Sweden in 2020, in Norway in 2021, and in Finland in 2022.

Prompted by these revelations of highly problematic academic relations and heightened risk-awareness in scientific cooperation with China, PET has participated in critical news coverage to an unusual degree, mainly through the service's head of counterintelligence[257] but also through a highly debated poster campaign at universities warning against knowledge theft and espionage.[258] These modern security-focused perspectives also allow for a retrospective exploration of Danish research on China, and how academic relations and perceptions were shaped. Parello-Plesner, head of Chinese policy at the Danish MFA between 2005 and 2009, points to the global intelligence effort by the Chinese MSS in promulgating the 'peaceful rise' myth.[259] His reflection on this operation from the vantage point of today deems it successful in both framing Danish MFA policy and directing Danish security research away from a risk-aware approach to China's military build-up.[260] This framing issue is a long-standing topic within the Danish research community on China, as illustrated for example in 2008 through a critique of academics misrepresenting Chinese progress on political freedoms and human rights, led by an old guard of left-wing China researchers in support of the regime.[261] The issue has persisted: as one China researcher noted in 2025, the concern over Chinese interest in Greenland was met with laughs and the conviction that China could not even figure out how the relations within the Danish realm worked,[262] which was a dismissal of the real risks involved. In order to avoid repeating such patterns of naivety, ignorance, or neglect in light of the more critical political assessment of China, the Danish government engaged universities in mapping relevant regulation, such as the Danish investment screening mechanism, which applies to certain configurations of joint-venture research[263] while also highlighting awareness of export controls and suchlike. This work resulted in the 2022 *Guidelines for International Research and Innovation Cooperation* specifically mentioning China's and Russia's civil-military fusion strategies.[264] This was an important signpost of the Critical Revision phase in Danish–Chinese relations. One noticeable application of this new awareness was the cancellation of cooperation and data sharing between Danish universities and the Beijing Genomics Institute (BGI Group), based on the Danish intelligence assessment that genomic data from Danish citizens could be used to create biological weapons.[265] The Critical Revision phase has in 2025 seen further restrictions on Danish–Chinese research collaboration in such fields as quantum, space, and defence research,[266] and a reorientation towards deeper engagement with other partners such as Japan on quantum technology.[267]

Academic relations also run through the High North and Arctic as China's self-declared near-Arctic status and its *Polar Silk Road* reflects growing interest in—among oth-

ers—Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The DDIS's yearly intelligence report highlights the Arctic ambitions of China alongside its challenges in establishing a regional foothold. The main assessment is that China has long-term military-strategic interests in the Arctic and is likely pursuing capabilities to conduct regional military operations, but for now is doing so through civilian research efforts.[268] Such groundwork has been laid over a considerable period of time. In 2013 and again in 2016 based on a memorandum of understanding[269] between Greenland and China, research agreements were entered into on exploration of minerals and research on glaciology, geology, sea ice, and so forth before the *Polar Research Institute of China* in 2017 revealed plans to build a 2000 m^2 research station.[270] This station has not, however, materialised, and neither has the unilaterally announced 'Greenland remote-sensing satellite ground station project' that took the Greenlandic authorities by surprise[271] but was celebrated in the Chinese media.[272]

Academic relations have thus gone through a change from almost unlimited ambitions from the Danish side to a thorough reassessment from a risk management perspective.

Economic Investments and Exposure to the Chinese Market

The networking hub *Danish Chinese Business Forum* (DCBF) is a solid starting point for understanding Chinese investments and exposure. It serves to facilitate Danish and Chinese business opportunities, and its members include major Danish companies like Novo Nordisk, Maersk, Carlsberg, Vestas, Lundbeck, DSV, and LEGO, in addition to Chinese entities like the Bank of China, Ming Yang Wind Power, Envision Energy, and the Chinese embassy. Six former Chinese ambassadors to Denmark serve as honorary members. The CBS, the Danish MFA, and the Danish Chamber of Commerce are among the DCBF's 85 members in 2025,[273] which is down from around 130 in 2020. It is of particular interest that the Chinese ambassador to Denmark is automatically given observer status on the board of the DCBF. High-level social status integration was already observable one year after the forum was founded in 2005, as the husband of Queen Margrethe II, Prince Consort Henrik, became patron of the DCBF. This patronage was subsequently taken over by Crown Prince Frederik in 2019.[274]

The DCBF has played a significant role in trying to shape preferences and decisions at the highest political levels. The president of the DCBF was, according to a high-ranking civil servant, 'quite pushy' during the Dalai Lama visit crisis in 2009, and the forum likewise wrote to the Danish minister of foreign affairs to warn him against an official reception for the Dalai Lama in 2014.[275] In 2013 the DCBF promoted the key CCP geostrategic goal of financing and constructing infrastructure, arguing that Chinese involvement in Danish infrastructure projects should be treated the same way as traditional business partners: 'We don't mind American or European investments in Denmark. So why shouldn't Chinese investments be welcome?'[276] This message had already been conveyed to the Danish government one year earlier in order to influence policy on the government's China strategy.[277] The DCBF has been successful in tying together commercial interests, political access, and strategic messaging, as demonstrated by the *China Daily* in 2015 covering Prime Minister Thorning-Schmidt's pro-China business speech at the forum's annual meeting, which also featured the Chinese ambassador.[278] Business opportunities under the BRI umbrella have been a recurring priority over the years. It was also emphasised by the CCP's secretary general Xi Jinping during the Danish state visit by Prime Minister Løkke Rasmussen in 2017,[279] and serves as a foundational element of Danish–Chinese relations in phase two's Opportunistic Expansion. In 2019 the Danish government received nine highly positive recommendations on engagement with China from its own panel of experts on global

centres of economic growth. The chairman of the DCBF board at the time, Claus Hemming, who was also CEO of Maersk Energy Division and vice CEO of the A.P. Møller-Maersk Group, was part of the fourteen-person panel and was the only person quoted in the press release alongside the Danish minister of foreign affairs.[280] Of the fourteen experts, twelve were at the time employed by a DCBF member.[281] The recommendations were published in the midst of the critical juncture switching from the Opportunistic Expansion phase to the current Critical Revision phase of Danish–Chinese relations, and the panel's foremost recommendation was advocating for an 'Expanded and Strengthened Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' while also pursuing further integration into Chinese tech and innovation environments. This was at a time when the Danish government was struggling with the issue of Huawei's involvement in the 5G network. The DCBF pursues its mission through a plethora of offerings and events, including co-organising the multi-stakeholder 2025 webinar series 'Staying in Dialogue with China', which hosts high-level Chinese academics, civil servants, and Communist Party politicians.[282] Chinese messaging access through DCBF events is a valuable avenue of influence, not least because the quarterly survey 'The Danish Business Outlook on China', published by the Danish MFA, is based on input from 'company members of the Danish Chamber of Commerce in China (DCCC) and the Danish-Chinese Business Forum (DCBF) with a Danish business license'.[283]

Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Denmark displays overlaps with the strategic aims of the *Made in China 2025* plan on technological leadership and self-sufficiency. A 2020 survey of Danish companies owned fully or in part by an investor located in China or Hong Kong showed the leading FDI sector to be technology (27 per cent), while fashion, design, and consumer goods was a distant second with 15 per cent.[284]

The debate surrounding China's politically motivated economic coercion, its carrot and stick approach and risks to supply and value chains, is complicated because disaggregating trade into final demand exposure can uncover much larger dependencies than generally assumed.[285] This could help explain why even when rough spreadsheet numbers show a lower Danish economic exposure to China than the general debate about weaponised interdependence would suggest, in 2022 almost 80 per cent of Danish companies in China view their activities there as decisive for their global performance.[286] In 2024, as diversification strategies set in, this number decreased to 53 per cent, with 14 per cent of the surveyed businesses reducing their activities in China and 36 per cent considering the same.[287] The argument of hidden dependencies which can be difficult to identify is further supported by analysis from the *Confederation of Danish Industry* showing Danish trade with China is larger than trade figures suggest, and that China and Hong Kong are of approximately 40 per cent greater importance for value creation in Denmark than shown by raw export numbers.[288] These numbers do, however, also show a striking increase, as the share of Danish exports of goods and services sold to China and Hong Kong has seen more than a 100 per cent increase from 2005 to 2023, accounting for over 6 per cent of total Danish exports. Parallel to this increased market exposure and informed by massive Covid-19 related supply-chain issues, more Danish companies are pursuing a China+1 diversification strategy of expanding sourcing and operations outside China to hedge against geopolitical turmoil.[289] This has resulted in a decrease of Danish corporations engaging in China from 64 per cent in 2022 to 46 per cent in 2024.[290] In 2022, 466 Danish companies operated subsidiaries in China, employing 85,211 people in total in the country.[291] The threat of China weaponising dependencies or the necessity for sanctions has also led the Danish government to examine 5500 product types and their dependence on China.[292]

The China+1 diversification strategy seems advisable, considering that Denmark has not been spared Chinese economic coercion. A Danish member of parliament recounted the repercussions after Prime Minister

Løkke Rasmussen received the Dalai Lama in 2009:

> *Forty export companies [...] complained about their plight. Everything with Denmark seemed to have come to a standstill; containers were forgotten on the wharf, no new licences were granted, harassment upon harassment. China fully complied with WTO rules. They never leave a mark when they threaten or harass. And everyone here knows how it went: as soon as China had gotten the Danish government to send a verbal note with the text that China demanded, Danish exports ran smoothly again.*[293]

This massively criticised[294] verbal note stated (among other concessions to China) that Denmark 'opposes the independence of Tibet'.[295]

Denmark's small state status and reliance on open global markets naturally makes it vulnerable to Chinese coercion. Growing economic ties and dependence on China would for the Faroe Islands and Greenland spell even greater risks given their much smaller populations and economies, especially in view of how China introduced informal secondary sanctions against Lithuania for opening a Taiwan Representative Office (not Taipei) in 2021 which to Beijing was seen as a violation of it's One China principle.[296] This concern is becoming more pertinent as free trade agreements with China are in play. In the case of the Faroe Islands, the former Chinese ambassador to Denmark, Feng Tie, reportedly threatened[297] to make a free trade agreement on all-important Faroese fishing exports directly depend on the national telecom provider Faroese Telecom contracting Huawei as its 5G provider.[298] This coercive approach failed, and Faroese Telecom chose the Swedish provider Ericsson.[299] In the case of Greenland, there are more extensive and diverse links to China, and Greenland is now officially pursuing a free trade agreement based out of its representative offices that opened in Beijing in 2021. But while Greenland's focus is on fisheries exports, China might consider a broader scope including research, education, and tourism.[300] The Greenlandic position is 'really to pressure on China' to arrive at a free trade agreement.[301] In general a wide-ranging economic infrastructure is in place between Denmark and China, with the DCCC having a long history and three chapters, while the *Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Denmark* (CCCD) was set up in 2018.[302]

Tying all the above together, the former Danish prime minister, former NATO secretary general, and current head of the Alliance of Democracies Anders Fogh Rasmussen has advised Danish companies to leave China to ultimately avoid a situation similar to leaving Russia unprepared in 2022.[303] His suggestion found some support from business leaders, and the current Danish foreign minister Løkke Rasmussen has announced that Denmark must become less dependent on China, while rejecting decoupling as an impossibility.[304]

Infrastructure Development

In this study the concept of infrastructure and development thereof must cover a multitude of avenues of influence. This is particularly the case as infrastructure has become increasingly interconnected with complex financing and highly advanced technologies. Chinese infrastructure-related matters in the Danish realm range from navigating (and avoiding) China Communications Construction Company involvement in the expansion of Greenlandic airports,[305] to municipal surveillance cameras from Hikvision and Dahua,[306] to national police purchasing of DJI drones.[307] However, the most critical case of Chinese influence on infrastructure development hitherto exposed is connected to the selection process for the national 5G network supplier. Chinese telecom giant Huawei's questionable methods and political support from the Chinese embassy will thus serve to highlight a plethora of avenues available for large Chinese companies in relation to infrastructure development or operation.

In 2013 Denmark's largest telecommunications provider, TDC, based its 4G network on Huawei equipment through a contract approved by the DDIS's Centre for Cybersecurity.[308] Other Danish providers likewise chose Huawei and in turn set the stage for a possible supplier lock-in for the next-generation 5G roll-out. But when the DDIS in December 2018 announced renewed security concerns regarding Huawei, the Chinese company faced a completely new Danish business environment. While the Danish authorities had already tightened security requirements for the largest national tele-communications company TDC in response to Huawei supplying its 4G infrastructure, the public American and British intelligence warnings against Chinese ownership of Huawei and risks of espionage and weaponisation prompted heightened Danish scepticism at the highest political levels.[309] This public debate became a critical juncture in the Danish–Chinese relationship, signalling the transition from the Opportunistic Expansion phase to the current Critical Revision phase.

Huawei responded by activating all potential avenues of influence, which included close partnering with the Chinese embassy putting political pressure on the Danish government. It will be shown below how Huawei attempted to exercise its influence through a number of Danish actors and allegedly engaged in high-level industrial espionage.

To gain access to decision-makers and spread pro-Huawei and pro-China messaging, Huawei stepped up tried-and-tested methods through what have been labelled 'China's Foreign PR Enablers'.[310] Thus, in addition to Huawei joining the hugely influential private business and employers' organisation the *Confederation of Danish Industry* (DI), it also hired at least four lobbying and public relations firms. Huawei's methods were so controversial that one of the lobbying firms cancelled the contract, while the DI confederation unknowingly found itself as a signatory to a meeting invitation Huawei sent to Danish parliamentarians.[311] However, at the higher end of the influencing scale more significant actions were taken. Huawei wrote 'desperate' letters to try to meet with two consecutive Danish prime ministers, and, before the TDC 5G supplier decision in 2019, the messaging turned to threatening the withholding of other Chinese investments in Denmark. Huawei contacted additional branches of the Danish government such as the minister of defence, to whom the allegedly private company proposed a so-called 'anti-spying agreement'[312] and offered up Huawei's own vice president for cyber security and privacy for a spot on the new Danish cybersecurity council.[313] In an attempt to gain influence in the public sphere, Huawei employed Tommy Zwicky—a former host on children's television at the national broadcaster, DR—as head of communications, but Zwicky resigned after six months because of the infamous Uyghur facial recognition alarm in Huawei equipment, stating that he didn't know if Huawei could be trusted.[314] Huawei also employed Xukun Ji, the Chinese-born wife of the retired leader of the Conservative Party and former Danish foreign minister Per Stig Møller, as director of public affairs, which immediately prompted her to seek influence through Møller's old political connections.[315]

All the above was cast in a more disturbing light in 2023 when Bloomberg exposed alleged industrial espionage by Huawei against TDC during the most intense period of the 5G bidding process. Huawei made a last-minute change to its bid to barely undercut its main competitor, Ericsson—a suspicious move that led TDC to launch an internal investigation, which turned up an alleged mole at TDC, unknown microphones in the TDC boardroom, and a ten-minute drone surveillance flight at night outside the fifteenth-floor office where the investigative team had a wall-sized whiteboard with traces and leads. A member of the TDC team was followed and photographed, while TDC vice president Jens Aaløse's home suffered a break-in, which led to him and CEO Allison Kirkby being assigned 24-hour security details.[316] A follow-up investigation by the Danish business newspaper *Børsen* found the Chinese ambassador heavily involved in pressuring the Danish government—one of many Huawei-related incidents where Shadow Wolf

Warrior tactics and diplomacy have been employed. Shortly after TDC informed Huawei of Ericsson's winning bid but before the deal was publicised, the Chinese ambassador Deng Ying and Huawei country manager Yang Lan had a meeting with the Danish minister for climate, energy, and utilities at which they were both highly agitated. The ambassador was emotional and yelled at the Danish representatives, threatening to withhold the planned arrival of two Chinese pandas at Copenhagen Zoo, as well as grave consequences for Danish–Chinese trade. Huawei's country manager expressed distress about his own and other Huawei employees' futures. One source with knowledge of the meeting said: 'They acted as if they thought they were going to die.' Within five weeks of the official announcement of Ericsson's winning bid, both the ambassador and Huawei's country manager were no longer in their positions and had left Denmark.[317]

A parallel situation to the question of using Huawei for Danish 5G networks arose in February 2023, when the European Commission banned Chinese social media app TikTok from staff devices. As noted above, in Denmark this led to the CFCS publicly releasing a previously non-public handbook for information security aimed at high-level government officials, who were advised against having TikTok (among other apps) on their work devices.[318] This public debate followed the Danish parliamentary election in November 2022, when TikTok for the first time became part of the political infrastructure, used by a majority of parties and being a central part of the Liberal Alliance party's election campaign. The party saw the largest increase in votes by any incumbent party,[319] but it's extremely difficult to tie this to TikTok engagement. As in the Huawei case, TikTok had already started vigorous lobbying activities aimed at Danish parliamentarians,[320] but the end result was a recommendation by the CFCS against using TikTok on work devices by any state entity. Following this, a considerable number of other public organisations banned the app, including universities and municipalities.[321] However, some Danish media outlets are committed to a presence on TikTok and thus push news consumption to the Chinese platform.[322]

In terms of more traditional infrastructure projects, the Danish foreign direct investment screening mechanism was introduced on the back of EU legislation in 2021, but there had already been years of national political discussions on security aspects of the Radius electricity company being sold off, which had made the government seek out an 'emergency break' to screen foreign investors.[323] Awareness was also raised regarding the possibility of the *China Railway Tunnel Group* constructing a new tunnel connecting Denmark and Sweden.[324]

Shifting focus to Greenland, the fundamental infrastructure development issue is the controversial Kvanefjeld mining project, which the leading candidate in the 2021 Greenlandic parliamentary election, Mute B. Egede, campaigned to completely shut down. Kvanefjeld had been a contentious issue for many years, as mining large amounts of critical minerals would cause environmental pollution, there would be an influx of foreign workers to the small Greenlandic population, and most importantly the minerals extracted would include uranium. Furthermore, income from mining is often seen as the quickest way to Greenlandic independence. Four days prior to the Greenlandic parliamentary election, a fake story was planted in Danish news media TV 2, attacking Egede with groundless accusations about his past. Egede won the election and later characterised the motivation for the fake story in the form of economic or power interests[325]—and those are multilayered in connection to Kvanefjeld. The Australian mining company Energy Transition Minerals (EMT) threatened a lawsuit of up to 76 billion DKK (€ 10.2 billion) as a new law against uranium mining put a full stop to their Kvanefjeld project.[326] The partly state-owned Chinese Shenge Resources holds a 12.5 per cent stake in EMT with an option for 60 per cent, and Kvanefjeld is thus a central issue in the global competition for critical resources.[327] EMT have taken further steps in pursuit of its mining license and legal case by adding the former Danish ambassador to China and USA as well as director of the MFA

Friis Arne Petersen and former Danish minister of foreign affairs Jeppe Kofod to its advisory board so as to utilize their networks.[328]

The avenues of influence presented here have potentially been diminished through two pieces of screening legislation on foreign direct investments and on suppliers in the critical telecommunication network respectively. The first and only publicly known screening rejection of foreign direct investment took place in 2023 when NKT was not allowed to divest its photonics business,[329] while there is no known example of the colloquially named 'lex Huawei' for telecommunications being used.[330] That law was instituted as a result of the Huawei 5G debacle, and the screening criteria include whether Denmark has a security agreement with the state in which the supplier is located and if the supplier through legal measures can be forced to participate in espionage. Chinese suppliers could therefore face serious difficulties in the future.

Parliamentarian Relationships

The vast areas of Danish–Chinese cooperation institutionalised by official partnership agreements and impacting all levels of government require an equally extensive number of relations with Chinese partners, naturally also including members of parliament. However, Danish political party-to-party relations with the CCP have historically been less extensive, as Danish communist parties and left-wing groups were generally aligned with Soviet partners and mostly backed the USSR in the Sino-Soviet split. But in 1963 the Maoist group *Kommunistisk Arbejdskreds* (Communist Working Circle, CWC) formed as a pro-Chinese breakout organisation from the pro-Soviet *Danish Communist Party* (DCP). Since the 1950s Gotfred Appel of the CWC had been affiliated with the Chinese embassy as a Danish-language teacher, and in 1963 he received funding from the embassy to start and run the Futura publishing house, which translated Chinese texts and published the embassy's own magazine, *Bulletin*.[331] A breakout group from the CWC formed in 1968, and in 1969 the Chinese embassy shifted its support from the CWC to this *Communist League Marxists-Leninists of Denmark,* led by Benito Scocozza, who would later travel to China several times by invitation from the CCP Central Committee to meet high-ranking party leaders in 1976–77. Oscillations in support from both sides characterised these party-to-party relations until the second half of the 1980s, when China normalised relations with the DCP and its new chairman, Ole Sohn, who visited China in 1988.[332] Sohn went on to become minister for business and growth in 2011 for the Socialist People's Party, where he handled commercial relations with China. As the Tibet Commission's report on the Tibet scandal notes, Sohn was central in launching the government's 2012 strategy for developing markets, including a 'specific strategy for China that focused on areas where Danish companies had specialised competencies or competitive advantages, including urbanisation, water and environmental solutions, energy and climate, agriculture and food safety, pharmaceuticals, health and welfare technology, research, innovation and education, as well as shipping'.[333] Sohn was, however, soon embroiled in questions of Soviet party funding during his DCP chairmanship, which led to his resignation later in 2012.[334]

Having failed to gain representation in the Danish parliament since 1979, the DCP joined forces with other left-wing parties in 1989 to form *Enhedslisten* (the Red/Green Alliance), which in time gained representation at all levels of government.[335] Today the DCP does, however, also function as a party organisation in its own right but with a rather marginal existence outside its connections with more established parties and organisations. In 2021 the DCP re-established party links with the CCP on behalf of communist parties in Denmark. The renewed party-to-party relationship was facilitated through the Chinese embassy.[336] In addition, the DCP also established contact with the *International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China* (IDCPC), which like the UFWD is placed directly under the CCP Central Committee and has

been prioritised by Xi Jinping in order to enhance the party's external outreach to other (communist) parties.[337] This change in status and relationship provided the DCP with virtual participation in at least two IDCPC-organised events in 2021, including a joint meeting of European and American Marxist parties.[338]

The IDCPC also pursues non-Communist Party external relations, as evidenced by a meeting in Beijing in 2018 between the vice minister of the IDCPC, Guo Yezhou, and the permanent secretary of the Danish MFA,[339] or in 2022, when Guo Yezhou represented the IDCPC for the *China-Denmark Seminar on Common Prosperity and Green Transition*.[340] And in 2023 the head of the IDCPC Liu Jianchao met with the permanent secretary of the Danish MFA in Beijing, where, according to the Chinese read-out, they 'exchanged in-depth views on strengthening inter-party exchanges between China and Denmark'[341] and Denmark attaches 'great importance to inter-party exchanges between the two parties, hopes to strengthen high-level exchanges'.[342]

Promotion of China's BRI runs through all the avenues of this study as a central tenet of CCP influence and propaganda efforts. In celebration of the 100th anniversary of the CCP in 2021 and shortly after reestablishment of what the DCP calls 'good party relations between the DKP [sic] and CPC after a long period of non-relations since the 1960s', the BRI is also praised in a congratulatory letter addressed to the now former Chinese ambassador to Denmark, Feng Tie.[343] This resumption of CCP–DCP relations could suggest a continuous adaptation in Chinese efforts as some existing avenues of influence grow narrower. More prominent and continuous BRI promotion can be observed from the Danish *Schiller Institute*, which is part of the global LaRouche movement characterised by a number of particularly anti-British and anti-establishment conspiracy theories.[344] When promoting the BRI, the Schiller Institute relies on the LaRouche movement's vision of a Eurasian Land Bridge,[345] and has been, in its own words, 'campaigning for Denmark, Europe, and the US to join the BRI, instead of looking at it as a threat'.[346] The chairman of the Schiller Institute, along with a number of its members, has pursued political influence by running for both municipal council and parliamentary elections, and has presented plans to several parliamentary committees over the years.[347] However, these efforts have so far been unsuccessful, attracting only marginal electoral support, and the Schiller Institute instead functions as a platform for anti-Western narratives.

It is thus clear that while parliamentary party-to-party relations have somewhat limited consequences, novel political links are being established, and there are people and organisations receptive to the CCP's political projects.

Diplomatic Measures

The Danish–Chinese diplomatic relationship has moved through several stages since the much-praised early Danish recognition of the PRC in 1950. The 2008 CSP put Denmark in a class of its own among Nordic countries, but as relations cooled off it was not politically feasible to renew the partnership after the end of the extensive *Joint Work Program (2017–2020)*. Only in August 2023 was a new and significantly watered-down agreement made, but not without strong public criticism from opposition parties in the Danish parliament.[348] The renewed four-page agreement is titled *Green Joint Work Programme, 2023–2026* to signal a Danish refocus on climate, energy, and the green transition throughout the tightened partnership initiatives.[349]

Influence through diplomatic measures with Chinese characteristics takes many forms. According to seasoned member of parliament Søren Espersen, coercive Chinese diplomatic practices often leave no tracks. As an instructive case, Espersen recalled his official visit to China in 2017 as chairman of the Foreign Policy Committee, when he was berated by a Chinese minister and ordered to cancel a planned visit to the Danish parliament by the prime minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile Lobsang Sangay. The meeting

took place despite the Chinese order, and the next day Espersen received an 'angry protest' from the Chinese embassy in Copenhagen: 'It was just a phone call. China never leaves a trace when they threaten and harass. Because this is how they operate: with elegance and with sophisticated cynicism, the communist regime has twisted Denmark's arm firmly behind its back. Yes, China rules!'[350] According to the former minister Søren Pind, the coercive nature of Chinese diplomatic measures has become internalised in the Danish political apparatus—an effect of what this study labels *Shadow Wolf Warrior* diplomacy. Pind surprisingly pointed to the inability to criticise China as one of his main reasons for leaving a long political career in 2018: 'It is just such a shared consciousness that arises in a government apparatus because so much is at stake. The trouble is too extensive, the business community becomes upset, China becomes angry. They are extremely sensitive to even the slightest criticism of the system.'[351]

In 2015, during his tenure as minister of justice, Pind had overseen the setting up of an investigation of one of the biggest scandals in Danish bureaucratic history: the Tibet Commission. The investigation was initiated because in 2012 Copenhagen police had physically removed Tibetan flags and prevented protesters from being seen by Chinese general secretary Hu Jintao on his route through the Danish capital, during the first visit of any PRC head of state to Denmark. The visit was the diplomatic culmination of the 2008 CSP and resulted in trade deals for Danish companies worth an estimated 18 billion DKK (€ 2.4 billion in 2025) and seventeen government-level partnerships enshrined in a memorandum of understanding, including a secret agreement whereby the China Development Bank would help finance investments in Denmark—a secret agreement that was apparently never utilised.[352] The visit was thus high stakes for the Danish diplomatic system, which ultimately manifested itself in the police violating constitutional rights.

The Tibet Commission was set up to investigate the chain of command, but in 2017 only found fault with two mid-level police officers for issuing clearly illegal orders. The scandal grew as journalists uncovered new evidence from within bureaucratic ranks that had not been provided to the first commission, and thus the second Tibet Commission was set up in 2018. When the commission concluded in 2022, too much time had lapsed for any punitive measures, and the high-level actors involved had left the bureaucracy. During the investigation the public learned that avoiding Chinese 'loss of face' during official visits was institutionalised within the police force since at least 1995, with a seasoned officer stating, 'Anyone who has been in the police force more than 20 minutes knows this is how we do it when there are Chinese visiting.'[353] The public also learned that the Danish MFA played a pivotal role in promulgating this narrative and conduct throughout the Danish system. In relation to Chinese premier Zhu Rongji's 2002 visit, a note from the Asian office within the MFA to the director (permanent secretary) of the MFA, Friis Arne Petersen, described how: 'a constructive collaboration has been initiated between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the police and the Chinese embassy with a view to ensuring that legally registered demonstrations take place where they do not disturb the Chinese delegation'.[354] In conclusion, the commission found the MFA to have encouraged and cooperated with partners towards ensuring that protesters would not be visible during official Chinese visits—particularly in 2002, 2009, and 2012.[355] The serious nature of the scandal—which mainly originated within the MFA but also involved multiple branches of the Danish authorities, including the *Danish Security and Intelligence Service*—was underlined by the commission's finding that 'The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' handling of Chinese visits to Denmark has generally been characterised by an administrative culture in which the consideration of avoiding offending Chinese guests was put above the constitution and the ECHR [European Convention on Human Rights].'[356]

Zhu's visit in 2002 is instructive in illustrating overlapping avenues of influence. In preparation for the visit, the Chinese Association (refer to United Front Networks earlier in this study for further details) registered six

one-hour 'open air meetings', as is required by Danish law for all types of demonstrations. These pro-China meetings were systematically designed and held to suppress and push away critical protesters from being physically present and seen by Zhu as he was moving across Copenhagen for the Asia-Europe Meeting.[357] In addition, MFA director Friis Arne Petersen, who oversaw the Zhu visit, went on to become the Danish ambassador to China in 2010. Five years later, Petersen was the first Dane to receive the honorary title of friendship ambassador from the UFWD organisation CPAFFC. Numerous high-level Chinese government officials were present on the occasion, praising Petersen's efforts in growing bilateral relations and historical breakthroughs, and explicitly mentioning his time as MFA director, hoping that he as an 'old friend of the Chinese people' (a term reserved for an exclusive group of foreigners deemed useful to the CCP[358]) would continue to 'promote the world's understanding of China'.[359] In 2022 the CPAFFC was characterised by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in the US as 'a Beijing-based organization tasked with co-opting subnational governments [that] has sought to directly and malignly influence state and local leaders to promote the PRC's global agenda'.[360] When Petersen retired from public service in 2020, he became partner and public relations director with Danish consultancy Rud Pedersen but left after eleven months. He is now used as a 'former top diplomat' expert in the media and has a regular podcast series on foreign and security affairs called *Friis' Diplomatpost*.[361]

Another example of a retired diplomat who had been key in managing the Danish–Chinese relationship from a host of high-level positions is the former director of the CBS Business Confucius Institute and former Danish consul general in Shanghai and Guangzhou, Carsten Boyer Thøgersen, who also plays an active role in the Danish debate on China. Thøgersen's defence of the Hong Kong national security law and his comparing it to Danish legislation led to accusations against him for spreading 'red propaganda'.[362] He has also been used as an expert in CCP media such as the *Global Times,* where he lauded the Chinese Global Security Initiative while lambasting the US.[363] And on the state-run CGTN, Thøgersen, who in 2015 received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Danish Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai, can be seen endorsing the BRI as a positive example of Xi Jinping's 'community with a shared future for mankind'.[364]

Cross-cutting and long-term engagements of avenues of influence can thus be observed to exert both macro- and micro-level effects. Other notable diplomatic measures include an almost ten-year effort to bring the two pandas Mao Sun and Xing Er to Copenhagen Zoo in 2019. The idea of Denmark joining the exclusive club of China's panda diplomacy arose as a Danish corrective to the serious 2009 crisis following the Dalai Lama's 'private meeting' with then prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen (see the 'Economic Investments' section above).[365] The process of panda diplomacy activated a whole system of public and private actors for years, most prominently when in 2014 Queen Margrethe II had to travel to China to follow the instructions of the Chinese playbook and, during a thirty-minute meeting, ask to borrow the pandas and have general secretary Xi Jinping allow it.[366] At the political level Rasmussen had to lobby a large number of companies and foundations with business interests in China to secure funding for the Panda House zoo enclosure. Copenhagen Zoo had failed to raise the money, and diplomatic disaster was only avoided by sixteen donors each paying 10 million DKK. For some it was among the biggest donations ever made.[367] Further notable diplomatic measures include mandatory CCP cells in Danish companies operating in China;[368] lawfare targeting named Danish parliamentarians in connection with Hong Kong politician Ted Hui's visit to Denmark and subsequent exile; sanctions against the Danish NGO the Alliance of Democracies;[369] and prosecution of the Danish artist Jens Galschiøt, whose sculpture *Pillar of Shame* commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen massacre has been used by student protesters in Hong Kong.[370]

The decision to have Danish navy vessels surveil the Chinese *Yi Peng 3* bulk carrier after damage to cables in the Baltic Sea in November 2024, and the carrier anchoring up in Danish waters for one month until an inspection could take place, has impacted the possible character of diplomatic engagements on the Danish side.[371] The incident has been instrumental for the Danish public perception of Chinese support for Russia and the projected threat coming from China. Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen had already foreshadowed this in September 2024, stating, 'We cannot continue a situation where China helps Russia in a war … in Europe, without consequences. They have to be held responsible for their activities.'[372] Political analysts have noticed a stark difference between the prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs regarding their respective approaches towards China, with Frederiksen seeing a China involved in the Ukraine war on the Russian side, and Rasmussen seeing a changed China that 'listens more than it did before',[373] indicating an institutional path dependency (as shown by the Tibet scandal) of the foreign service in its being accommodating towards China. Nevertheless, the Danish prime minister publicly calling China out potentially makes both frontstage and backstage access within the Danish state more challenging.

Public Communication

Efforts at public communication will adapt based on a number of variables such as motivation, resources, audience, and purpose, as Harald Lasswell's 5W model of communication asked: Who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?[374] This approach allows for a broad understanding of public communication as an avenue of influence and permits the study to expand its examination to a variety of actors and channels. This broad approach is particularly important considering the massive propaganda resources and diverse tools China and the CCP have at their disposal. Within this communication to the broader Danish public, it is helpful to distinguish between white (correctly identified source, and information tends to be accurate), black (concealed or false source spreading fabrications, lies, and deceptions), and grey (uncertain source identity and uncertain information accuracy) propaganda.[375] In-depth analysis of the official public communication conducted by the Chinese embassy is covered later in this chapter under the framing analysis. Most of that content would qualify as white propaganda, although the reactive, fact-rejecting nature of some embassy communication moves it closer to grey propaganda.

One prominent instance of public communication as Chinese black propaganda was a radio show about Chinese culture called *Kina Ekspressen*, which ran for four years on the two largest commercial radio stations which collectively had two million weekly listeners. The programme was not renewed in 2013 as it was revealed that it was fully produced in Finland by GbTimes, 60 per cent owned and controlled by the state-owned propaganda media *China Radio International,*[376] and that the radio stations were paid to broadcast the show[377]—information that had not been disclosed to its listeners and which turned out to be violating the law.[378] In addition to the source being concealed, some elements of the show's content were deceptive[379] and thus qualify as black propaganda. While *Kina Ekspressen* was shut down in 2013, the GbTimes Danish-language news site, a text version of the radio show, only closed in February 2019.[380]

A large Chinese investment in white propaganda as public diplomacy took place in 2014, when the inauguration of the *China Cultural Center in Copenhagen* (CCCCPH) made it the first of its kind in the Nordic region. It was opened by the Danish minister of culture Marianne Jelved and Liu Yunshan, member of the Politburo Standing Committee and tasked with overseeing propaganda and ideological indoctrination, as well as being president of the Central Party School.[381] The CCCCPH has since accelerated its activities, with exhibitions, seminars, guest lectures, and public events such as movie showings, tea ceremonies, cooking classes, and the recurring Copenhagen Dragon Boat Festival, which in

2023 was run under the theme 'Let the world be filled with love'.[382]

The reach of the CCCCPH can be illustrated by an event tying together key actors of influence: the *Musical Dialogue of Cultures 2019.* This brought together the Schiller Institute, Russian-Danish Dialogue, the Russian House (under investigation for spreading Russian propaganda and directing agents of influence[383]), the CCCCPH, and the Confucius Music Institute, while the event was covered by the Chinese state-owned media Xinhua through its Copenhagen-based bureau chief.[384] Schiller Institute chairman Tom Gillesberg used the musical dialogue to warn about 'certain forces' trying to pit Denmark against China and Russia and the risk of thermonuclear war, and argued for joining the BRI.[385] Further reach by the CCCCPH includes multiple celebrations of the Chinese New Year at Copenhagen City Hall and having the 'architectural landmark' building of the *Confederation of Danish Industry* lit up in 'China Red'.[386]

A third and high-profile instance of public communication was the Chinese reaction to the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*'s satirical drawing of the Chinese flag at the very beginning of the spread of Covid-19 in late January 2020. In the drawing the flag's five gold stars were replaced with depictions of the novel coronavirus.[387] From a Danish perspective, the official Chinese ire was widely interpreted as taking tactical offence in order to deflect attention from mishandling of the outbreak.[388] However, more significantly, the corona-flag issue serves as an illustration of which avenues and actors China is able to activate in the Danish information space. The incident first gained traction as Heidi Wang, a Taiwan-born local politician in Copenhagen, wrote a press statement on behalf of the *Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Denmark* (CCCD). Members such as Huawei, the Bank of China, COSCO, and Air China asked Wang (who ran her own China-focused Nordic business network at the time) for guidance through the CCCD's general secretary. After the press release was put out, then Chinese ambassador Feng demanded a public apology from *Jyllands-Posten* and the artist, which in turn attracted global attention, not least in China.[389] A range of actors became involved, but the activation of two types of groups stood out. One group consisted of what appeared to be ordinary Chinese who mailed and called in (death) threats against the artist and his children. The first wave of calls came from Danish phone numbers belonging to people with Chinese names, indicating a latent resource in the Chinese diaspora that can be activated in the future. As things escalated with global attention and huge amounts of calls from China, the artist ended up only giving his first interview after four months—and without a photo.[390] The second group took to social media through one or more organised campaigns and flooded *Jyllands-Posten* and the Danish minister of foreign affairs with abuse. The social media efforts showed a lack of cultural understanding and relied on copy-pasted insults, and, by using Chinese-based abbreviations, these insults were largely incomprehensible to a Danish audience.[391] The issue was allowed to trend on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo, and there was a call to action from an online forum of the Chinese nationalist group Diba, which is known to carry out targeted attacks.[392] As Diba is 'state media endorsed'[393] and the CCP has millions of so-called 50 Cent Party, or *wumao*, Internet warriors at hand ready to spread CCP propaganda, it is difficult to ascertain the degree of official involvement in these harassment campaigns, which locates them in the grey propaganda domain.

Ultimately, China engages in public communication through a broad variety of actors, avenues, and audiences, which in turn requires heightened attention to recognise and counter these efforts.

Official Chinese Frames: Shunning the Frontstage

While the analysis above underscores the Chinese priority of influencing through an easy accessible backstage, this may also be intended to avoid a sceptical Danish public. Though some initiatives like the Chinese Association are reminiscent of more classical public diplomacy initiatives, the official communication and engagement from the Chinese government is fairly limited and mainly reactive to critical news stories. Activities by the United Front and DCBF remain extensive and pre-emptive, and have played an important role in shaping perceptions among business, academic, and political elites.

While other countries have been subjected to the publicly aggressive 'wolf warrior' diplomacy,[394] this has been found to be far less prominent in the Danish case. As described in both the above analysis and in the following analysis of official frames, Chinese public diplomatic efforts have been more restrained in the Danish case. This is especially noteworthy considering the Critical Revision phase that Danish–Chinese relations have entered. When other states began viewing China through a lens of national security or competition, Chinese public diplomacy responded in an escalatory and coercive manner, with Lithuania being the most serious example.[395] However, a major reason for this more lenient approach towards Denmark can be ascribed to the effectiveness and entrenchment of the Shadow Wolf Warrior diplomacy on the backstage of Danish–Chinese politics described in the introduction. Although Denmark indeed has awoken to contemporary geopolitical realities, and domestic scepticism of further collaboration has risen in recent years, the country maintains a continued pragmatic approach that keeps the door to the backstage open for Chinese diplomacy, as exemplified in the updated joint work programme.[396] Public provocation or classic frontstage wolf warrior diplomacy is likely to invite further public scrutiny and worsen relations with the Danish public. China would both risk the expansion of backstage access, by dissuading relevant elites from further engagement, and risk established points of entry becoming untenable to maintain by existing elite connections.

To preserve existing access, the Chinese embassy has opted to disengage from the negative public perception that has developed in the last ten years in Denmark. Both due to its autocratic nature and a number of domestic scandals involving China (see the analysis above), Chinese official public communication efforts in Denmark are deprioritised and mostly reactive to bad press. As the analysis above shows, since the Tibet Scandal in 2012 the Danish public has been exposed to a number of high-profile scandals involving the Chinese embassy interfering in Danish domestic politics and coercing local actors. These experiences have laid the foundation of the public viewing engagement with the Chinese government as also involving compromising on core democratic and Danish values. Adding to international scandals of repressive politics in Hong Kong and Tibet, and human rights violations in Xinjiang, these points of friction have led to a majority of Danes holding negative views of China (75 per cent),[397] making it challenging for pro-Chinese messaging to find resonance in the Danish public sphere. In turn, as shown in the previous section, backstage access has proven more effective and protecting such ties from public condemnation has informed the Shadow Wolf Warrior practice.

In response to the growing scepticism and the access afforded by backstage activities, the only channel for China's official communication that is active in the Danish information space, that is, the Chinese embassy in Copenhagen, has downscaled its public engagement to a minimum. Although

other platforms could be identified, such as the CCCCPH, this organisation is not an official communication channel. The lack of active official engagement suggests that backstage access has disincentivised the more active public communication, as the costs of mending relations with the Danish public do not match the relative benefits such frontstage activity could provide. A part of the Shadow Wolf Warrior concept is the strategy of avoiding reputational and access costs associated with public diplomacy or engagement, for both oneself and the partners and collaborating elites within the targeted society. According to the embassy's website, in former ambassador Deng Ying's last year (2018) the embassy engaged the Danish public thirty times through public visits, speeches at cultural events, and meetings with business and political elites. During former ambassador Feng's first year (2019) the number of public occurrences was reduced to seven. Under Feng, official communication largely parroted Beijing's global frames, rarely developed independent Danish-adapted narratives, and adopted a defensive and reactive approach. This often leads the embassy's public communication to appear disorganised and unfocused, for example in the ambassador's speech at the annual general meeting of the DCBF in May 2022. Although the DCBF is a platform focused on trade, Ambassador Feng mainly focused on non-commerce-related issues and discussed both China's position on the war in Ukraine and Chinese sovereignty in regard to Xinjiang and Taiwan.

The lack of tailored outreach is reflected in a preference for communicating in English or Chinese on the embassy website and only having a social media presence on X (formerly Twitter), which in Denmark is mainly used by a small media and political elite and not for broad public engagement.[398] The embassy's tweets are rarely relevant to Danish–Chinese relations but frequently consist of retweets from accounts run by either the Chinese foreign ministry or state media like @spokespersonchn, @wanglutongmfa, and @xhnews, which constituted 33 per cent of all posts in 2022.

The lack of proactive and tailored engagement has changed under Wang Xuefeng, who took over the post as ambassador on July 5th 2024. He began his tenure with hosting a public panda event in collaboration with Copenhagen Zoo, awarding Professor Troels Skrydstrup with a medal of friendship, and holding a public tea ceremony. Between July 2024 and October 2025, the Chinese Embassy in Denmark has recorded 73 public appearances by Wang on its website, mainly focused on reaching out to Danish business elites. This stands in stark contrast to Feng's 6 recorded appreances in all of 2023.[399]

Methodology

As the embassy is the only official communication channel in Denmark, the case study relies on public statements by the ambassador (10) and the embassy spokesperson (9) from January to November 2022 to identify the official frames promoted by the Chinese government in the Danish information space. While the embassy also produced a regular newsletter, *News from China*, this was excluded as it contained generic English-language messages not specifically meant for Danish audiences and not actively promoted beyond the embassy's website. To expand the dataset, tweets by the embassy's official X/Twitter profile @ChinaInDenmark were also included (577). To investigate the durability of these official frames, the study further includes the embassy's public statements from July until December 2024.[400]

As both 2022 and 2024 were years marked by global crises and upheaval, the study focused the content analysis on five general questions. These questions were chosen a priori, to explore how official Chinese frames were presenting various actors and specific events. In general, the study was interested in asking how China and Chinese state policies are presented, as embassies are the main channels for nation branding, public diplomacy, and promotion of policies and mutual relationships with Denmark. As the sampling period was during one of the most

serious international security crises, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is particularly important to explore how China sought to present itself and its policies regarding the war. Western calls for Chinese involvement in solving the crisis and China's own narrative of being a neutral peace-broker situated China in a position between the West and Russia, with whom China had declared a 'no limits' friendship only weeks before the invasion. This led to a special need for navigating discursively between the two sides. These calls grew into criticism of China enabling Russian aggression in 2024, and anti-Chinese rhetoric became prevalent during the US election in the autumn of 2024, especially from ex-president and candidate Donald J. Trump. Thus the pressure on Chinese public diplomacy to tackle and respond to foreign criticism has grown, making it relevant to study the longevity of these official frames in 2024. Lastly, the study asked how 'the West' and Western state actors were presented, to understand how Chinese official frames presents key geopolitical adversaries. In sum, the study asked how official Chinese communication framed the following:

1. The People's Republic of China?
2. China's Policy on the War in Ukraine?
3. Danish-Chinese Relations?
4. The West?
5. Which single issues were highlighted and how?

Codes were generated in two cycles by a single coder.

Pro-China Frames

This study found official Chinese communication in Denmark, in 2022, relied on four frames to respectively promote Chinese trade, culture, values, and policies: (i) The Responsible International Leader, (ii) The Business Opportunity, (iii) The Chinese System of Governance, and (iv) Beautiful China. For the ambassador and embassy, this often meant explaining and justifying China's and the CCP's policies and dismissing accusations of autocracy and human rights violations in opinion editorials and interviews. Meanwhile, the embassy's X account prioritised success stories of the Chinese economy and government policies, picturesque imagery of Chinese culture and nature, and promotion of the 20th National Congress of the CCP, making it the only investigated channel that projected positive stories of China during this period (see Figure 1a). The lack of engagement with Danish audiences, posting of relatable content, and frequent retweeting of other official accounts of the Chinese MFA indicate a high degree of automation and not culturally sensitive digital public diplomacy.

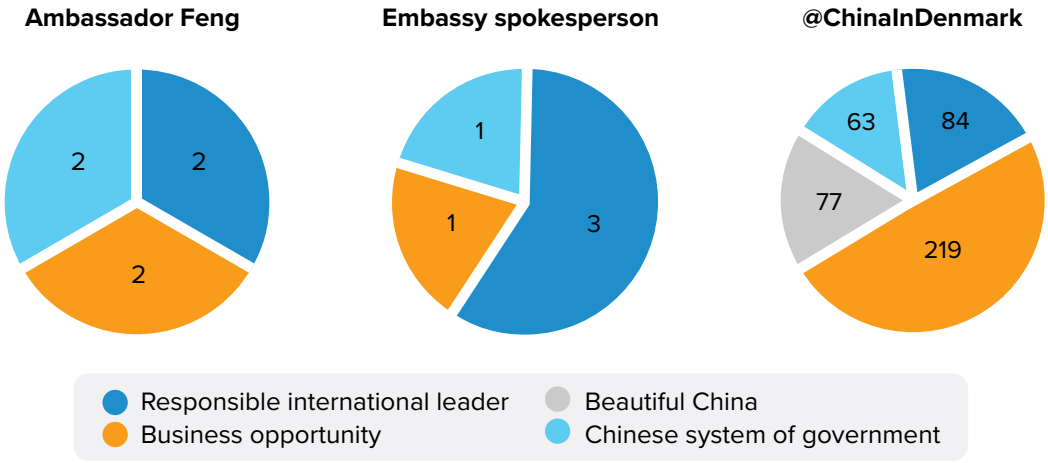

Figure 1a. Focus on identified narratives by Ambassador Feng, the embassy spokesperson, and the embassy's official X (formerly Twitter) account, 2022

While similar frames could be found in Wang's inauguration speech, they do not appear in other public statements by the ambassador nor the embassy spokesperson. The new style of deprioritising pro-Chinese frames in Chinese public diplomacy of 2024 (Figure 1b) may have been due to the newly appointed ambassador's need to build relationships with his host country and an indicator of the deteriorating relationship between China and Denmark (as described above). As shall be presented below, the new ambassador was mainly focused on pro-Danish frames, while the spokesperson was responding to accusations by Danish intelligence and criticising pro-Taiwanese events.

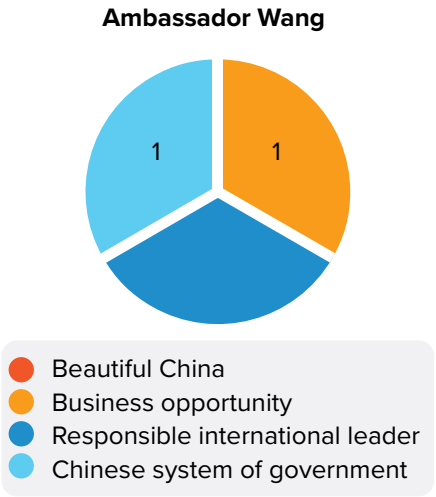

Figure 1b. Official pro-Chinese frames by Ambassador Wang, June–December 2024

The Responsible International Leader

Pro-China Frames	Quotes
Main Frame: The Responsible International Leader	'China is and remains a proponent of an international system that can ensure peace, stability, development and cooperation' (Kina er og forbliver en fortaler for et internationalt system, som kan sikre fred, stabilitet, udvikling og samarbejde)—Ambassador Feng, Politiken, 13 August 2022
Sub-frame: Peaceful Actor	'Since the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, Chinese defence policy has been exclusively defensive. China hasn't started wars, invaded other countries or waged proxy-wars' (Siden Folkerepublikken Kina blev etableret i 1949, har Kinas forsvarspolitik udelukkende været defensiv. Kina har ikke startet krige, invaderet andre lande eller lavet stedfortræderkrige)—Ambassador Feng, Politiken, 13 August 2022
Sub-frame: Cooperation for Development	'China has been committed to the path of peaceful development and devoted itself to addressing global challenges, facilitating win-win cooperation and making the global governance system more just and more equitable.'—@ChinaInDenmark, X (formerly Twitter), 11 October 2022

As the international community followed the dramatic rise of Chinese power with some apprehension,[401] official Chinese communication channels put special focus on easing these concerns. Echoing frame 1 of the Lithuanian case found in this report, this took the form of pro-Chinese frames which presented China as a responsible international leader committed to peaceful coexistence and cooperation.

While this framing did include some instances in which major revisionist elements were presented, such as promoting a new international system as an alternative to the liberal world order, this sub-frame's focus was more on depicting Chinese leadership and the alternative world order as committed to fairness and sovereignty. Under the slogan of a 'community of shared destiny',[402] the purpose of this order was presented as providing international stability.

This was further supported by another sub-frame cementing Chinese commitment to cooperation and as a champion of global development, which would often be exemplified by statistics on the increase in Chinese–European trade, highlighting the achievements of China's Global Development Initiative and Belt and Road Initiative in the developing world. To counter criticism of China as a systemic rival or harbouring expansionist ambitions,[403] a sub-frame focused on China as a peaceful and responsible international actor. By frequently referencing Western interventionism, the sub-frame would contrast China's disinterest in promoting global value systems and present itself as lacking the military capability to pursue similar interventionist policies. Instead, China was presented as adhering to principles of sovereignty and respect for cultural differences. This sub-frame of the peaceful actor paid special attention to dismissing PET's allegations of Chinese scientific and industrial espionage as being part of an anti-Chinese smear campaign initiated by the US.[404]

The Business Opportunity

Pro-China Frames	Quotes
Main Frame: The Business Opportunity	'Stable growth of the Chinese #economy and the huge Chinese #market represent enormous opportunities for the world.'—@ChinaInDenmark, X (formerly Twitter), 27 October 2022
Sub-frame: Flourishing Trade	'China's foreign trade and investment hit new highs last year, making positive contributions to the continuous recovery and development of the national economy.'—@ChinaInDenmark, X (formerly Twitter), 16 February 2022
Sub-frame: Leader in Green Tech and Innovation	'Beijing Winter Olympics will be the first modern Olympics to truly achieve carbon neutrality, which spotlights China's commitment to achieve carbon peaks by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060.'—@ChinaInDenmark, X (formerly Twitter), 16 February 2022

Most effort was put into framing China as a business opportunity. Underscoring the strength, resilience, and progress of the Chinese economy, most tweets from the embassy aimed to encourage further investment in China, portraying it as a land of opportunity by mentioning economic growth, innovation, and investment in infrastructure. While one sub-frame presented trade with China as flourishing, using statistics of increased trade with the EU and Denmark, another sub-frame described China as a progressive leader in advanced and green technologies. Contrary to the Lithuanian case, Denmark was not isolated from Chinese official communication during the period of the study, which allowed this sub-frame to include the Winter Olympics (6–22 February 2022), which in turn became a showcase of Chinese scientific innovation, with little mention of athletic achievements. Instead—and in line with the business opportunity narrative—the embassy published a flyer on green solutions, high-tech products, and clean transportation.[405] This, however, changed in the communication from both embassy and ambassador in 2024, which largely refrained from mentioning the Chinese economy, at the time in deep crisis.[406]

The Chinese System of Governance

China Frames	Quotes
Main Frame: Chinese Characteristics	'Overseas experts say institutional strengths of socialism with Chinese characteristics have been clearly manifested in the country's practices of tackling challenges and stimulating development and enabled China to bring more benefits to the world'—*@ChinaInDenmark*,X (formerly Twitter), *10 March 2022*
Sub-frame: Successful System	'China's political system of multi-party cooperation and political consultation under the leadership of the CPC has made further progress in the past decade.'—*@ChinaInDenmark*, X (formerly Twitter), *18 August 2022*

With the 20th National Congress taking place in October 2022, official communication by the embassy's X/Twitter account was focused on promoting the year's largest event in Chinese politics. Its framing emphasised that the particular Chinese style of government did not undermine its legitimacy, with the one-party system presented as popular and effective. Like other pro-Chinese stories, this was largely promoted by the embassy's official X/Twitter account, whereas the ambassador and the embassy spokesperson maintained a defensive approach that dismissed criticism of autocracy. Under the terms '*whole-process*',[407] '*consultative*[408]' or *'comprehensive democracy*[409]*'*, and '*socialism with Chinese characteristics*',[410] the Chinese rule of government was presented as uniquely fitting China. Arguing that cultural sensitivity is required when evaluating systems of governments, this frame overlapped with the Responsible International Leader frame's emphasis on value relativism. Both shielding Chinese autocracy from criticism and allowing China to present itself as more inclusive, the usage of value relativism plays a double role in Chinese communication. Meanwhile, this pro-Chinese System of Governance frame aimed to establish the CCP's legitimacy by referencing its economic achievements of combating poverty in mainly functional terms and claiming nationwide support for the CCP. In this way the official frames of the Chinese System of Governance built legitimacy on utilitarian grounds by drawing on the CCP's ability to deliver economically and on technological development.

Beautiful China

Pro-China Frame	Quote
Main Frame: Beautiful China	'A glimpse of 24 hours in Shache, an ancient town in China's Xinjiang known for its rich history and diversified culture'—*@ChinaInDenmark, X (formerly Twitter), 7 June 2022*

The last official pro-China frame focused on promoting Chinese culture and nature on X (formerly Twitter). Drawing on diversity and cultural sensitivity, this frame performed two functions as it both presented China as an exotic and diverse country ideal for tourism and travel, while also trying to whitewash the global perception of regions marred with controversy, such as Xinjiang and Tibet. By highlighting them as being at peace, Chinese communication efforts sought to undermine international accusations of human rights abuses occurring within these regions and to present the image of a harmonious relationship between the CCP and the Uyghurs, for example.

Danish and Western Frames

Official communication was less focused on cultivating Danish-specific frames or actively promoting anti-Western narratives, which instead were kept in the background on all single-issue frames (Figure 2a).

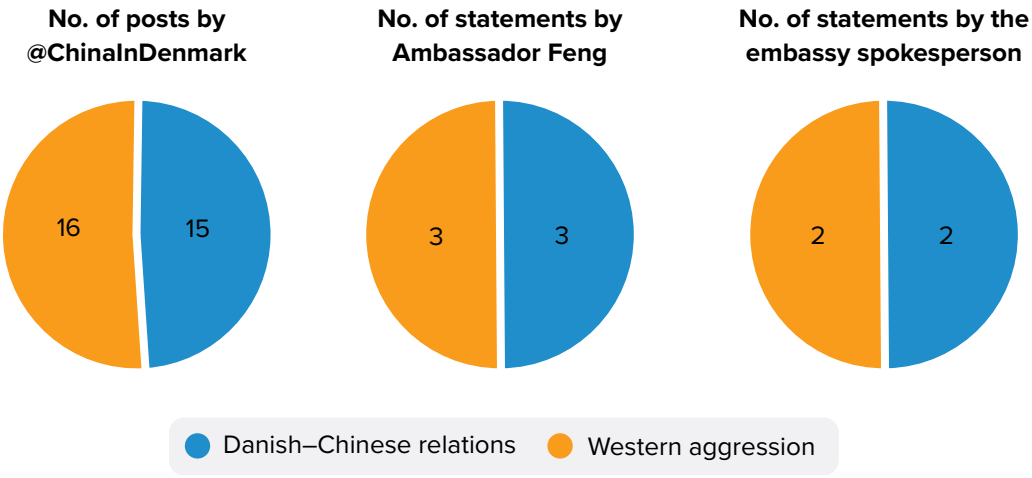

Figure 2a. Distribution of Danish–Chinese relations and anti-Western frames used by the embassy's official X/Twitter account, Ambassador Feng, and the embassy spokesperson, 2022

Indicative of the change in communication practices under Ambassador Wang, the anti-Western and Danish–Chinese relations frames seemed divided in the second half of 2024 (Figure 2b). While the newly appointed ambassador hosted a few public diplomacy events to boost Chinese–Danish relations, the spokesperson continued the previous administration's practice of dismissing critique as misunderstood and directing blame onto the collective West, led by the US.

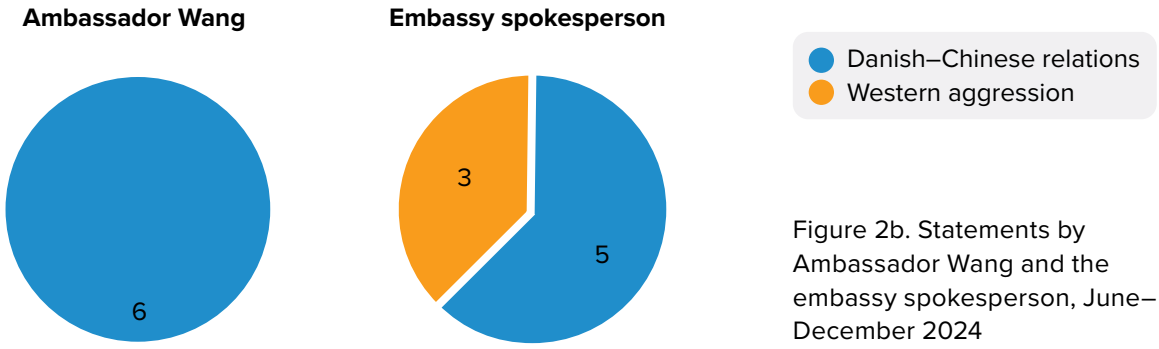

Figure 2b. Statements by Ambassador Wang and the embassy spokesperson, June–December 2024

Danish–Chinese Understanding

Chinese–Danish Relations Frame	Quote
Main Frame: Danish–Chinese Relations	'To keep the China-Denmark relations going forward, we need: 1) have a good understanding of each other; 2) respect each other's core interests and deepen political trust; 3) expand practical cooperation'—*@ChinaInDenmark*, *X (formerly Twitter)*, *6 May 2022*

Despite the CSP having begun in 2008, Danish–Chinese relations were seldom referred to in official Chinese communication in 2022. As this period coincided with the renegotiations of the work programme specifying the CSP, the lack of proactive communication may again underscore the point of the Shadow Wolf Warrior concept. To maintain useful backstage access, Chinese official communication and frontstage activity were limited to avoid arousing too much attention. However, with the change of communicative focus by Ambassador Wang, the CSP was referred to more frequently and encouragement of further collaboration became more pronounced, through public events like the 'Close to Panda' event at Copenhagen Zoo[411] or the tea ceremony for the Danmark-Kina Friendship Association.[412] Yet these continued the lack of cultural tailoring and were often repetitive reminders of the long diplomatic history between the Kingdom of Denmark and the PRC. With considerable overlaps between the Business Opportunity frame and the Responsible International Leader frame, adaptations to Danish audiences remained limited under both ambassadors Feng and Wang. Although the embassy spokesperson echoed some of the encouragement of Chinese–Danish relations, for example praising the visa-free policy between Denmark and China enacted on 30 November 2024, they seemed to continue the practice of dismissing Danish politicians' and intelligence criticism of China as a misunderstanding or disingenuous and US-instigated, and underscoring the need for mutual understanding. This became especially pronounced when Danish Foreign Intelligence dedicated a chapter on the threat of Chinese hybrid activities in its annual intelligence report 'Udsyn 2023', which the spokesperson dismissed as 'groundless and slanderous'.[413] Though far from a dominant frame in official communication, the Danish case also echoes the finding of the Lithuanian case that the call for mutual respect seems one-sided and often implies a need to change the Danish perspective. This further operated in tandem with the single-issue frames rejecting accusations of human rights concerns (see below). These calls for mutual respect implicitly involved protecting the CCP from criticism under the guise of cultural sensitivity and sovereignty.

Western Aggression

Western Aggression Frames	Quotes
Main Frame: Western Lies	'US's lies about #Xinjiang: a classic act of "diplomacy through lying"'—*@ChinaInDenmark, X (formerly Twitter), 7 June 2022*
Sub-frame: Western Aggression	'NATO calls itself a defensive alliance and claims to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries. But if we look at NATO's actions over the last decades, the facts show something different' *(NATO kalder sig en defensiv forsvarsorganisation og hævder at respektere andre landes suverænitet og territoriale integritet. Men hvis vi kigger på NATO's handlinger over de sidste årtier, så viser faktum noget andet)—Ambassador Feng, Politiken, 13 August 2022*

As most descriptions of Western actors were done in connection to rebuttals of accusations of human rights violations and of being a threat, the West was consistently framed unfavourably and in correspondence with classical wolf warrior diplomacy. This frame presented a US-led Western coalition that spread falsehoods and waged an ideological war to subvert and contain China. As these were rebuttals to Western criticism, they continued in the background of the single-issue frames below and the previously mentioned Danish intelligence reports.

Single-Issue Frames

Chinese official communication regularly took an actively defensive position both in 2022 and 2024, when domestic Danish and international critique became too intense. This is especially true of high-profile issues of repressive policies enacted by the CCP, for example in Hong Kong, and tensions with Taiwan and mainland China. When criticism was deemed too much, the embassy often responded by rejecting it. The two most prominent single-issue frames in 2022 were on Taiwanese independence and human rights violations of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province (Figure 3). Meanwhile, the single issue of Russia's war in Ukraine, having dominated much of both Danish domestic and international public discourse, was mainly avoided in official communication targeting Denmark.

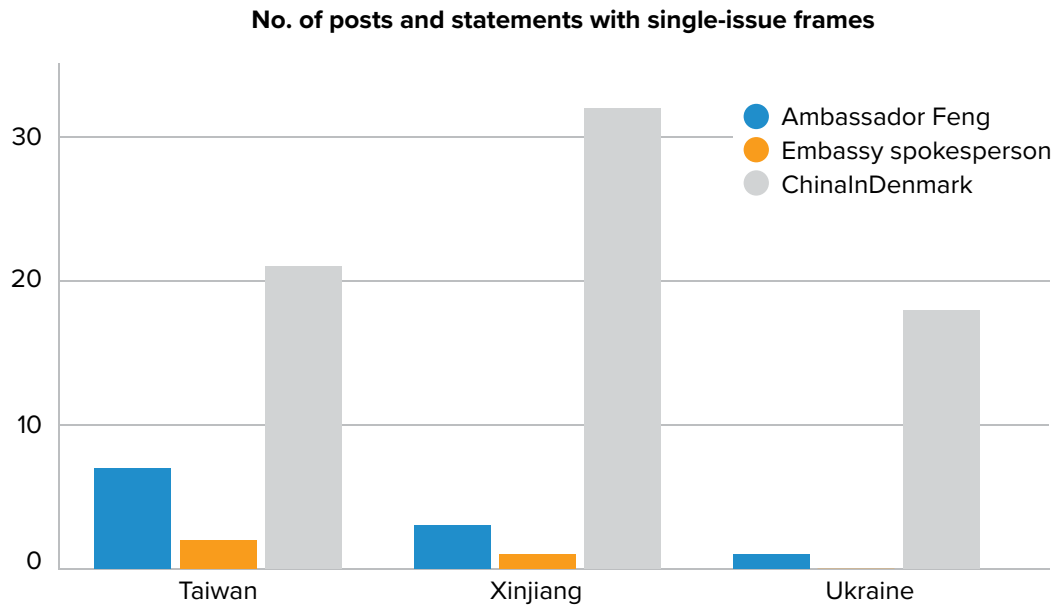

Figure 3. The number of single-issue frames occurring in Ambassador Feng's communications, 2022

The salience of these issues remerged in 2024, for example when the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen accused China of enabling Russian aggression in Ukraine,[414] or when Danish parliamentarians once again visited Taiwan.[415] But in contrast to the previous reaction to bad press under Ambassador Feng, Chinese official communication in 2024 raised its tolerance for when to react and remained largely unresponsive to such criticism. As a consequence there were no explicit mentions of these issues, except for Taiwan.

Taiwan as an Internal Matter

Taiwan Frames	Quotes
Main Frame: Sovereignty	'[The] Taiwan question is an important matter concerning China's sovereignty and territorial integrity'—Ambassador Feng, *Embassy of the* People's *Republic of China in the Kingdom of Denmark,* 1 May 2022
Sub-frame: The One-China Policy Is Universal	'The One China Principle is the international community's shared perspective and a recognised basic norm of international relations' (Et-Kina-princippet er det internationale samfunds fælles forståelse og en anerkendt grundregel for internationale relationer)—Ambassador Feng, *Politiken*, 27 September 2022

Sub-frame: Reunification by Any Means	'The process of reunification is irreversible. We will do our best to achieve this peacefully, but we will not exclude the possibility of using military force' (Processen omkring genforening er irreversibel. Vi vil gøre vores bedste for at opnå det på fredelig vis, men vi vil ikke udelukke muligheden for at bruge militær magt.)—Ambassador Feng, Danmarks Radio, 8 August 2022
Sub-frame: Unrelated to Ukraine	'Now some also compare the Ukraine crisis with the question about Taiwan despite them being completely different situations' (Nu er der også nogen, som sammenligner Ukraine-krisen med spørgsmålet omkring Taiwan, på trods af at det er komplet forskellige situationer)—Ambassador Feng, *Politiken*, 13 August 2022

Mainly in response to Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's state visit to Taipei in August 2022, usage of the official Chinese frame on Taiwan increased rapidly and it defined the issue as a matter of Chinese sovereignty. With constant reference to the One-China Principle, the official Taiwan frame attempted to elevate the CCP's position of Taiwan being an inalienable part of mainland China to an international norm on a par with international law. In this attempt the frame did not distinguish between the One-China Principle and the strategically ambiguous one-China policy adopted by the US and Denmark, which allowed for a degree of recognition of an autonomous Taiwan. In this way Chinese frames were at times overstretching Western policies towards Taiwan in an attempt to legitimise China's own position of reunification.

From this position, US engagement with Taipei was routinely depicted as exploiting and funding Taiwanese separatist movements in an attempt to contain and subvert the Chinese government, with Pelosi's visit an unnecessary and dangerous provocation. Subsequently, a sub-frame of reunification by any means emerged and attempted to reaffirm Chinese commitment by openly discussing and justifying military measures to do so. Less aggressive responses came from the embassy when Danish members of parliament publicly discussed copying the Pelosi visit,[416] with the embassy expressing the hope that Denmark would respect its One-China policy, in an unusual recognition of the difference between the policy and principle. Later in 2022 similar encouragements of not accepting Taiwan as an independent state and denunciations of Western interference were repeated when the Danish NGO the Alliance of Democracies invited what the embassy referred to as a handful of 'Taiwanese separatists'.[417] This criticism was reiterated when the Alliance of Democracies once again invited Taiwanese state representatives to its Democracy Summit in 2024.

As the Pelosi visit enforced public parallels between the Taiwan conflict and the war in Ukraine, on two occasions Ambassador Feng attempted to separate the two issues,[418] which led the study to identify a third sub-frame, 'Unrelated to Ukraine'. Rejecting the validity of the parallel, this sub-frame tried to delegitimise any discussion stemming from such comparisons, and to prevent dynamics related to the latter from influencing dealings with the former. Such a response to acknowledging the Taiwanese state was, however, absent when for example four Danish parliamentarians visited the island in November 2024.[419]

Xinjiang as an Internal Matter

Xinjiang Frames	Quotes
Main Frame: Sovereignty	'I want to emphasize that Xinjiang affairs are China's internal affairs that brook no interference by any external forces.'—*Ambassador Feng, Embassy of the* People's *Republic of China in the Kingdom of Denmark, 1 May 2022*
Sub-frame: Counterterrorism Operations	'The government of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region has fought violent terrorist crimes in accordance with law and, at the same time, worked to address the root cause of terrorism.'—Embassy spokesperson, *26 May 2022*
Sub-frame: Anti-Chinese Propaganda	'The allegations of so-called "re-education camps" are sheer lies from some anti-China politicians, media and scholars who act in collusion to create trouble. They are attempting to use political manipulation and economic coercion under the pretext of protecting human rights to undermine Xinjiang's prosperity and stability and contain China's development.'—Embassy spokesperson, *26 May 2022*

The second most important official Chinese frame focused on dismissing accusations of violations of human rights in Xinjiang province and the systematic abuse of the Uyghur minority.[420] Maintaining a commitment to the sovereignty frame, the single-issue frame defined this as an internal matter and rejected any external commentary as part of an anti-Chinese propaganda campaign. To delegitimise criticism and accusations of human rights violations of the Uyghurs, this sub-narrative bridged a hybrid warfare debate and referred to supporting evidence as subversive disinformation.

Promoting instead a sub-frame of counterterrorism, the embassy largely redefined re-education camps as part of a wholesome effort to combat Islamic terrorism and fundamentalism, invoking Western frames of the War on Terror as a legitimator. This frame emphasised how such deradicalisation measures included large Chinese investments in the modernisation of the region. These were presented as taken in harmony with the Uyghur minority, in a further attempt to dismiss criticism of ethnic persecution. This frame was absent in 2024, due to lack of salience.

The War in Ukraine Is a Complex European Conflict

Ukraine Frames	Quotes
Main Frame: A Complex European Conflict	'The root cause of the Ukraine crisis is the regional security tensions in Europe that have built up over the years. This crisis demands self-reflection on why it happened. All countries want security, but one country's security should not come at the expense of that of others. Pursuing absolute security means no security.'—Ambassador Feng, Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Denmark, 1 May 2022
Sub-frame: Humanitarianism and Peace	'China will continue to play a constructive role in promoting peace and easing tension. China has put forward a six-point proposal for coping with the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and shipments of humanitarian assistance from China have already been sent to Ukraine and surrounding countries. China's position on Ukraine is objective and fair. Some in the west demand China be on the right side of history. China was, is and will always be on the side of peace. And time will prove that China is on the right side of history.'—Ambassador Feng, Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Denmark, 1 May 2022

Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, China faced a dilemma between avoiding provoking the West for not supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine and supporting the pursuit of geopolitical goals by its Russian strategic ally, with whom it had entered a 'no limits' partnership earlier the same month. Committed to maintaining a policy of strategic ambiguity, Chinese official communication remained vague and limited to avoid drawing attention. For example, the only public comment by Ambassador Feng within the period of study was made at the annual general meeting of the DCBF, two months after the invasion. Though this strategy was also pursued by Ambassador Wang, it was only mentioned once by him, in his inauguration speech, in which he referred to the Chinese–Brazilian six-point peace plan.[421]

The overall Ukraine frame defined the war as a tragic event of human suffering and as a result of unstable security architecture in Europe, thereby striking a balance to sympathise with Ukrainian suffering and acknowledge Russian security concerns, while primarily blaming the West for fuelling the conflict. Echoing the Russian framing of the war as being primarily a result of NATO expansionism and neglect of European security architecture, this frame also distanced China from what it portrayed as a European conflict.

Instead, a sub-frame was used to position China as a humanitarian peacemaker. By highlighting Chinese humanitarian aid and foreign minister Wang Yi's Six Point Initiative[422], a Chinese precursor to the Brazilian-Chinese peace plan made in 2022, a it presented China as a responsible actor committed to the safety and well-being of Ukrainian civilians.

Through calls for negotiations and referencing Xi's proposal of the Global Security Initiative, the frame gave China the role of a responsible international actor for peace, calling for the prevention of disruptions of international trade and an end to human suffering. The goal of this frame was to present China as part of the solution to the war in Ukraine, instead of the image of an unhelpful bystander or enabler. While the following chapter will discuss the effects and success of this frame in full, one interesting aspect of the communication by the ambassador and embassy in 2024 is their lack of response to defend this framing when the Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen accused China of enabling Russian aggression. While the previous strategy of reacting to criticism once it reached a certain level would have required a response to Frederiksen's public statement to the major English-language newsmagazine *Politico*,[423] both Ambassador Wang and the embassy spokesperson opted to remain unresponsive.

Summary

The communication practice under Ambassador Feng emphasised a defensive and reactive approach of dismissing criticism levelled against China, whereas communication practices under Ambassador Wang raised the threshold for reacting and instead emphasised generic relationship-building more attuned to classical public diplomacy. The approach under Feng limited Chinese official communication in quickly delivering coherent responses to international events and fully exploiting the public diplomacy strength of China's culture and economy. This shortcoming was not rectified under Wang, whose lack of response and overly repetitive statements on historical relations failed both to culturally engage with Danish audiences and to promote Chinese interests. The lack of engagement with criticism in the latter half of 2024 is especially noteworthy, considering the number of crises in the Chinese–Danish relationship, including the incident of the *Yi Peng 3* commercial carrier suspected of sabotaging underwater cables in the Baltic Sea. Despite substantive public attention and outcry, the embassy remained silent. While the change in communication practice in 2024 can be attributed to the change of ambassador and the need to reset China's public image within Denmark, the lack of more extensive public engagement can also be understood within the Shadow Wolf Warrior concept as a strategy to avoid raising the reputational costs for partners during crises. By not fanning the flames of controversy by engaging publicly with criticism, Chinese actors can maintain backstage access.

Resonating Frames in the Danish Information Space

The study now considers to what degree the aforementioned frames resonate within the Danish information space and the development of this resonance among the general public. To answer this question, a content analysis of media coverage of China was conducted, using the identified frames as reference points.

Methodology

To narrow the analytical focus, the study sampled articles based on four topics—the top three official frames (Taiwan, Xinjiang, and China as business opportunity) and the war in Ukraine single-issue frame—to investigate the effectiveness of the Chinese narrative of distancing itself from the conflict. The study used a query search of the terms *China/Chinese* and *Taiwan, Taiwanese, Taipei, Tsai-Ing Wen / Xinjiang, Uyghurs / Investment, Business, Trade, Commerce / Ukraine, Ukrainian, Kyiv, War, Invasion* to identify articles published between 1 January and 1 May 2022.

To narrow the focus of the public discourse analysis, the study looked at op-eds, as they are a participatory action in public discourse, and long reads (>500 words), as these often inform this participation. Forty articles were randomly selected from three mainstream media outlets (*Berlingske, Politiken,* and *Børsen*), giving 120 articles in total. Niche media were also sampled, and as these are often less productive due to resource constraints, the study collected all articles within the time period that mentioned China, producing the following number of articles: nine from the Schiller Institute, two from NewSpeek, ten from Den Korte Avis, and nine from Sermitsiaq AG. When updating the general resonance in 2024, five articles per national daily were randomly selected between 1 July and 1 December 2024. The study analysed 165 articles in total.

To identify the resonance among mainstream discourse, this study relied on the big national dailies, which set the public agenda in Denmark. To achieve a panoramic view of public discourse in 2022 the study sampled articles published by the right-leaning *Berlingske*, the left-leaning *Politiken*, and the conservative and business-oriented *Børsen*. As foreign influence campaigns tend to be more effective among readers of alternative media,[424] appealing to their anti-establishment sentiments, the sampling also focused on a set of niche media. This included the alternative news site NewSpeek,[425] the right-wing alternative news site Den Korte Avis,[426] and the Danish Schiller Institute, which is part of the international LaRouche conspiracy-focused network. As the Kingdom of Denmark includes Greenland, which has been a key focus for Chinese Arctic policies in recent years,[427] the study also included the small Greenlandic news media Sermitsiaq AG to understand the resonance of Chinese foreign policies and frames among a strategically important audience within the Kingdom of Denmark.

As the autumn of 2024 was marked by a number of crises, such as the *Yi Peng 3* incident and Frederiksen's *Politico* interview, and influential global events, such as the American re-election of Donald Trump and concerns about a trade war, this study also examined the development of resonance among the general Danish public by including publications in the fall of 2024 from the three large national dailies *Politiken*, *Berlingske*, and *Børsen*.

The study defined resonance as instances in which official frames were partially or wholly supported or repeated in articles. Coding was therefore done deductively based on the identified official frames in the previous section and consisted of snippets of text, that is, sentences or paragraphs, that referred to a frame and fell into the three categories of resonance, challenge, and neutral, following previously established praxis by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.[428] While resonance is defined above, challenge refers to instances of rejecting or contradicting the official frame, and neutral to neutral descriptions or when text falls between the two other categories. For example, resonance could mean statements that repeat or support the claim that China is an important business opportunity that Denmark cannot ignore, while challenge could include statements that the Chinese market is not a business opportunity for Denmark or that human rights abuses outweigh it. Neutral would be a middle position, for example that China is a large and growing economy.

Resonance of Single-Issue frames

Most of the embassy's single-issue frames did not resonate in public Danish discourse but often faced strong opposition instead (Figure 4). Only the frame making Western actors the main culprits for the deteriorating relationship between China and the West showed a modest resonance. This is likely due to the enactment of tougher China policies by both the EU and US during 2022, which made it easier to frame Western actors as aggressors.

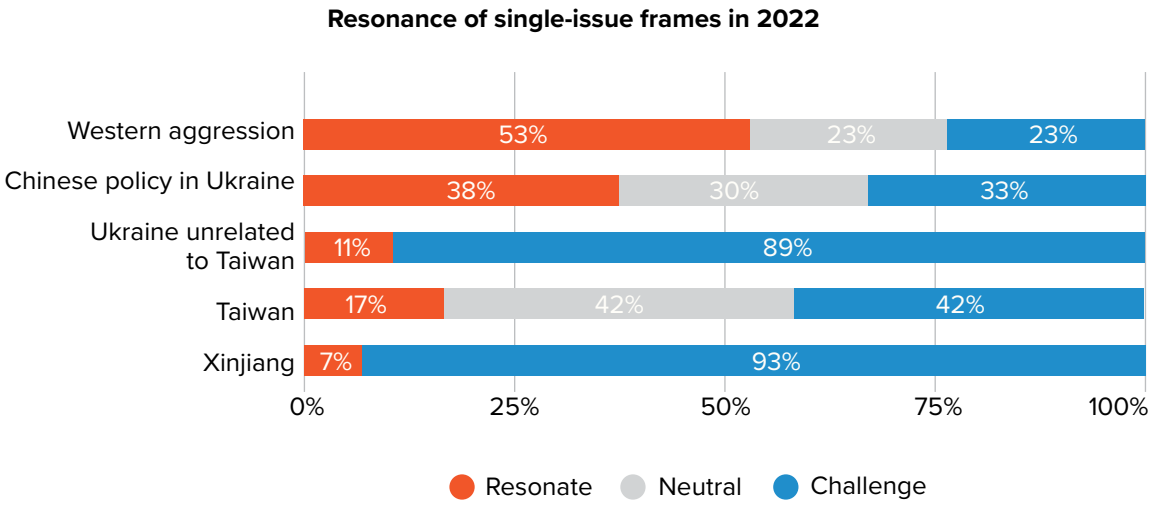

Figure 4. Percentage distribution of articles in 2022 with codes that resonate with, challenge, or are neutral to the single-issue frames (total 150 articles)

Meanwhile, the framing of China as a peacemaker in the war in Ukraine found limited resonance and most often due to experts' and journalists' analysis of Chinese incentives to push for peace. Coverage mainly focused on Beijing's balancing between its Russian strategic partner and its Western trade partners. China was often depicted as struggling to find a balance between maintaining its close relationship with Russia and mending its relations with the West. On one side China was perceived as needing Russia to counterweight US hegemony, and on the other side China had to distance itself enough from Russia to avoid being hit by Western sanctions on key industries. Though China escaped the image of being an unhelpful bystander, it exchanged it with the image of a reluctant and conflicted peacemaker. This may be seen as a successful attempt at avoiding being perceived as too close to Russia, but China did not manage to be seen as a constructive actor in the conflict and criticism remained high towards it. This will be further expanded upon in the following section.

As for Chinese attempts to keep Taiwan and Ukraine separate, this did not resonate. While this frame was included in the overall official Taiwan frame, it became a driver of articles mentioning Taiwan and is shown here separately to distinguish this effect. As the war triggered a flood of debate on its systemic impact on international relations, parallels and predictions were frequently made between Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Meanwhile, the Taiwan frame of the One-China Principle as universally accepted did not resonate across the Danish media, which instead would neutrally refer to a conflict between Taipei and Beijing or present the former as independent.

Finally, the attempt to dismiss accusations of human rights violations in Xinjiang largely failed to resonate in Danish public discourse. While few articles were dedicated to this specific topic, they provided in-depth stories of human rights abuses. The issue was a frequent critique of the Beijing regime in other contexts, especially concerning the 2022 Winter Olympics.

Most of the trends of single-issue frames carried over into the public resonance in 2024 (Figure 5), which were now more influenced by the fears of a looming trade war between a hawkish US, soon to be led by the re-elected Donald Trump, and a China which could no longer escape the accusations of enabling Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, certain topics had fallen out of public discourse and were therefore not included in the 2024 analysis, for example Covid policies, the Olympics, and Xinjiang.

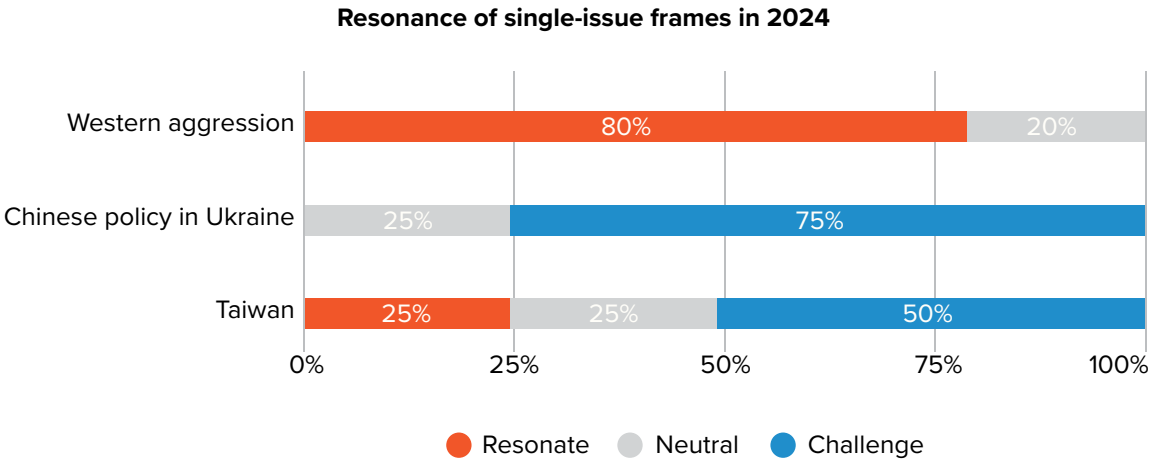

Figure 5. Percentage distribution of articles published between July and December 2024 with codes that resonate with, challenge, or are neutral to the single-issue frames (total 15 articles)

As President Trump is viewed negatively by most Danes,[429] the Danish media mainly focused on the implications a second term of his anti-China policies and unpredictable behaviour would have for Denmark and its economy. This created a large overlap between the Danish media portraying the US as a (potentially) aggressive international actor and Chinese official framing of the West (led by the US) being the main aggressor on the international stage and escalating tensions with China. However, most articles also included condemnation of China being either aggressive towards or constitute a strategic threat to Europe and Denmark, undermining the notion of the frame achieving genuine resonance on its own. This critical stance towards China also defined the issue on Chinese policies in Ukraine, largely seeing it as either an accomplice or enabler of Russia's continued war against Ukraine. Driven by influential opinion leaders, like Prime Minister Frederiksen, the rejection of the official Chinese frame has become well established in public discourse. Lastly, as the Danish MPs' visit to Taiwan in 2024 triggered the debate on Taiwanese independence anew in the Danish media, the general rejection of the One-China Principle became more pronounced in public discourse. While the Chinese foreign ministry (not embassy) spokesperson did comment on the event once,[430] most mentions of the topic emphasised Chinese provocations and Taiwanese aspirations of freedom and their democratic system, in clear support of an independent Taiwan.

Resonance of Pro-China Frames

When looking at the more general pro-China frames in 2022 (Figure 6), China's uphill struggle for public support becomes even more apparent, with resonance mainly kept to the Business Opportunity frame. This hill only got steeper in 2024, thanks to a growing consensus among European decision-makers of seeing China as a strategic threat and the severe economic crisis that hit China in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a consequence, the resonance of Chinese official frames only diminished. Like the single-issue frames, certain official frames also disappeared from public discourse, that is, the effective Covid strategy and the unpolitical Winter Olympics. These were therefore removed from the 2024 analysis (Figure 7).

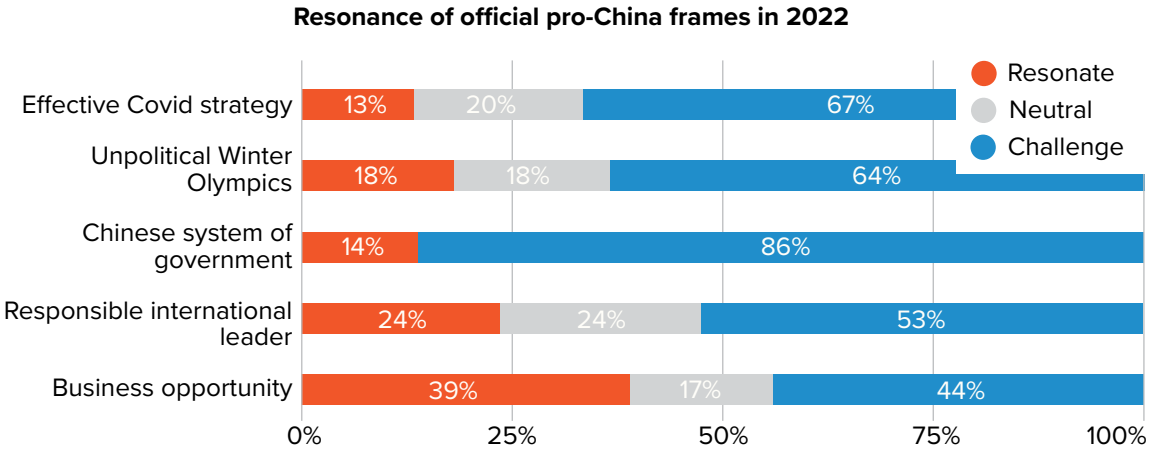

Figure 6. Percentage distribution of articles in 2022 with codes that resonate with, challenge, or are neutral to the pro-China frames (total 150 articles)

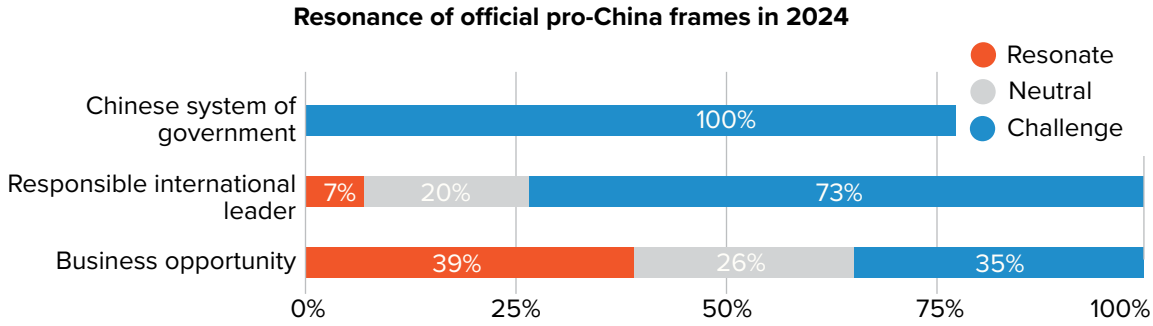

Figure 7. Percentage distribution of articles published between July and December 2024 with codes that resonate with, challenge, or are neutral to the official pro-China frames (total 15 articles)

As the Winter Olympics of 2022 triggered a debate on whether Denmark should officially boycott the games because of concerns over the Chinese human rights record—which ultimately led to a public boycott by the government and the royal family—Chinese attempts to use the event to showcase its tech sector were mainly contradicted by several critical op-eds on Beijing and personal profile stories of human rights violations. The event also gave more exposure to instances where dailies would be challenging China's Xinjiang frames and frames depicting the Chinese system of governance as legitimate, boosting

their respective presence in the dataset. Instead of being seen as an unpolitical event or a showcase of Chinese innovation, the Winter Olympics largely became equated with all the CCP's moral shortcomings.

While there was a global easing of Covid-19 restrictions in 2022, Beijing's continuation of its zero-Covid policy stood in stark contrast. As reporting focused on China's draconian policy, criticism of the country's lack of vaccination efforts became more frequent and was negatively linked to discussions about China as a business opportunity.

Though it was the most effective of the pro-China frames, the depiction of China as an attractive business opportunity was often undermined in 2022 by debate on the economic effects of domestic lockdowns and Western sanctions on Russia. While the shutdown of financial hubs cast doubt on the future of Chinese domestic markets, the war in Ukraine spurred a debate on conducting business in authoritarian regimes likely to be sanctioned for violating international laws. Both these concerns grew in 2024. Enforced by the parallels drawn between the war in Ukraine and geopolitical tensions over Taiwan, there was considerable debate in 2022 on the financial risk and moral dilemmas of conducting business in China, which limited the effectiveness of this official frame. However, most op-eds and long reads seldom took a clear position on the issue but remained descriptive of the dilemma in which Danish business found themselves.

The global image of China suffered in 2024 because of three main factors. First, the growing evidence of Chinese financial support for Russia,[431] which eased the effects of Western sanctions, and military support for the Kremlin's war-fighting capabilities in Ukraine[432] made it more difficult for Danes to accept the view of China as a responsible international leader, and strengthened the argument of China being a systemic rival to the West. Incidents of espionage,[433] discoveries of unfair state subsidies for the battery electric vehicle industry,[434] threats of tariffs escalating into a trade war,[435] and accusations of sabotage meant Chinese public diplomacy struggled to maintain the peaceful coexistence narrative and the pro-Chinese System of Government frame. This was only cemented in public discourse, when Frederiksen accused China of enabling Russian aggression. Second, with China stuck in an economic crisis in the wake of the pandemic, initiated by the bursting of a severe real estate bubble,[436] the CCP was unable to maintain impressive indicators of economic and commercial success. As a consequence, the previously effective official frame of China as a business opportunity lost its resonance in later Danish public discourse. Third, the concerns of a potential and later confirmed second Trump administration in the US reinforced the two previously mentioned factors. Fearing the small Danish economy would risk being caught in a potential conflict between China and the US, be it over Taiwan or tariffs, the Danish media increasingly portrayed commerce with China as geopolitically unwise or difficult. This undermined the Business Opportunity frame, and, although China remains a key trading partner for Denmark, this fact was often portrayed with negative undertones and linked to encouragement to withdraw from the Chinese market. For example, the largest business organisation, Dansk Industri, launched its China+1 policy in 2023, encouraging members to invest in alternative partners outside China. In autumn 2024 *Børsen* printed tales of the five largest companies in Denmark decoupling from China.[437]

Resonance among Niche and Mainstream Media

When looking at different media sources' reporting on China in 2022, the analysis shows an overall tendency to challenge China's official frames. Though it was influenced by the sample strategy of choosing controversial topics, for example Xinjiang and Taiwan, all the mainstream dailies tended to be more critical of China, either contradicting or rejecting official frames. This was also found in the China coverage of niche media, for example Den Korte Avis and NewSpeek, which maintained a critical tone towards China for its autocratic nature. This underscores the lack of resonance that China has even among the niche media (see Figure 8). Meanwhile, China hardly featured in the Greenlandic Sermitsiaq AG, whose reporting would often echo the criticism presented in the Danish media. Hence both the resonance of China's official frames and the attention given to China in general remain limited among Greenlandic audiences during this period.

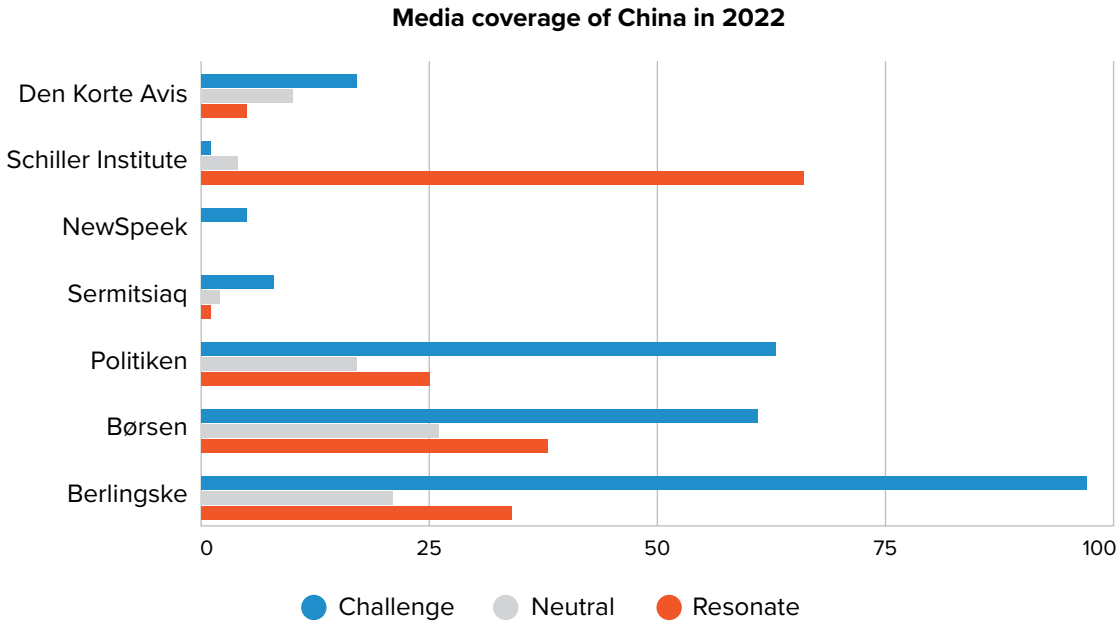

Figure 8. Distribution between media sources of instances that challenge, are neutral to, or resonate with Chinese official frames.

The only real resonance was found in the news bulletins and blog posts on Schillerinstitut.dk. As part of the global LaRouche anti-capitalist conspiracy movement, the Schiller Institute shares the anti-Western frames of Chinese officials and has absorbed the cooperative and development frames of China. However, as the institute has a marginal online following with fewer than 500 followers on its YouTube channel, and its participation in elections failed (its president Tom Gillesberg only gained 167 personal votes in the parliamentary election of 2019),[438] the impact of this resonance remains peripheral.

Though most of the official frames did not achieve much resonance among the 2024 media sources analysed, looking closer at what frame resonated with which media source in 2022 can give a more in-depth study of individual frames' appeal to the sources' different audiences (see Figure 8). While the Schiller Institute parroted a number of the official Chinese frames, the performances of the Business Opportunity frame in *Børsen* and the anti-Western frames in *Berlingske* stand out.

Berlingske with its focus on international affairs frequently analyses the great power competition between the US and China, and covers US and EU policies critical of China. While this has led to some natural resonance of Chinese anti-Western frames in the paper, it is also among the most critical of China (see Figure 8).

Due to the business-oriented *Børsen*'s focus on the debate over the economic consequences of sanctions and lockdowns, as expected the Business Opportunity frame had an outsized resonance (Figure 9). Emphasising the size of trade with China, potential profits made from emerging Chinese domestic markets, and the challenges of decoupling from China, op-eds and long reads in *Børsen* would often advocate for maintaining business ties to China and adopt an ad hoc approach in case of sanctions. While this debate also included risks of sanctions and status costs if companies were involved in human rights abuses, the Business Opportunity remained the most effective official frame, as it resonated in a large share of Børsen's articles (15).

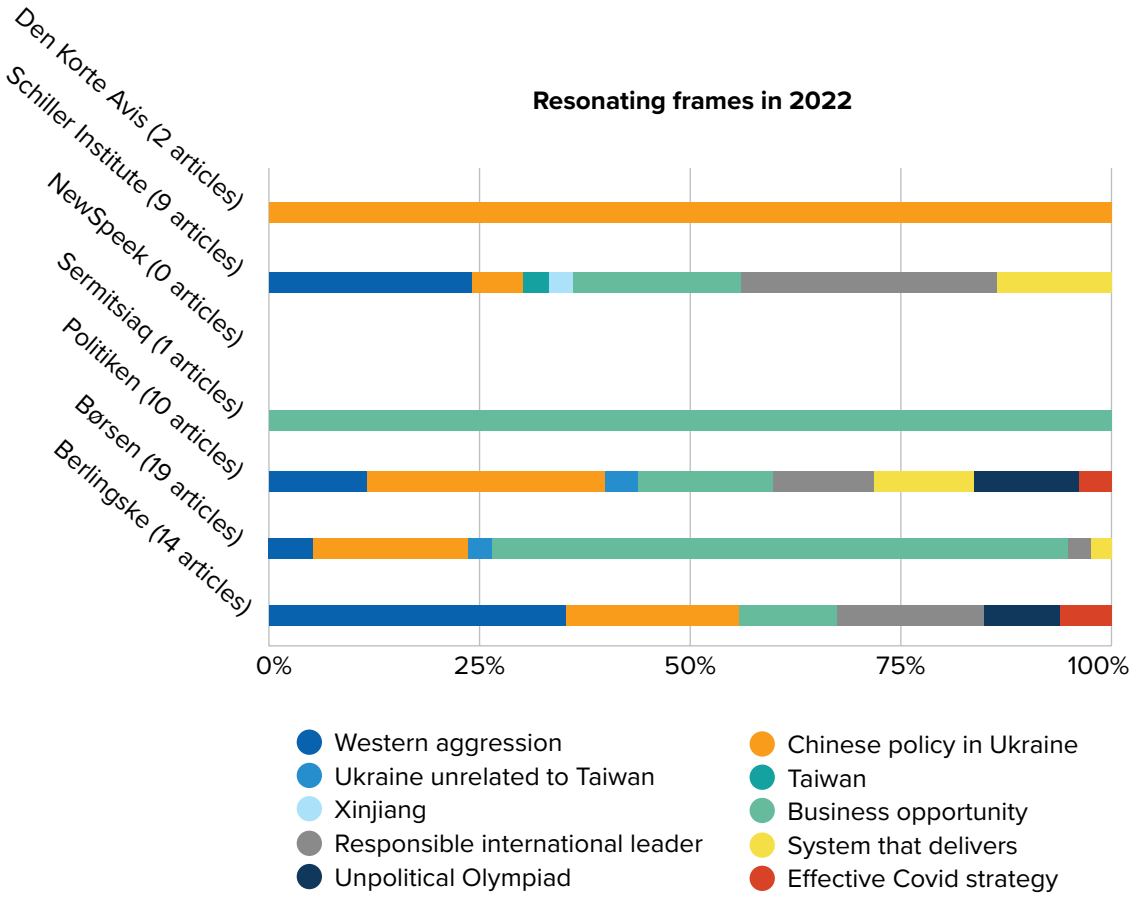

Figure 9. Distribution of 2022 sources' resonance with official frames

Looking into the distribution of the same resonating statements in 2024 among the general discourse (Figure 10), the study again found the pattern of the Business Opportunity frame driving resonance, and *Børsen* being the paper in which official frames resonated the most (with all its articles including resonance). But this may be overinflated due to the methodological choice of coding single statements and not entire articles. Though

most of *Børsen*'s articles included acknowledgements of the opportunities in the large Chinese economy and the role it plays for the Danish economy, this was often within the context of the decoupling discourse and the long-term challenges of operating in China. As previously stated, the resonance of Chinese official frames became even more marginalised in Danish public discourse in 2024.

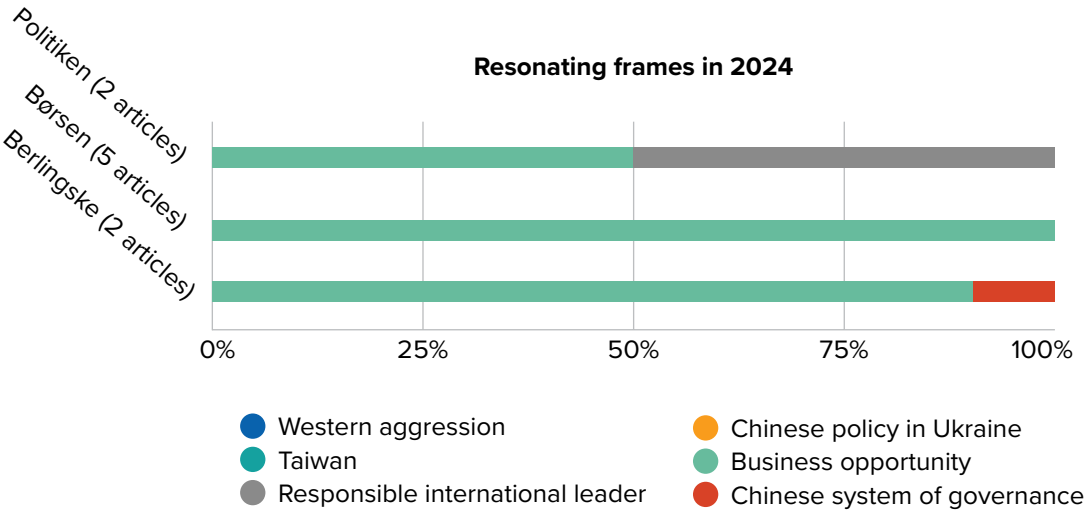

Figure 10. Distribution of 2024 sources' resonance with official frames

Framing Summary

In general, the study found little resonance of China's official frames within Danish public discourse and information space. Except for one peripheral actor, most media were largely critical of Chinese policies and contradicted or rejected the identified official frames. Although some did reference Chinese talking points, these instances were dwarfed by the sections challenging them.

Though the official frames faced an uphill struggle in the form of negative Danish perceptions of China, the lack of resonance may also be due to the quality of Chinese communication practices. Adopting a reactive and aggressive approach robs any persuasive effort of the initiative both to influence public opinion and the ability to use its most effective frames, such as the Business Opportunity, proactively. Considering the lack of public engagement, proactive communication in Danish, or cultivation of audience-specific narratives indicates that the Chinese government is not prioritising the influence of public opinion or even niche opinion through official frames. Instead, this may indicate that Chinese influence campaigns come from unofficial frames through the other avenues identified above. Although some of these practices were changed under Ambassador Wang, the continued reliance on generic and un-engaging communication remains an obstacle for achieving resonance.

Tellingly the most data-rich source in the dataset was Ambassador Feng's speech at the annual meeting of the DCBF, targeting Danish business elites, which the study identified as prioritised audiences of Chinese influence efforts. This further points to the strategy of maintaining the existing backstage access during the current Critical Revision phase of Danish–Chinese relations.

It is also important to indicate the study's shortcomings. Focusing solely on official communication excludes more informal frames and interactions covered by the Shadow Wolf Warrior diplomacy practice with an economic or political elite, and the exact effectiveness of such interaction. This also underscores the need to analyse frames and the resonance of such backstage channels of communication in Denmark. However, this requires data access beyond the scope and means of this study. Meanwhile, the absence of frames on China as a near Arctic state in Danish and Chinese, or descriptions of Danish–Chinese relations within a frame of the strategic partnership, is also due to the constraining period of 2022 and 2024. This is particularly apparent in the case of Danish foreign minister Jeppe Kofod's meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in November 2021. During this meeting both sides made the strategic partnership central for framing collaboration, while Chinese official summaries attempted to depict Denmark as adhering to the One-China Principle, in clear contradistinction to the Danish official summaries.[439] Yet this was not pursued further by the Chinese embassy in Copenhagen. The study was also limited from including the meeting on 18 August 2023 between the current Danish foreign minister and former Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen and Wang Yi, at which the strategic partnership was slimmed down to focus on environmental collaboration issues.[440] Such time constraints also elevate the impact of the embassy's defensive approach, as only issues that the embassy feels it must respond to will be identified by the study's method. However, this does not change the overall analysis of Chinese official frames being neither tailored to nor proactive in Denmark. Another shortcoming is the limited data sample of the 2024 study, which constrains the report's ability to fully capture the nuances of public discourse. However, at a general level the study still provides the gist of official Chinese communications in 2024. This especially concerns the dramatic change of public diplomacy engagement by ambassador Wang.

One interesting observation is that the growing criticism towards China within Danish public discourse during the time of study in 2024 was not met by more aggressive public diplomacy engagements from Ambassador Wang. While other actors' diplomatic practices would have entailed promoting policies directed at host countries, the embassy did not actively promote the new policy of visa-free travel between Denmark and China during this period. Although other reasons may be the main driving force behind this decision, engaging with the Danish media on this topic would open the new ambassador to critical questions on Taiwan, the Chinese economy, or Chinese hybrid activities in Europe. As this could risk further deterioration of the public environment faced by China, and more importantly its Danish partners using the visa policy, refraining from public engagements can be a strategy of minimising reputational damage. This has however, changed following a more public and pro-active approach by Wang in 2025.

Avenues of the Future

Looking ahead at Chinese influence within the Kingdom of Denmark, the contours of three trends are taking shape. All three are fuelled by the rather rapidly changing Danish information space in the face of China while the Critical Revision phase and the securitisation of Danish–Chinese relations build momentum. The three trends are: (i) the narrowing of the eight avenues and backstage access, (ii) the increased utility of clandestine activity, and (iii) the decreased utility of Shadow Wolf Warrior diplomacy.

First trend: although the total decoupling and shutdown of all the avenues of influence is politically unlikely, either due to lingering neoliberalism and vested interests or pressure for cooperation on global climate change, Chinese access is likely to narrow in the future. As Danish decision-makers have become more critical of China and growing public scrutiny is likely to inspire hesitancy among national elites, China must come to terms with diminishing backstage access. These constraints on Chinese influence are likely to change the balance of Chinese risk calculus considerably and lead to an adjustment of China's strategies of influence, which in turn shapes the two following trends.

Second trend: as China maintains its ambition to be a world leader in advanced technologies, losing access to the backstage may increase the utility of accessing wanted information through clandestine operations. In the Danish case, this is likely to involve increased industrial espionage on dual-use technology, quantum technology, artificial intelligence, telecommunications, and green transition tech, as well as attempts to access the political decision-making processes. The NATO DIANA Quantum Centre at the University of Copenhagen, which seeks to 'accelerate the development and commercialization of dual-use quantum technologies for civil and military use and contribute to the growth of a deep tech ecosystem within the Alliance',[441] is a particularly clear example of a narrowing avenue which in turn attracts more clandestine Chinese efforts at access.

Third trend: moreover, as backstage access diminishes, China's incentive to reassess its Shadow Wolf Warrior strategy increases and may involve publicly addressing the growing criticism on the frontstage in Denmark. To some degree this is already happening, with the embassy becoming more active publicly since the start of 2023. Adaptation of the conventional wolf warrior diplomacy is likely to accelerate the narrowing of the eight avenues and in addition provoke reactions among other European audiences. Hence this reassessment will involve China weighing the benefits of an aggressive public diplomacy against the loss of existing backstage access in Denmark and reputational costs among Western actors.

As Danish, Faroese, and Greenlandic decision-makers are adjusting to the new global realities, they will increasingly have to take into account the adjustments of China's strategies of influence.

The three trends will be conditioned by increasing uncertainties in global politics. Potential dissolution of the Danish realm stands front and centre in this regard, and the renewed Greenlandic aspirations for independence, reignited by President Trump's explicit desire to buy the island from Denmark, create new windows of opportunity for China to gain additional influence on the strategically important and resource-rich region. The Greenlandic polity has long struggled with achieving the functional and economic independence from Denmark necessary to claim legal independence, as it is largely dependent on Danish administrative and economic support to carry out key state functions. The Greenlandic economy is fundamentally not sustainable, as an ageing population and emigration necessitate structural reforms.[442] A consequence of this dependency and desire for independ-

ence could incentivise Greenland to seek alternative streams of income and achieve concessions by pitching them against each other. Greenland's own Arctic strategy for 2023–24 emphasised China as a country to focus on, especially for fisheries exports. Such efforts would widen or reopen Chinese avenues of influence in Greenland.

Another uncertainty that conditions the three trends is the European response to the Trump presidency and its use of tariffs, as well as European doubts about US security commitments. As the Chinese *Global Times* was eager to report in February 2025, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen has indicated a shift in the relationship between the EU and China: 'We will keep de-risking our economic relationship—as we have been doing in recent years. But there is also room to engage constructively with China—and find solutions in our mutual interest.'[443] There seems to be a European perception of having to balance supporting Ukraine's war efforts against Russia and building up its own military industrial base and deterrence. Faced with these challenges, the EU's ability or desire to challenge China or de-risk is cast into doubt. These European trends will also affect how the three trends of future Chinese avenues of influence will develop in the Danish context.

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