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CHINA'S INFLUENCE IN THE NORDIC – BALTIC INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT: LATVIA AND SWEDEN

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1. INTRODUCTION

Given its rapid economic growth and expanded geopolitical ambitions, China's influence projection has grown globally. The World Economic Forum projected that China may overtake the U.S. as the world's largest economy by 2024.[1] The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at optimising and expanding China's economic cooperation with the Eurasian continent, makes Europe a prime destination for Chinese investment.[2] Countries in Europe have largely treated economic cooperation with China as an opportunity, and the Nordic-Baltic region (NB8)[3] has not been an exception to this trend. However, several European countries have grown apprehensive regarding China's intents, as economic cooperation has become a backdrop to undesirable political influence via bilateral and multilateral fora.[4]

At the same time, buoyed by pride from its rapid economic growth, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has become more assertive in defending its national interests, including in the South China Sea region and in response to Western critics of China's expansionist foreign policy, undemocratic practices and human rights violations.[5] In reaction to these developments, a growing number of European countries have started to look at China's activities as a challenge or threat to national security. This shift has also become increasingly visible among the countries of the Nordic-Baltic region.[6]

China exploits several avenues of influence in the Nordic-Baltic region, ranging from overt activities, such as economic cooperation and investments, academic and parliamentary relationships and public diplomacy, to more covert efforts, such as United Front work and espionage. Countries in the Nordic-Baltic region have experienced China's diplomatic and economic pressure in response to meeting with Tibetan leader Dalai Lama (i.e., Denmark, Norway), supporting Chinese dissidents (Nobel Peace prize awarded to Liu Xiaobo in 2010), voicing human rights issues or naming China as a security threat. More recently, Sweden and Lithuania have faced China's coercive economic measures in retaliation for excluding Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE from the development of its 5G telecommunications networks (in the case of Sweden) and strengthening diplomatic ties with Taiwan (in the case of Lithuania).

At the same time, to support its ambition of becoming a global superpower, China has expanded efforts and resources to strengthen its 'discourse power' – the capability to communicate its story globally. To underpin this endeavour, it has developed a global propaganda apparatus, consisting of

diplomatic missions, state and party-funded media with international coverage, local media, and proxies in the target countries.[7] Research investigations have identified active use of social media to promote and amplify China's narratives, silence opponents and mobilise Chinese diaspora abroad.[8] In the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic, these efforts have been focused on defending Beijing's official narratives about the emergence of the virus. In addition to active engagement by Chinese officials and state media, Chinese actors have been behind inauthentic activity on social media to spread disinformation and amplify the content favourable to the CCP.[9]

China's growing assertiveness, including aggressive territorial expansion in the South China Sea, has become a first order concern both for the United States as well as the governments in Southeast Asia.[10] China's influence strategy towards Europe has generally not been as assertive, rendering it more challenging to detect and measure.

Although there are reports discussing the political and economic relationship between China and the Nordic-Baltic countries, this study represents the first attempt to apply a unified methodology to assess China's discursive power in the region and analyse it vis-à-vis the presence of other avenues of influence.

The aim of this report has been to develop and verify the methodology that facilitates the identification and analysis of China's communication tools and tactics, its strategic narratives and their prevalence in public discourse in the Nordic-Baltic region, as illustrated by two case studies – Latvia and Sweden.

From the Nordic countries, Sweden was selected as the country of analysis due to its tense bilateral relations with China over the past years, as well as experience in facing China's confrontational mode of diplomacy, often labelled as 'wolf warrior diplomacy'. From the Baltic countries, Latvia was selected due to the role of Riga as not only the most populous city in the Baltics, but also host of the headquarters of various Chinese overseas representations and public diplomacy activities in the Baltics.

> *A growing number of European countries have started to look at China's activities as a challenge or threat to national security. This shift has also become increasingly visible among the countries of the Nordic-Baltic region.*

In contrast to Sweden, this country has experienced less attention from China's communication efforts.

The paper examines China's influence in the Nordic-Baltic region across two dimensions. First, it analyses avenues of China's influence, in the process exploring the commonalities and differences between China's approaches to individual countries in the Nordic-Baltic region. Second, it analyses how China's 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 first chapter serves as a brief introduction to China's influence activities and the design of the methodological approach for this report. The second chapter provides an in-depth analysis of China's activities and strategic interests in the Nordic-Baltic region, placing it in comparative analysis with Russia's *modus operandi*. The third and fourth chapters feature case studies of Latvia and Sweden, with application of the proposed methodology. The report concludes with a comparison of the case studies and suggestions regarding the application of this methodological framework in future research.

China's tools of influence

One of the CCP's top priorities is ensuring regime security.[11] It must persuade international and, arguably more importantly, domestic audiences that it can provide stability, sustain growth and development, and protect national security. As part of this multi-pronged effort, the CCP is working to boost its international standing. This manifests in its foreign policy in multiple ways. Economically, China seeks out trade relationships that contribute to its rapid market growth. Politically, China seeks to secure leadership positions in key multilateral organisations that enable it to shift the balance of power and normalise a Chinese values-based international system. Technologically, China is developing its capabilities and expertise in the most advanced technological domains, including quantum computing and artificial intelligence, aiming to raise its competitiveness and security capabilities. Publicly, China has focused on advancing its ability to 'tell its story' to an increasingly global audience, thereby enhancing its global standing.

Acknowledging its high degree of dependence on international trade relations, China has worked for years to assure international partners that it is interested in a stable and mutually beneficial environment for cooperation. At the outset, China attempted to maintain a low public profile internationally to keep its positive image based on mutually beneficial cooperation. But as discourse towards China shifted in the democratic West, China has started to react defensively against negative labels, such as 'China threat theory' or 'debt-trap diplomacy'. As China's voice on the international stage has grown louder, it

has performed an increasingly strenuous balancing act between demonstrating to its domestic audiences its willingness to defend Chinese interests and simultaneously projecting signals of reassurance to foreign publics regarding China's 'benign' intentions and activities.[12]

In June 2021, China's President Xi Jinping announced that China should improve its ability to spread its messages globally in order to present a 'true, three-dimensional and comprehensive China'[13], thus yet again confirming the CCP's ambition to influence audiences internationally. It has learned to do it domestically, where it has assumed narrative control over domestic audiences by controlling mass- and social media platforms operating in China and Chinese language domains. It has also put considerable effort in pushing its narrative globally by promoting international outlets like ***CGTN*** or ***Xinhua*** in several languages, sponsoring paid media inserts in popular foreign media outlets, purchasing local media companies, among other tools.[14]

There are no specialised or translated arms of the Chinese state media outlets in the Nordic-Baltic region. China has, however, sought to promote its messaging in the local media space via their ambassadors granting interviews, offering content in mainstream media, and instrumentalising social media channels. However, China's levers of influence in the Nordic-Baltic region are likely to transcend public communication activities. Therefore, one must examine a far broader range of tools to understand China's potential to exert influence in the region.

A large part of Chinese influence in the Nordic-Baltic region is not illegal and is likely to be happening in the 'grey zone' between so-called conventional influencing (open with clear goals) and 'hybrid influencing' (causing threats). Activities in this zone can include fostering dependency on Chinese funding to universities, think-tanks, businesses, as well as 'elite capture', involving the provision of benefits for influential political, academic or business leaders to preparing ground for possible coercion in the future.[15] However, as Giannopoulos et al. argue, whether these activities are illegal and unacceptable or not, 'when activated with given need or opportunity and combined and used in synchronization, they start to create an effect that harms and undermines the democratic state system, sovereignty and functionality of the target state.'[16]

A large part of Chinese influence in the Nordic-Baltic region is not illegal and is likely to be happening in the 'grey zone' between so-called conventional influencing and 'hybrid influencing'.

For the purposes of this report, **influence** is defined as 'the ability to achieve effects on opinions and behaviour through words, images and actions'.[17] In this study, China's influence is analysed as it pertains to the information environment.

The information environment is understood to be a 'model for understanding how actors and audiences interact, how people see the world around them and consequently make decisions based on the meaning they deduce from it. It is a conceptual space consisting of three interrelated dimensions: **cognitive** (where people think, understand, and decide); **physical** (individuals, organisations and infrastructure); and **informational** (facts, knowledge and data)'[18].

This study identified eight avenues China uses to influence the information environment. Although they are not necessarily all employed in every Nordic-Baltic country, the extent to which each tool is applied in the region merits further investigation.

An overview of the existing analyses of Chinese influence in the Nordic-Baltic region identified the following examples for each of the eight identified avenues of influence.

'United Front' networks. One of the main instruments through which China conducts its global influence operations is through the 'united front' system – a vast network of actors that works to further the interests of the CCP.[19] Created for controlling and influencing groups that might threaten the CCP's power from within, the 'united front' work has been increasingly used for external influence. Outside of mainland China, the targets of united front networks are the Chinese diaspora but also a wider audience, such as politicians, media representatives, and academics who can be influenced 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.[20] As very few Chinese organisations outside of mainland China are able to remain outside the reach of the united front system, many notable Chinese associations in the NB8 also fall under the network of the united front. The Nordic Zhigong Association is a regional actor, acting as a subsidiary of one of China's eight 'democratic parties' and claiming to have representatives in all five Nordic states.[21] The united front networks in Finland and Sweden, in particular, have drawn attention for their active influence through organisations, such as the Finland Association for Promoting Peaceful Reunification of China and the Swedish China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification.[22]

Parliamentarian relationships. In addition to the Chinese diaspora, the CCP exerts influence abroad through connections with foreign politicians. These relationships often overlap with united front efforts, but effectively represent a specific tactic in its own right through the International Liaison Department of the Communist Party of China. Aside from its official diplomatic function, the Liaison Department gathers intelligence on the 'behind the scenes' political scene in target countries and 'hosts exchanges' with foreign political parties to influence attitudes and policies toward China.[23] The CCP has established connections with several major parties among the NB8 governments (e.g. Finland[24], Estonia[25]).

Academic relations. China uses a combination of academic relations and establishment of Confucius Institutes – educational and cultural promotion programmes – based on university campuses around the world to promote the party line.[26] At one point, there was at least one Confucius Institute in every NB8 country.[27] In 2020 and 2021, institutes have been closed in Sweden and Norway. Other than formal centres, there is anecdotal evidence of pressure placed on local academics to avoid criticising the CCP. In April 2021, Beijing formalised such pressure to the extent of sanctioning a few high profile China experts in Europe, including Swedish expert Björn Jerdén, for criticising China's policies.[28]

Economic investments/exposure to the Chinese market. China uses economic levers of influence to assert its interests globally. China's economic influence strategy is two-fold: promises of financial investment and threats to restrict access to the Chinese market. Some have referred to this as a 'carrot and stick' method of influence.[29]In the early stages of China's economic outreach, it advertised its foreign direct investment (FDI) plans for the Baltics. Reality, however, has proven different, with Chinese FDI in the Baltic economies reaching insignificant figures – 0.05%, 0.34% and 0.99% of Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian accumulated FDI, respectively.[30]The NB8 is also no stranger to the negative 'sticks' of Chinese economic influence, however.

> *Building on its financial investment, China also promises infrastructure development. Constructing telecoms and energy links in the region provides obvious financial and security incentives for China, whilst potentially posing risks for the host countries.*

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[31]. In 2021, China launched a boycott of the Swedish retailer H&M in response to its criticism of its human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

Infrastructure development. Building on its financial investment, China also promises infrastructure development. Constructing telecoms and energy links in the region provides obvious financial and security incentives for China, whilst potentially posing risks for the host countries. Over the last decade, China has embarked on several infrastructure projects in the Nordic-Baltic region. In 2019, it was announced that China would support the construction of a Tallinn-Helsinki undersea tunnel.[32] In 2017, the Chinese state company CITIC Telecom CPC acquired a Dutch company which controls part of the existing undersea internet cables between Estonia, Finland and Sweden.[33] In the same year, one of China's largest energy producers announced plans to construct a new electricity plant in Lithuania.[34]

Espionage. While espionage is not a new form of influence, China's modern espionage seeks to exert influence over individuals whom they regard as regime critics.[35] Six of the NB8 singled out increased espionage from China as a growing security threat in their 2020 security assessments.[36] In addition to traditional intelligence collection, these efforts have focused on industrial espionage (collection of trade secrets) and espionage of Chinese diaspora (coercion of refugees, emigrants, students studying in the NB8).

Diplomatic measures. In the same vein as economic sticks, the CCP uses diplomatic tactics – ranging from cancelling state visits to imprisoning foreign nationals – to clearly signal its stances and priorities. Some of the earliest diplomatic snubs between China and the NB8 were over several instances of Nordic-Baltic countries hosting the Dalai Lama, whom China considers to be a separatist and threat to national security. China made it clear that such visits would seriously damage bilateral relations between China and the host

country, and in the following years several NB8 states changed course and chose not to meet with the Tibetan spiritual leader.[37] In more proactive displays of controversy, China imprisoned Swedish citizen Gui Minhai for publishing books on the personal lives of CCP leaders and the Chinese Embassy in Lithuania organised a pro-Beijing counter-protest in response to pro-Hong Kong demonstrations in Vilnius in 2019.[38]

Public communication. China is making a concerted effort to expand its story-telling capability to reach a global audience. Chinese leaders are aware that international public perception is an important facet of diplomacy and are increasingly paying attention to how China is perceived internationally. As a result, China has embarked on massive state-driven communication campaigns to improve its image and communicate strategic narratives around its core interests. [39] Many of those activities fall within the scope of what can be deemed public diplomacy or 'soft power' activities – such as ambassadors reaching out or granting interviews to foreign media, or reaching global audiences with state-funded news broadcasts or entertainment content. However, some activities are characterised by a demonstrable lack of transparency and corruption in terms of how pro-CCP content reaches foreign audiences through local media and social media. There is a growing effort to censor 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.[40] There are documented instances of similar efforts in the Nordic-Baltic countries as well (see Swedish case study).

China is making a concerted effort to expand its story-telling capability to reach a global audience. Chinese leaders are aware that international public perception is an important facet of diplomacy and are increasingly paying attention to how China is perceived internationally.

What is China saying?

A recent NATO StratCom COE study of China's narratives reveals that China is consistent in presenting the main features of its strategic narratives to international audiences, but stresses different aspects depending on the desired target audience.[41] Before assessing the narrative nuances within the Nordic-Baltic region, it is helpful to build a more detailed understanding of the narratives that China promotes globally.

International order narratives[42]:

- The international system is undergoing a major transformation, including a redistribution of power to an increasingly multipolar configuration. This change is driven by globalisation and the emergence of disruptive technologies. NATO is framed as an example of the outdated international order.

- China's vision of a pluralistic world order based on a 'community of shared destiny of humankind' is either a viable or the best alternative to the current international system. Rather than relying on alliances based on government systems, international relations should be based on partnerships for mutual development.

China's identity narratives[43]:

- China is a proud heir to one of the great ancient civilisations. Chinese history, culture, art, and philosophy shaped the international order and should be celebrated. Confucian values of peace and harmony allow China to engage positively with other countries and form the basis for the China-envisioned world order.

- China's remarkable economic development is proof that a country can choose its own path, maintain sovereignty and social stability, and still achieve economic success.

- China is a responsible major power that can deliver positive transformation at the international level. This narrative embodies China's shift from reactive rhetoric to more proactive positive messaging.

Research methodology

In order to assess measure China's influence in the information environment, the methodology of this report is comprised of three stages, applied to the individual countries examined in the case studies.

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 countries in the Nordic-Baltic region. The following areas are assessed:

- United Front networks
- Parliamentarian relations
- Academic relations
- Economic investments/exposure to Chinese market
- Infrastructure development
- Espionage
- Diplomatic measures
- Public communication

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 target 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'[44].

Third, the study analyses the target country's media content in the timeframe from 1 January – 30 April 2021 to identify convergence between the previously determined Chinese official frames and frames that dominate Swedish and Latvian media.

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,'[45] 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.'[46]

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.

In case the frame is received positively, mediatic diplomacy can be evaluated as successful.[47] 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.

This report will aim 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?
- ***What*** can other countries in the Nordic – Baltic region learn from the Latvian and Swedish case studies about Chinese tactics and influence in the information environment?

By applying this three-step methodology to both case studies, this report aims to assess the validity, relevance, and transferability of the methodology. The objective is to take lessons learned from this study and apply the same or similar methodology to the remaining six Nordic-Baltic countries in future studies.

2. FOG ON THE BALTIC: RUSSIA'S AND CHINA'S INFLUENCE IN THE REGION

Edward Lucas

Introduction

Russia and China are both superpowers. They are not allies, and they are not rivals, but they have overlapping aims, occasionally similar tactics – and wildly differing resources.

In both countries, all policy, internal and external, stems from the overriding goal of regime stability. China regards the West as a threat to its economic development and political sovereignty. The Kremlin too sees the West, particularly the European Union (EU) and NATO, as illegitimate constraints on its decision-making, and as potential instigators of 'colour revolutions' that will exploit Russia's ethnic, religious, political, and other fissures.

The long-term goal for both the party-state (the most accurate description of the political-military entity that rules mainland China) and the Kremlin, therefore, is a polycentric or multipolar world in which multilateral, rules-based organisations, particularly but not only US-led ones, are unable to dictate terms. That means weakening multilateral organizations, especially those that might constrain decision-making in Moscow and Beijing.

The dimensions are different. The People's Republic of China envisages itself becoming the most important country in the world by the middle of this century. It already has unparalleled economic clout when it chooses to use it. For most companies it is the biggest market in the world. It is a vital part of many industries' supply chains. It runs a global infrastructure programme, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which offers transformative improvements to rail, road and port connectivity for those that choose to engage with it. The party-state also engages in hegemonic discourse control: attempting to control any discussion of China, anywhere in the world. Among notable successes is the film industry – for example, Hollywood no longer produces films with any content critical of the Beijing regime and its activities.[48]

None of that is true of the Russian Federation. It is not an important market. Though its energy imports give it strategic heft in some parts of Europe, it is not an essential part of any global supply chain. It does not organise any global infrastructure schemes. Indeed, its global efforts are chiefly related to short-term deals involving the supply of security assistance in exchange for natural-resource concessions, chiefly in Africa. Instead of pursuing ambitions of global dominance, Russia aims to be the dominant power in Eurasia, using its size to exert strong influence over its neighbours and over small countries, and to bargain with big countries on equal footing.

Russia's big advantage in this region is proximity. This creates economic, cultural and personal ties that it can exploit for influence operations. These have been more notable in south-eastern Europe (Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria)[49]and with respect to energy and other deals with Hungary. Russia's real strength, however, is not in the 'ex-communist' countries but in Germany, France and Italy, where it plays on latent anti-Americanism, the perceived opportunities of the Russian market, and (in the case of Germany) its role as an energy supplier.

China, despite geographical distance, conducts influence operations in Europe. The party-state has wooed Hungary to the point that this country vetoes EU statements on human rights violations, in Hong Kong in particular.[50] It also has close economic, military and political ties with Serbia. In 2019, it persuaded Italy to join the BRI, the first G7 country to do so, though the current government of Mario Draghi has backtracked from the initial commitments.[51]The PRC has intense academic ties with British universities, which have opened campuses in mainland China and become heavily dependent on Chinese students, in addition to building close research partnerships. When Xi Jinping visited London in 2015, the British police used anti-terrorism laws to ensure that protests made no impact.[52] China has also used shipments of PPE and 'vaccine diplomacy', notably in non-EU countries, such as Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Turkey. None of these activities have counterparts in the Nordic-Baltic region, which remains firmly anchored in the Euro Atlantic security sphere.

Indeed, for most Nordic and Baltic countries, the biggest concerns regarding Chinese and Russian activities lie not within the region but outside it. Russian and Chinese influence in the Arctic is one issue, another is Belarus. This country is moving closer to Russia, which provides loans and other support for the autocratic regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka (Alexander Lukashenko) in exchange for concessions on security cooperation.

Belarus is another state with which the Chinese party-state has cultivated strong political ties. It has made high-profile investments and supplies surveillance technology and other assistance. The Chinese presence bolsters the economy (which is heavily dependent on subsidised

Russian energy), and at least in theory could balance the Kremlin's overbearing political and diplomatic influence.

These activities put both countries' records in the Nordic-Baltic region into perspective. Nothing similar is going on now, nor has it in the recent past. No country in the region could be described as 'pro-China' or 'pro-Russia'. No country in the region has an economic relationship with China or Russia that seriously constrains its diplomatic or defence posture.

Stability, instability and opportunities

Whereas China fears instability, a stable security environment in Russia's neighbourhood is, contrary to many Western assumptions, not necessarily the Kremlin's preferred outcome. It may be in Russia's national security interest to destabilise neighbouring countries to:

- Prevent a perceived threat;
- Create a bargaining position; or
- Reap domestic political dividends.

Russia has other interests too. They include gaining and securing:

- Export markets in advanced countries, especially for energy and other natural resources.
- Stable transit routes (unimpeded access to road, rail, harbours, and sea lanes).
- Advanced technology and investment.

China's interests are slightly different. Whereas Russia is accustomed to dealing with international sanctions, and is broadly self-sufficient in energy and food, China is energy-poor and cannot feed itself. It therefore places great emphasis on unimpeded control of sea lanes. Whereas Russia's presence in international financial markets is peripheral, China's more highly developed financial sector grants it a greater stake in international financial regulation.

Both countries prize their economic relationship with Germany. In Russia's case, this is exemplified by the Nord Stream natural gas pipelines. In China's case, the heavy dependence of the German auto industry on manufacturing plants in western China plays a similar role. Both countries assume that a harmonious relationship with Germany will help ties with EU and NATO countries.

Russia, however, has specific regional security interests. It aims to keep other countries as far as possible in a security grey zone: either out of NATO altogether, or with weak ties to the United States, or in NATO but without the corresponding plans, deployments, and bases that could present a serious military obstacle to Russian power.

In particular, Russia dislikes the presence of outside NATO forces in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and in Poland. It regards this as a breach of undertakings allegedly given during the expansion of NATO, and previously during the unification of Germany.

This interpretation of history is not widely shared in the countries concerned.

A further factor is psychological and relates specifically to the Baltic countries. The Kremlin considers their independence an affront to geopolitical reality and their role in NATO and EU decision-making as an inherent security threat. Among practical Russian objectives in the region, and particularly in the Baltic countries, are:

- Preventing increased NATO presence (infrastructure and deployment), and NATO membership or closer ties for Finland and Sweden.
- Maintaining and developing control and ownership of critical infrastructure (especially in the energy and transit industries).
- Countering the local historical narrative that depicts the Soviet and Nazi occupiers as equivalent.

Russia also has the strategic goal to exert geopolitical leverage by using countries of the region to weaken and subvert multilateral rules and organisations.[53] In pursuit of this objective, Russia uses sophisticated and varied means, overt and covert, in order to hamper Baltic states' decision-making, to corrode internal cohesion, to alienate Western allies and partners, and to foment anti-Western sentiment in the three countries.

None of this concerns China, whose major diplomatic goal in the region is to bolster the 17+1, a Beijing-led regional economic security forum, and to prevent any extension of political or diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

Means and ends

China's levers of power in the region are limited, chiefly consisting of diplomatic pressure and constraints on trade and investment. Russia, by contrast has an extensive arsenal of military and non-military measures to deploy against the countries of the Baltic Sea region, with varying degrees of associated cost and risk. The spectrum has developed in size and sophistication since 1991. It ranges from the threatened and actual use of nuclear weapons in a military conflict at one extreme, to the offer of beneficial energy, trade, transit, and investment relationships to favoured countries at the other.

The central feature of Russia's approach to the Baltic region is ambiguity. The Kremlin does not articulate a clear strategy toward the region, or approach it as a whole. It targets individual countries, often balancing aggressive behaviour with charm offensives elsewhere. However, over the past 30 years clear features have become visible.

The most long-standing of these are economic sanctions, such as import curbs and restrictions on exports and transit, particularly interference with natural gas, oil, and electricity supplies.

A Swedish study from as early as 2006 highlighted 50 instances of coercive Russian energy policy directed against ex-Soviet neighbours, of which more than half took place before 1999, under the supposedly benign rule of Boris Yeltsin.[54] In the Baltic Sea region these have been chiefly directed against Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

None of these economic measures has been debilitating. Russia's room for manoeuvre is partly constrained by the need to keep natural gas and electricity flowing to the Kaliningrad exclave. More importantly, the application of economic sanctions, and even the threat of them, has prompted extensive measures toward resilience-building and diversification. In sharp contrast to the picture of 30 years ago, none of the countries in the Baltic Sea region has strategically vulnerable economic ties with Russia, reflecting the country's positioning on the sidelines of the global economy. Foreign trade with Russia is typically below 10% of imports and exports, whereas regional trade ties are far more important. Germany, for example, conducts nearly three times more foreign trade with Poland than it does with Russia.[55] For Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Norway, and Finland, Russia is not top in the five partners for exports or imports. The country with the highest foreign trade with Russia is Lithuania (14% of imports and exports).

Russia also conducts extensive **information operations** in the Baltic Sea region. These typically reflect a mixture of domestic and local targets and priorities. The main elements are those identified by the British analyst Ben Nimmo as the 'four Ds': dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay.[56]

Another vector of attack is directed against the liberal Nordic states, framing them as declining, morally rotten societies that have abandoned traditional Christian values, and that have been fatally weakened by immigration from non-European countries.[57] Examples include attacks on the Finnish and Norwegian child welfare agencies, which have on occasion placed the children of dysfunctional Russian parents into foster care or adoption.[58]

Individuals who present a threat to Russia can be harassed.[59] This tactic also finds echoes in the Chinese approach, which has included imposed visa bans on officials involved in EU sanctions policy and on critical journalists.

A sophisticated Kremlin narrative is to deride the idea that Russia poses any kind of threat. Meanwhile, the presence of NATO and other allied forces in the region, and other defence cooperation efforts (such as Swedish and Finnish bilateral ties and agreements with the United States) are portrayed as warmongering provocation. Since NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) forces were deployed in the Baltic countries, Russia has spread rumours and hoaxes about their activities, such as the false claim that German soldiers in Lithuania had raped a local woman, as well as attempted to demoralise foreign forces with covert, targeted attacks against individuals, particularly using personal mobile phones.[60]

> *Information attacks should not be seen in isolation. They are part of wider influence operations that use political, economic, legal, and other tools to exacerbate ethnic, cultural, demographic, diplomatic, linguistic, regional, and other divisions.*

Furthermore, military bluff and intimidation create perceptions of indefensibility and highlight the danger of nuclear escalation.

Audiences for these operations include Russian domestic opinion, which should be discouraged from noticing that post-Soviet life is better elsewhere; opinion in the Baltic countries, which can be demoralised; and opinion in the rest of the EU and NATO, which should be made to question the merits and practicability of defending the Baltic countries.

Information attacks should not be seen in isolation. They are part of wider influence operations that use political, economic, legal, and other tools to exacerbate ethnic, cultural, demographic, diplomatic, linguistic, regional, and other divisions. Russia's diaspora policy, for example, involves both information operations aimed at fomenting alienation and resentment among Russian speakers in Estonia and Latvia, financial support for anti-systemic groups and individuals, diplomatic pressure on the two countries in international organisations, and clandestine subversive operations.

In particular, Russia's arsenal features military intimidation. In addition to aggressive military exercises, instances of intimidation feature military aircraft that do not transmit a transponder code indicating their position and altitude, file a flight plan, or communicate with air traffic controllers, posing a potential risk to civilian airliners.[61] Estonia counted 228 Russian violations of international aviation norms in and near its airspace in 2020 alone.[62] Russian planes and ships also conduct unsafe manoeuvres in the air and at sea, and intrusions into airspace and territorial waters, as the following (non-exhaustive) list illustrates, in chronological order.

- In 2015, the Finnish navy dropped depth charges in waters near Helsinki as a warning to a suspected Russian submarine.
- Russia has repeatedly violated Finnish airspace, including an incident in October 2016 seemingly timed to coincide with the signing of

a defence agreement with the United States.[63] This episode also featured an intrusion into Estonian airspace.

- In April of the same year, two Russian warplanes flew simulated attack passes near a U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer in the Baltic Sea.[64]
- In 2018, Russia conducted dummy attacks on military installations in northern Norway.[65]
- In September 2019, Estonia said a Russian Su-34 Fullback combat jet flew into its airspace.
- In August 2020, a Russian Su-27 Flanker jet committed a significant violation of Danish territory — the airspace of the island of Bornholm — after intercepting a B-52 bomber over the Baltic Sea. (On the same day, another Flanker performed an unsafe manoeuvre very close to a B-52 flying over the Black Sea).[66]
- In September 2020, on the day after Sweden signed a trilateral defence pact with Norway and Finland, Russian naval vessels intruded into Sweden's territorial waters near Gothenburg.[67]

These may at first sight seem counterproductive. Yet from the Kremlin's point of view, they are low-risk and effective. They highlight the costs and risks involved in confronting Russia and underline one of the main messages and priorities of Russian strategy: that the country cannot be ignored. Inside Russia, they chime with deeply held perceptions of a decadent and divided West that can muster only the pretence of defence, but not its substance.

This 'hybrid war' or 'active measures' toolbox for now offers Russia the most promising combination of risk and reward. It provides opportunities to apply ambiguous, asymmetric, and selective pressure on countries in the region. Yet the military dimension remains the one where NATO and the Baltic countries are at the greatest inherent disadvantage. By virtue of its topography, the region offers Russia a tempting geostrategic prize. If by military bluff, intimidation, or actual attack it can show that NATO and U.S. security guarantees are empty, Russia can upend the post-1991 security order in Europe in a matter of hours.

> *Inside Russia, they chime with deeply held perceptions of a decadent and divided West that can muster only the pretence of defence, but not its substance.*

China also adopts a full-spectrum approach to its influence operations, but – in the Nordic-Baltic region at least – with far fewer capabilities. The party-state's efforts to exert pressure include:

- Intimidating Norway after the Nobel Prize committee in Oslo awarded the Peace Prize to the late Liu Xiaobo, a jailed Chinese dissident, in 2010. This involved suspending bilateral government contacts, curbing business ties and joint research and academic relationships and freezing a free trade agreement. The Norwegian authorities eventually repaired relations.[68] An important turning point was Norwegian officials' refusal to meet the Dalai Lama during a visit to Norway by the Tibetan spiritual leader in 2014.
- Putting Denmark, similarly, in the diplomatic deep freeze after officials met the Dalai Lama in 2009. It provided a verbal note on relations using language that the party-state was able to accept as an apology.[69]
- Intimidating Sweden on numerous issues, chiefly to try to silence complaints about Chinese human rights abuses. A notorious utterance by the ambassador to Stockholm, Gui Congyou, 'We treat our friends with fine wine…but for our enemies we got shotguns' exemplifies this.[70]
- Inducing Ericsson to lobby against Sweden's ban on Huawei products in the country's 5G network.
- Intimidating Estonia after the then-president Toomas Hendrik Ilves met the Dalai Lama in 2011.[71]
- Complaining about the annual reports of the security services in the Baltic countries which highlight concerns about Chinese influence.
- Complaining about Lithuania's parliamentary hearings on human-rights abuses.[72]
- Complaining about Lithuania's role in leading a six-country boycott of the 17+1 summit in February 2021[73] and for its ties with Taiwan.
- Sanctioning Lithuanian diplomats and public figures.[74]
- Wooing Latvia with the offer of a role in the developing of infrastructure and establishing a 17+1 logistics office in a government ministry in Riga.

> *Media coverage of China's foreign and domestic policies is almost uniformly negative.*

The practical results of this approach have been limited. On the positive side for the party-state, political leaders in the Nordic-Baltic region are no longer willing to meet the Dalai Lama (though Lithuania is somewhat an exception to this rule). On the negative side, China's reputation has suffered. Views are hardening and increasingly negative across the region (as indeed they are in much of Europe). The 'wolf warrior diplomacy' now endorsed by the party-state is invariably counter-productive: trying to give the Danish municipalities instructions about the public statues that can be erected, for example, (as happened in 2020) is unlikely to succeed in a free-minded country.[75] That the aim of 'wolf warrior diplomacy' is to demonstrate loyalty and energy to the high command in Beijing may explain the tactic, but it does not mitigate its detrimental effects.

No country in the region has a significant Chinese diaspora: typical figures in the larger countries are between 10,000 and 20,000. This is in sharp contrast to countries, such as Australia and Canada, where China has influence in domestic politics thanks to the size of the diaspora.[76]

In Nordic and Baltic countries diaspora activities are constrained by the absence of numbers. On August 23, 2019, for example, the Chinese Embassy in Lithuania organized a protest in Vilnius disrupting a rally in support of Hong Kong. Most of the participants in the pro-Chinese protest were members of the Association of Chinese Expatriates living in Lithuania. But the turn-out was small and the effect proved counterproductive. Lithuania's security service scrutinises such activity closely.

It is also notable that Confucius Institutes have little presence in the region. These state-funded, secretive bodies have attracted sharp criticism for their role in promoting Chinese influence (and other interests) in Western universities. Sweden abruptly withdrew cooperation from these in 2020. Norway closed its first and only Confucius Institute in 2021. Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania has one each. Russia, it should be noted, has no effective counterpart to the Confucius institutes.

Media coverage of China's foreign and domestic policies is almost uniformly negative. A rare example of a success in hegemonic discourse control is that Taiwanese students in Norway must register on government websites as being from 'Chinese Taipei' — the party-state's preferred designation for the self-governing offshore Chinese democracy. It is hard to identify any significant news outlet in the region that takes a consistently pro-China line. Notable critical voices include Jojje Olsson, a Swedish journalist now resident in Taiwan, who has been the repeated target of harassment by the Chinese party-state.[77]

In short, no country in the region has a substantial Chinese presence in its domestic politics, or even an important political party that could be described as 'pro-China'.

By contrast, Russia enjoys the at least perceived support of and institutional ties with Estonia's Centre Party and Latvia's Harmony (both parties contest the 'pro-Kremlin' label). In Sweden, left-wing parties oppose the country's alignment with NATO. Whereas no Chinese infrastructure project in the region is of any significance, Russia has built two important natural-gas pipelines across the Baltic Sea to Germany, with geopolitical significance.

China and its counterweights

The central fact about the relationship between the Nordic and Baltic countries on one hand and the party-state on the other, is asymmetry. In most of the world, the party-state can dictate terms and extract political and economic benefits from its interaction with outsiders. In the Nordic-Baltic region, the weak trade and investment relationship, coupled with geographical distance and a strong civic culture, means that political leaders and civil society have a large degree of freedom, and exercise it confidently and creatively. They can use this to annoy and provoke the party-state (for example, by strengthening ties with Taiwan or highlighting human-rights abuses). They can also shape the views of other countries and multilateral organisations, such as NATO and the EU. Increasingly, they have been doing just that. Resistance to China's influence has been increasingly vigorous and effective. For example:

- In 2018, Finland blocked an attempted Chinese acquisition of a regional airport on national security grounds.[78]
- Estonia was among the first EU countries to issue a bilateral declaration with the U.S. government blocking the Chinese telecom giant Huawei from taking part in the rollout of 5G networks [79] Latvia and Lithuania followed suit.
- The Nordic and Baltic countries issued a joint eight-member statement in May 2021 decrying human rights abuses in Xinjiang (the Chinese name for East Turkestan).[80]
- Lithuania has pulled out of the 17+1 framework and Estonia has reduced its participation to a minimum.
- Lithuania's parliament held hearings on Chinese human-rights abuses.
- In April 2021, 70 leading Estonian public intellectuals published an open letter criticising Chinese attempts to control public discourse. [81]
- Latvia now holds the rotating presidency of the U.S.-led Three Seas Initiative, which includes Baltic states and nine other European countries. It aims to improve connectivity in the region between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas, rivalling China's infrastructure projects promoted under the Belt and Road Initiative.

As the scholar Andris Banka noted in a report for an Australian think-tank in May 2021, 'the Chinese leadership has given something of a masterclass in how to alienate potential partner governments. It has reacted harshly to even the slightest questioning of its human rights record. Local Chinese embassy websites in the Baltics often read like a manifesto of a misunderstood superpower, filled with statements with a propagandistic flavour demanding that Baltic governments abandon their Cold War mindset.'[82]

Follow the money

Money flows are the sinews of power. Any assessment of the Chinese and Russian relationships with the Nordic-Baltic region should therefore start with an assessment of the financial stocks and flows, and their trajectory.

With a few exceptions (chiefly involving Swedish multinationals' exposure to the Chinese market, see below) the picture is clear and reassuring. China is not among the top trading partners (see table), accounting only for at most (in the case of Denmark) 5% of exports. Nor does Chinese FDI significantly shape the economies of the region. Chinese investors do not hold strategically important amounts of financial instruments either. In an era in which uncoupling from dependence on China is now seriously discussed, the Nordic and Baltic countries start from an enviable position.

Sweden is one of the top European destinations for Chinese investment (notably the auto manufacturer Volvo Cars, bought by Zhejiang Geely). Ericsson, the Swedish telecoms giant, has substantial business in China and has been lobbying against a Swedish court decision to uphold a ban on Huawei's involvement in the country's next-generation 5G networks. H&M, a Sweden-based clothing chain, has seen its sales slump following a boycott in China prompted by its concerns about forced labour in the supply chain.[83]

Sweden is one of the top European destinations for Chinese investment.

Denmark's economic ties with China are more low profile. The government in Copenhagen has gained legislative authority to screen future investments on national security grounds. It is also concerned about Chinese influence in Greenland, an autonomous territory where foreign and defence policy are a Danish responsibility.[84]

Bright spots for China include **Norway**, where the electric car company Nio has made a strong start with its battery-swapping technology.[85] **Estonia's** $2.1 billion oil-shale deal in Jordan in 2019 benefited from links with China.[86] Chinese investment in a planned Tallinn-Helsinki tunnel remains a possibility, albeit a fading one.

But counterexamples exist too. **Finland's** forestry products company Stora Enso announced in early 2021 that it would no longer supply wood pulp to customers in Xinjiang (East Turkestan)[87] because of human rights concerns about treatment of the indigenous Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. No substantial China-backed infrastructure project has succeeded since: a sharp contrast to other parts of Europe.

In the case of Russia, economic ties are stronger, but with no corresponding political baggage. The trajectory is towards further decoupling. A Swedish study as early as 2006 highlighted 50 instances of coercive Russian energy policy directed against ex-Soviet neighbours, of which more than half took place before 1999, under the supposedly benign rule of Boris Yeltsin.[88] In the Baltic Sea region these are chiefly directed against Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. They include cut-offs of oil supplies to the export terminal in Ventspils, Latvia in 2003 and to the Polish-owned Orlen Lietuva (formerly Mažeikių Nafta) oil refinery in Lithuania in 2006, and the sanctions on transit trade through Estonia after the 'Bronze Soldier' incident of 2007 (see below).

Sanctions imposed on Russia after the attack on Ukraine in 2014 brought counter-measures from the Kremlin, which have diminished trade and investment further.[89] Far from denting political willpower in the Baltic countries, the chillier economic climate has had the opposite effect. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have been among the foremost proponents of still-tougher measures against Russian aggression.[90] Russian sanctions have targeted agricultural and food imports (Polish apples and Lithuanian cheese, for example). But the domestic political fall-out has been negligible.

Russia has no substantial infrastructure investments in the region, with the exception of the planned (but troubled) Finnish nuclear power plant at Hanhikivi. Having used export bans as a political weapon against the Baltic countries, the potential for further pressure is exhausted.

However, Russian capabilities in the hybrid warfare sphere are far greater than China's, as evidenced by the attack on Estonia in 2007.[91] Prompted by the hasty removal of

a controversial Soviet war memorial from central Tallinn to a military cemetery, this involved:

- A disinformation blitz claiming falsely that the Estonian authorities had destroyed the statue as part of systematic persecution of the Russian minority.
- A major distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack on computer networks. This disabled, briefly, banking and other public services and the mobile phone network, and cut the country off from the global internet making it hard for media outlets and the authorities to get their message across.
- Kremlin-sponsored youth groups rioting in the streets of Tallinn and besieging the Estonian embassy in Moscow.
- Economic sanctions on transit and energy supplies.
- Russian politicians and officials, and those of allied countries, applied intense diplomatic pressure on Estonia, with demands including the dismissal of the prime minister and government.

Compare this with China's pressure on Lithuania over Taiwan. China downgraded diplomatic ties, imposed informal sanctions on Lithuanian exports and privately threatened the US company Thermo Fisher Scientific which is a major foreign investor in Lithuania and also has extensive operations in mainland China. However, the party-state:

- did not conduct a cyber-attack;
- did not try to use the (tiny) Chinese diaspora in Lithuania for political purposes;
- did not conduct extensive information operations; and
- did not organise street protests outside the Lithuanian embassy in Beijing.

Perhaps most importantly, Lithuania does not appear to have occupied the attention of senior decision-makers in Beijing, whereas Russian president Vladimir Putin takes a close personal interest in the Baltic states, displaying a particular animus towards Estonia.

Russia's economic ties with the Nordic-Baltic region are similarly muted. Russia's flagship project in the region is the Nord Stream gas pipelines, followed by a troubled nuclear power plant construction project in Finland.[92]

Conclusion

The Nordic and Baltic countries matter to Russia and Russia matters to them, from a cultural, diplomatic, economic, military, intelligence and security perspective.

China by contrast is a bigger deal for the Nordic and Baltic countries than they are for China. Their combined population is under 35m – the population of Shanghai alone, for comparison, is 27m. Their GDP combined is $1.6 trillion (measured by purchasing power) – less than a tenth of the EU's nearly $20 trillion. Technological pickings are thin, with a few exceptions. Ericsson is a competitor to Huawei. The Estonian rare-earths plant at Sillamäe is the only plant outside China to offer a wide range of high-purity products. It therefore plays an important role in limiting past and putative efforts by the party-state to extract political leverage from its dominance of the supply chain.[93]

Whereas a survey of Russian media gives countless examples of hysterical, distorted and paranoid coverage of the Baltic and Nordic countries, a survey of the Chinese media shows no sign of these countries playing a significant role in Chinese discourse. Coverage of foreign affairs in Beijing and elsewhere focuses on the US administration, the purported hypocrisy and incompetence of the West in general, pandemic-related issues (such as contesting the lab-leak theory), and China's objections to any foreign naval presence in the South China Sea. On none of these issues do the countries of the Nordic or Baltic regions play a significant role. The only recent issue to make even limited impact on public discourse is Lithuania's attempts to boost ties with Taiwan.

But even this does not reflect popular engagement. Issues such as Japanese war-crimes, or the supposed bias of the BBC and other Anglo-American news outlets, genuinely resonate with the public. From a Chinese point of view, the countries of the Nordic and Baltic region are largely shrouded in fog. Some may find the lack of interest galling. They might like to contemplate what a sharper focus would feel like.

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Trade and FDI Data: China and Russia

Yearly Exports to China

Country	2018	2019	2020	Total
Denmark	3.298	3.404	2.648	9.35
Estonia	2.262	2.372	1.584	6.218
Finland	18.92	28.492	24.593	72.005
Iceland	0.147	0.125	0.122	0.394
Latvia	3.688	3.993	3.176	10.857
Lithuania	2.273	1.105	1.088	4.466
Norway	0.819	1.111	1.162	3.092
Sweden	19.558	19.926	12.225	51.709

Yearly Exports from China

Country	Trade Value ($bn) (2019)	Percentage of exports	Growth (%) (2014-2019)
Denmark	1.39	1.34	-21.9
Estonia	1.4	8.23	-43.9
Finland	4.05	5.43	-32.9
Iceland	0.105	1.75	-60.3
Latvia	1.29	8.54	-10.1
Lithuania	4.27	13.1	-32.3
Norway	0.405	0.37	-62.9
Sweden	2.37	1.5	-29.9

Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) (2020). Historical Data.
https://oec.world/en/profile/country/dnk

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Lithuania	4.27	13.1	-32.3
Norway	0.405	0.37	-62.9
Sweden	2.37	1.5	-29.9

Yearly Imports from Russia

Country	Trade Value ($bn) (2019)	Percentage of imports	Growth (%) (2014-2019)
Denmark	2.82	2.85	6.98
Estonia	2.5	12.3	-31.2
Finland	9.5	13.2	-8.12
Iceland	0.072	1.08	132
Latvia	4.43	20.8	-58.6
Lithuania	3.87	11.9	-26
Norway	3.08	3.47	189
Sweden	2.83	1.87	-47.3

Source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) (2020). Historical Data.

https://oec.world/en

Direct Investment in the Russian Federation: Positions by Instrument and Partner Country (Asset/Liability Principle) ($bil)

Country	2018	2019	2020	Total
Denmark	6.348	5.643	4.664	16.655
Estonia	1.957	2.056	1.655	5.668
Finland	11.951	11.095	11.73	34.776
Iceland	4	2	0	6
Latvia	8.724	8.875	8.316	25.915
Lithuania	1.303	1.335	1.19	3.828
Norway	1.862	1.756	1.682	5.3
Sweden	0.767	0.801	1.221	2.789

Source: Bank of Russia (2021). 'Positions by Instrument and Partner Country (Asset/Liability Principle)'. External Sector Statistics, Direct Investment, Direct Investment in the Russian Federation. https://www.cbr.ru/eng/statistics/macro_itm/svs/

Direct Investment of the Russian Federation Abroad: Positions by Instrument and Partner Country (Asset/Liability Principle) ($bil)

Country	Value in 2021 ($mil)	Value 2020 ($mil)	Value 2019 ($mil)	Combined value 2015-2021 ($bil)
Denmark	0	0	0	0.73
Estonia	No Data	No Data	No Data	<0.1
Finland	660	0	5,420	15.48
Iceland	No Data	No Data	No Data	<0.1
Latvia	No Data	No Data	No Data	<0.1
Lithuania	No Data	No Data	No Data	<0.1
Norway	0	290	0	1.64
Sweden	290	380	1,820	12.64

Source: China Global Investment Tracker (2021). American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and The Heritage Foundation. https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/

Chinese Outward FDI to Nordic-Baltic

Country	Value in 2021 ($mil)	Value 2020 ($mil)	Value 2019 ($mil)	Combined value 2015-2021 ($bil)
Denmark	0	0	0	0.73
Estonia	No Data	No Data	No Data	<0.1
Finland	660	0	5,420	15.48
Iceland	No Data	No Data	No Data	<0.1
Latvia	No Data	No Data	No Data	<0.1
Lithuania	No Data	No Data	No Data	<0.1
Norway	0	290	0	1.64
Sweden	290	380	1,820	12.64

Source: China Global Investment Tracker (2021). American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and The Heritage Foundation.
https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/

Chinese FDI to the Nordic-Baltic region

Country	Chinese FDI to Nordic – Baltic countries (2000-2019) (EUR bn)
Denmark	1.2
Estonia	0.1
Finland	12
Iceland	No Data
Latvia	0.1
Lithuania	0.1
Norway	No Data
Sweden	7.3

Source: Chinese FDI in Europe: 2019 Update (2020). Rhodium Group and Mercator Institute for China Studies.
https://rhg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/MERICS-Rhodium-Group_COFDI-Update-2020-2.pdf

3. CHINA'S INFLUENCE IN THE LATVIAN INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Egle Klekere

Introduction

Different opinions have been expressed regarding the avenues and scope of influence of the People's Republic of China in the Nordic-Baltic region. This study approaches the research topic by examining the Latvian information environment.

There are several reasons behind the choice of Latvia for analysis. First, it is the country with the most populous city in the Baltics – Riga, which serves as a transport, political, cultural and financial hub.

Second, with reference to the previous point, the overseas representations of various PRC institutions, including the government, state media (e.g. ***Xinhua***), and public diplomacy (e.g. China Cultural Centre), have chosen Riga, the capital of Latvia, as the headquarters of their Baltic network.

Third, during the period from 2012 to 2016, the early days of China's engagement with the region, Latvia invested significant political capital into the idea of pragmatic cooperation with China, most notably in the transit sector, export, and FDI attraction. It is the only Baltic country to have hosted a '16+1' Summit (the 5th Summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2016[94]).

The first section of the study – 'Chinese activity in Latvia' – attempts to set the background by providing an audit of the under-the-surface avenues of PRC influence in Latvia. It connects concrete actions to China's frames[95] identified in the discourse analysis and described in detail in the following sections, including the 'sovereignty' frame, the 'global leader' frame, the 'responsible major power' frame, the 'COVID-19 success story' frame, and the 'Uighurs are treated well' frame, among others.

The second part of the study – 'What China is saying – Strategic intents and messages in the Latvian information environment' – establishes the persistent frames and the corresponding discursive characteristics, including assertiveness, examines the degree of 'wolf warrior diplomacy', and provides potential explanations linking the local dynamic to the wider strategy of the PRC.

The third part of the case study – 'What Latvia is Hearing – China reporting in the Latvian information environment' – uses across-the-board media analysis to look deeper into the public information space, to assess how China's activities are presented in the local media, and to tackle the question of whether the Latvian information environment has been impacted by Chinese activities.

Ultimately, the research concludes that China's goal in the Latvian information environment is to amplify and spread the positive narrative, framing China as a successful country and a partner that offers pragmatic opportunities for Latvia. However, since strong competing frames and narratives transpire in reaction to China's official messaging in the Latvian media, the amplification of China's official narrative is not enough in itself. Therefore, the approach to achieve the PRC's goal is two-fold – amplification of a cooperation narrative and abstaining from confrontation, including not using the 'wolf warrior' tactic publicly, but pushing back against non-flattering information covertly. The information influence strategy in Latvia feeds into China's wider strategic interests: to keep a number of relatively friendly and non-antagonised countries within the EU, and ultimately, to preclude an EU-US joint position against China.

The authors acknowledge the limitations of assessing China's influence in Latvia based on publicly available sources. In order to make up for the gap, as well as to verify the assumptions that have been made from open sources, informal conversations with stakeholders, including local media reporters, ministry officials, and diplomats have been conducted.

China's activity in Latvia

It has been established in previous research on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to China's influence activities, and China is 'instead relying on varying local political climates, existing geopolitical standing and level of bilateral interactions to shape its strategy and tactics in the region.'[96] China's strategy for expanding its influence can be understood as a 'targeted mix of 'carrots' and 'sticks'', and the approach has been flagged in wider context beyond the CEE: '... one way to achieve 'discourse power' is to promote information that demonstrates the party-state's soft power demonstrated by economic and diplomatic might. On the other hand, the party-state also seeks to remove, suppress, and downplay negative information about the CCP that could jeopardise a benevolent international image.'[97]

United front networks

Although organisations associated with the United front work do exist in Latvia (e.g. Confucius Institute, China Cultural Centre, the Overseas Chinese Association of Latvia), according to open sources no significant malicious United front activity has been identified in Latvia to date, when compared to other Nordic-Baltic countries like Finland or Sweden.[98] Latvian universities do not have chapters of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association – the organisation that links to PRC embassies and serves as the United front instrument for monitoring overseas Chinese. What is present, however, is the China Alumni association of Latvia – an organisation whose members are Latvians with a study experience in China and that is closely linked to the PRC Embassy and the Confucius Institute.[99]

Parliamentarian relationships

The Parliament of Latvia (Saeima) undertakes direct exchanges with the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China. Zhang Dejiang, the Chairman of the Standing Committee of the 12th National People's Congress, had several meetings with the highest Latvian officials both in Riga and Beijing during his time in office from 2013 to 2018[100], largely because his tenure coincided with the most active time in the '16+1' cooperation format exchanges. The Saeima also has a group for promoting cooperation with the Parliament of the People's Republic of China[101]. However, neither the activities nor the size of the group is unusual, as the Saeima has groups for cooperation with 53 countries. Members of the Saeima Group for the Support of Taiwan and a Group for the Support of Tibet, however, have reported cancellation of events due to PRC pressure in 2015.[102] These actions of the Chinese side were widely publicised among the supporters of Tibet in the Latvian society.

Public communication[103]

Preliminary analysis has shown that there are two media outlets in Latvia where PRC's paid and favourable content can be found, i.e., they regularly publish op-eds and interviews with PRC officials in Latvia: ***Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze*** (NRA) and ***Delfi.lv***.

NRA is a daily newspaper turned online-only resource in 2020. It is owned by 'Mediju nams', a limited liability company. Three one-on-one interviews with the Ambassador have appeared during 2020 alone[104]. Original interviews with Ambassadors from other countries are visibly lacking from the outlet, with the only exception of Armenia (3 interviews[105]) and Azerbaijan (1 op-ed[106]), leading to the conclusion that China exercises some influence over the outlet.

Delfi.lv is a mainstream online news platform owned by the Estonian ***Ekspress Group***, with a strong market presence in all three Baltic countries and is a stable leader among online media in Latvia.[107]

It has also been publishing official China Embassy content, including 'Five Important Questions on Latvia-China Cooperation in Trade'[108] by Shen Xiaokai, the Economic and Commercial Counsellor of the Embassy of People's Republic of China. However, in more recent cases the platform has introduced a disclaimer explaining the nature of the publication: 'The Chinese Embassy in Latvia addressed the ***Delfi*** portal, wishing to express its official opinion on the pandemic and the fight against it. We agreed to the publication on the condition that we ask questions, but the Chinese Embassy agreed to answer if we did not shorten the answers. We offer a written interview with Chinese Ambassador to Latvia Liang Jianquan conducted according to these rules.'[109]

The PRC strategy of using interviews with officials in the local media to present China's position is not exclusive to Latvia. As related research has found across Central and Eastern Europe, 'methods applied by the Chinese side include placing ambassadors' op-eds to local media outlets, inviting journalists to China, publishing sponsored articles or even placing whole supplements to local media.'[110] Neither are Ambassador's interviews a new phenomenon: incoming PRC Ambassadors have been seeking out interviewing opportunities for decades, especially around the National Day of October 1.[111] The higher intensity of such appearances, however, is relatively new.

As China began to stress the importance of discursive power[112] Western social media platforms, previously treated by the CCP mostly as an instrument to wreak havoc among China's population, which should therefore be banned, were identified as avenues for communication and persuasion of the West. Therefore, in analysing the China's public communication in Latvia, the positioning of the China story on Western social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook cannot be overlooked. This section assesses the official Chinese diplomatic social media accounts in Latvia from a qualitative, not quantitative perspective. The assessment of authentic and inauthentic behaviours lies beyond the scope of the research question.[113]

The PRC strategy of using interviews with officials in the local media to present China's position is not exclusive to Latvia.

> *The China Cultural Centre primarily offers culture and tourism-related content, as well as re-posts of materials from local Latvian organisations, which cooperate with China, e.g. the Latvian Sports Wushu Federation.*

Three main actors are involved in spreading the official message of China through an online presence in Latvia: the Confucius Institute at the University of Latvia, the China Cultural Centre in Riga, as well as the Embassy of the PRC in Latvia.

The Confucius Institute focuses on offering educational content, e.g. Chinese language proficiency tests and competitions, but also is a platform for the stories of education cooperation and official exchanges, including Chinese journalists visiting 'the Confucius Institute office and the Confucius Institute Book Corner, which is full of Chinese culture'.[114] As outlined in previous NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence research 'the Confucius Institutes initiative was brought forward in 2004 as means to tell China's story to the world, but it also served to demonstrate to the domestic population how China is welcomed and respected globally.'[115] Therefore, it is unsurprising that the page also focuses on positive stories of cross-cultural communication between China and Latvia, and the majority of the content is featured in Latvian and Russian.

The China Cultural Centre primarily offers culture and tourism-related content, as well as re-posts of materials from local Latvian organisations, which cooperate with China, e.g. the Latvian Sports Wushu Federation. Similarly to the Confucius Institute, a lot of content on its social media channels is posted in Latvian and Russian, suggesting that the goal is to reach the local population, however, the public outreach is quite modest, with usually 1 to 3 likes on Facebook posts. The Centre is trying to avoid politicised content for the most part, still, the choice of some materials, such as the documentary 'The Taste of China – Journey of Xinjiang Cuisine'[116], cannot be seen as separate from the political agenda and strategic communications frame of the 'Uighurs are treated well', which will be discussed in the next sub-chapter. The China Cultural Centre duplicates all of the information on its Twitter account as well, however, this account has few followers and negligible interactions on its tweets,[117] demonstrating that the amplification of the message of the Culture Centre to reach the general public is secondary. Interviews corroborate this finding, with Latvian officials admitting the Centre is elite-oriented.

The Embassy of the PRC in Latvia has not established an official Twitter account. Ambassador Liang Jianquan is not on Twitter as well, unlike his Lithuanian counterpart Shen Zhifei[118]. Instead, the preferred social media channel for the Embassy is Facebook, the activity on which is enough to spotlight the embassy as the leading PRC's actor in Latvia. The Facebook posting thread of PRC Embassy is quite active, ranging between 2 to 4 posts on workdays, however, original content is scarce.

The posts are amplified by shares of diplomats and representative offices, and contain four distinct post content categories that differ by topic, language and degree of assertiveness:

- *Culture, geography, traditions, language, political system[119], development (including the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic) appeal content* – reposts of Xinhua news agency reports, e.g. on the Lhasa-Nyingchi highway[120], Shahe aqueduct and Chinese New Year celebrations. Wording: soft, positive. Language: English.
- *Official exchanges content* – reposts of Xinhua news agency reports on meetings between PRC head of state and countries considered relevant for the Latvian public (including other members of '16+1'). Wording: neutral to positive. Language: Latvian.
- *Xinhua exposés* (with references to original source) that address issues of Western democracies (e.g. 'Danish intelligence service has given U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) open internet access to spy on heads of state, politicians of neighbouring countries, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel: national broadcaster DR News'[121]). Wording: sharp, negative. Language: English.
- *Polemic statements on China's 'core interests' and points of disagreement* – e.g. on sanctions: 'Several people on the European side are arbitrarily linking issues of various kinds and politicising economic and trade issues.'[122] The content has become more pronounced since 2020/2021, signalling the embassy's move towards a more active political stance. Wording: sharp. Language: Latvian. Most of the posts have been translated from English into Latvian and can be traced back to the original releases, yet some limited original content has also appeared in this category. However, interestingly, the posts have avoided criticism geared specifically towards the position of the Latvian state or officials.

Overall, the messaging is reposted from pre-approved official outlets, and news agency's ***Xinhua*** materials dominate in this regard. Interestingly, the more assertive and opinionated China's official media outlet ***Global Times***, often retweeted by the Twitter account (@MFA_China) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China is practically invisible in the social media activity of the PRC Embassy in Latvia. It again points towards the conclusion that the strategy of the PRC communication in Latvia is to promote positive image of China, stress the positive aspects of cooperation and not cause controversy. It is hard to determine to what degree this approach is steered by Beijing, but the regional differences demonstrate that the Ambassador's personality does impact the tone and direction of the messaging.

Academic relations

A 2019 report by the Baltic Centre for Investigative Journalism (Re: Baltica) remarks an avenue of PRC influence – educational propaganda.[123] Indeed, the activities of the PRC official institutions, including the Embassy, the Economic Affairs Office, and the Confucius Institute at the University of Latvia[124], heavily centre on education cooperation as a part of the people-to-people links. Such actions go in line with the 'Global leader' and 'Responsible major power' frames, discussed in detail in the following sections of this case study, forming part of a global rather than Latvia-centric strategy.

The strategy has also been noted in previous research on PRC soft power in Latvia:

'The most active channels Beijing uses to project its soft power in Latvia are education and the promotion of culture. The Chinese government annually offers Latvian students around ten scholarships in social sciences, languages, politics and international law – some subjects in which Chinese and Western values are different. This seemingly small number of Chinese-subsidised scholarships is, however, considerably larger than those offered by any other state and illustrates China's ambitions to promote its language and values to Latvian society."[125]

Therefore, in the case of education the goal is to cultivate and uphold a sympathetic opinion of China, especially among the educated younger generation, to expose students to Chinese point of view, and to spread the message of China as an opportunity for Latvia. Academic relations may feature the highest level of Chinese influence in comparison to other areas. Discussions of it have entered public discourse and attracted media coverage. This approach extends beyond Latvia. The topic of Chinese academic influence has become the focus of research in other European countries as well.[126]

Economic investments / exposure to Chinese market

During the early periods of the PRC's engagement with Latvia via the '16+1' format from 2012 up to 2017, attracting FDI and gaining access to the Chinese market were the leading motivations for Latvia's cooperation with China. The Chinese side displayed a high level of political involvement and the determination to find an economic success story as well (coinciding with the 'Latvia appreciator' frame, the 'global leader' and the 'lucrative partner' frames discussed in the next chapter). Currently, however, both exports and FDI remain low, with Latvia's 27 million USD in Chinese FDI stock representing the lowest figure among the '16+1' countries.[127] Due to a mix of mutual misperceptions leading to unrealised initial expectations, Latvia's strong transatlantic commitments, as well as growing EU's caution in its approach to China, it would be unjustified to expect significant economic breakthroughs in Latvia-China relations in the near future.[128] As Latvia is not overdependent on China economically, it is unfeasible to treat the economic avenue as a source of effective pressure.

Infrastructure development

The infrastructure channel of influence does not apply to the Latvian case. The framework of the preferential loans China had offered in 2012 was not compatible with EU legislation, nor was there a dire need for them nationally.

As the China-CEE cooperation did not yield immediate results, the Chinese side became aware of the regional differences between the countries it had included into one grouping, and more tailored approaches transpired towards the Balkan region, the Visegrad Four, and the Baltic states. The Riga '16+1' Summit of 2016 can serve as an analytical point of departure in this regard. Starting from 2016, a more nuanced Baltic-oriented offer emerged, not centred on infrastructure loans or industry revitalisation activities anymore, but rather looking to establish cooperation in logistics/ transit, exports, and FDI. Consequently, Latvia has not taken out any infrastructure loans from China.

Espionage

During the last two years, Latvian security services have noted a growing presence of Chinese intelligence activities: "Chinese special services see Latvia as a possible platform for obtaining information about NATO and EU processes, and are trying to spread pro-Beijing messages that justify China's foreign policy and lobby for closer cooperation with China.'[129] The phenomenon falls into the regional dynamic of the Nordic-Baltic countries, all of which report an increase in Chinese intelligence activities, leading to assume Latvia is secondary to China's interests and is being approached as a part of a regional strategy, as in other fields. No refugee espionage cases have been established according to open sources.

Diplomatic measures

The ***Re:Baltica*** report describes covert pressure tactics employed by the PRC officials in Latvia, e.g. calls from the PRC Ambassador already mentioned in the sub-section on parliamentarian relations of this report.[130] The goal of the pressure is to ensure that the Latvian officials do not act against China's 'core interests', e.g. meeting the Tibetan government in exile or pursuing academic cooperation with Taiwan, coinciding with the 'sovereignty' frame. Opinions vary, however, on whether such influence attempts fall within the lines of diplomatically acceptable behaviour. In the neighbouring Lithuania, the Embassy of the PRC has overstepped the thin line by reportedly taking part in organising a counter-protest at a Hong Kong support rally in Vilnius, causing a public outcry as well as a strong Lithuanian counter-reaction. Lithuania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned the Chinese Ambassador and handed a diplomatic note over the PRC Embassy's possible involvement.[131] No such activities have been identified in Latvia. The reasons for that in Latvian case could be that the embassy feels the absence of Latvian civil society involvement in controversial issues surrounding China. Therefore, it refrains from reacting publicly and is careful not to cause a diplomatic incident. Indeed, a 2020 comparative 13-country report 'European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19' suggests that Latvia is the only EU country having a predominantly positive view of China (43%, whereas, e.g., in Sweden it is just 15%[132]), with more respondents reporting their views on China as improving than worsening.[133] This argument feeds back into the general conclusion that China is careful not to over-antagonise Latvia at this stage, because comparatively it is one of the least opposing partners within the Nordic – Baltic region.

Concrete diplomatic actions are in line with the 'COVID-19 success story' frame as well, as China through official and institutional channels has invested in establishing links between Latvian and Chinese medical institutions to exchange experience of the fight against COVID-19[134], as well as to pursue mask and vaccine diplomacy. Again, such actions are not uniquely geared towards Latvia, but is a part of China's strategy in CEE.[135] This avenue of influence has clearly raised concerns on the Latvian side, with several Latvian ministries looking into state institutions' connections with Chinese partners.

Overall, the goal of Chinese influence in Latvia feeds into the broader objective – to contribute to a positive image of China. PRC's activity in Latvia is mostly current and future elite-targeted, including paid trips and network-building for current elites, and provision of study opportunities for future elites. Although pressure tactics have been flagged and reported on, the question remains whether those activities in Latvia, unpleasant as they may be, fall within the scope of acceptable diplomatic pressure instruments, or whether the Chinese side has been overstepping, as in the Lithuanian case.

What China is saying: China's official frames, positions and strategic intents in the Latvian information environment

China's strategic interests in Latvia cannot be seen as separate from China's strategic interests in Central and Eastern Europe in general. China's interest in Latvia was first noticed in 2012, when Wen Jiabao, the then-Premier of the PRC, announced 'China's Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries' and included the Baltic countries in the list. Although first reluctant to be branded 'Eastern European'[136] – a label that had emphasised the Baltic states' Soviet past – Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia decided to engage, driven by pragmatic hopes of economic opportunities. China's interests, on the other hand, were hard to establish clearly, but it was evident that they extended beyond economic considerations. The presumptions included: CEE as a test area for China in the EU, or the relatively soft Western underbelly with easy access that could help China get a foot in the door.[137] More ambitious explanations included a political 'divide and conquer' strategy aimed at dividing Europe, as well as China securing 'the critical geopolitical space between Germany and Russia, which in case of renewed Russian strength and inability of the EU (and NATO) to respond may become the trigger of Russian rise'[138].

As the US-PRC relationship started to deteriorate in 2017, China became more interested in the relationship with Europe in general, and CEE in particular, including Latvia, advocating for a European foreign policy that is independent from the US[139].

Regardless of this effort, the secondary role of the Baltic countries in China's strategy was manifested throughout the interactions – very little transpired from the initial ambition[140]. Still, tangible results or not, a change had occurred: China's presence in the region in general and in Latvia specifically, had increased, especially in terms of the major soft-power dissemination avenue – people-to-people exchanges. Medium-term agenda aims pertaining to 'Cultural, Educational, Youth, Sport and Tourism Cooperation'[141], such as concerts, exhibitions, educational exchanges, including via CSC (China Scholarship Council) scholarships, academic events, educational policy dialogues, sports gatherings could well be argued to be the most fruitful part of Latvian cooperation with China, and a successful soft-power strategy.

The following subsections will seek to uncover China's influence objectives by identifying dominant official frames. This will be done by examining China's messaging through interviews with the Ambassador, op-eds of the Head of the Economic and Commercial Representative Office, and active official social media accounts. Previous research confirms that 'the most active institution carrying out China's soft-power policy in Latvia is the Embassy of the People's Republic of China and its closely linked lower-level subordinate institutions,

such as the Economic and Commercial Office, which reports on commercial matters'[142]. Additionally, the degree of 'wolf warrior diplomacy' is examined in the official communication of the PRC diplomatic corps in Latvia, and explanations of the current lack thereof are given.

China-promoted content: official frames in the Latvian information environment

In order to understand how Chinese official frames[143] are reflected in the Latvian media space, it was important to first identify the content that is promoted via PRC's official communication channels in Latvia. The following reoccurring official China's frames were identified:

- **Lucrative partner**: China as the provider of economic benefits for Latvia with a potential for growth. Wording: positive. Jeopardising the state-to-state relationship and politicising economic and trade issues runs counter to Latvian national interests. Wording: neutral/ negative.
- **Global leader**: China as a high achiever in technology, culture, economy, development, political system. Wording: positive.
- **Culture and history wonderland**: China is an ancient civilisation, its geographical, historical, cultural wonders harmoniously coexist with development and modernity. Wording: positive.
- **Latvia's appreciator**: Praise of Latvia (export innovation, fight against COVID-19, bilateral relations, BRI). Wording: positive.
- **COVID-19 success story**: China's success in combating COVID-19 as proof of internal resilience. Wording: positive.
- **Multilateral Europe**: China as a supporter of European autonomy and advocate against US reliance. Wording: neutral/negative.
- **Sovereignty**: Reiteration of China's position on 'core interests' (Hong Kong, Taiwan). Wording: neutral/ moderately assertive.
- **Uighurs are treated well:** Xinjiang is a harmonious, beautiful and peaceful region. Wording: positive.

The frames identified in the official sources lead to conclude that the messaging of the PRC diplomatic corps in Latvia is focusing on positive, non-abrasive agenda and does not demonstrate explicit application of sharp ***discursive power***. Cooperation is praised, whereas criticism is moderate and untargeted. The strategic interest approach is to present China as a friendly state to the Latvian population, to reinforce the belief in economic benefits that Latvia's cooperation with China can yield, and to seek sympathy regarding China's 'core interests'.

However, the Latvian State Security Service has flagged 'efforts to forbid publications which criticise China's political course and the efforts to achieve the removal from media content of materials which are unflattering to China's political course'.[144] Author's anonymous interviews with local experts have confirmed attempts to influence the media content, but have denied strong-arming or threats – a behaviour that has been reported in Sweden[145]. This suggests a two-track strategy of Chinese influence dissemination – public amplification of the cooperation narrative and abstaining from confrontation with simultaneous covert push-back against non-flattering information.

No wolves in sight – Chinese tactics towards Latvia

The previous sections demonstrate a noticeable and analysis-worthy trait of the official diplomatic PRC communication towards Latvia – the lack of the so-called 'wolf warrior diplomacy' approach. This approach of the official Chinese diplomatic communication, characterised by the 'transition…from conservative, passive, and low-key to assertive, proactive, and high-profile [..] to defend China's national interests, often in confrontational ways'[146] can be first traced to 2012-2013, when Chinese diplomats began to seek ***discursive power*** during the early stages of Xi Jinping's rule: 'In the PRC itself, it was increasingly stated that the West should not have a monopoly on discourse.'[147] It is often believed that 'wolf warrior diplomacy' is exclusively targeted at Western democracies, but in fact, it has been deployed on a much wider scale, even against PRC partner countries such as Russia and Kazakhstan.[148] The attitude peaked in late 2010s, triggered by the US-China trade war, and has since manifested in the Nordic-Baltic region as well, most notoriously in Sweden[149], but also in Latvia's Baltic neighbour, Lithuania[150].

In the Latvian case, however, no spikes in confrontation have emerged. The activity of Chinese official channels in the Latvian information space has been quite low. This trait goes beyond simply official communication through social media. Although the communication of the PRC diplomatic corps in Latvia has become more active and outspoken on issues pertaining to China's core interests, the messaging does not contain elements of confronting or blaming Latvia.

The 'Annual Report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the accomplishments and further work with respect to national foreign policy and the European Union 2020' provided an unprecedently critical assessment of China, saying that

'China is positioning itself internationally as a proponent of multilateralism, a supporter of the international system and a provider of the international assistance, while advocating greater solidarity and cooperation in inter-state relations. However, at the same time, China is attempting to modify and alter

international structures and norms, tailoring them to its own values and world outlook. China invokes arguments concerning sovereignty and state security to limit the chances of international human rights mechanisms for investigating and preventing potential human rights violations. China promotes solutions in the field of internet governance that would give states greater control over the activity of internet users and the content they can access online."[151]

And yet, no public backlash or heated reaction to the Annual Report followed from the Chinese side. Instead, the Embassy of the PRC published an official commentary which can only be characterised as surprisingly mild: while reiterating China's official position on human rights, disinformation, information technology and arms control, the Commentary avoided placing the blame on Latvia and continued to stress the positive message of cooperation: 'China attaches great importance to the development of relations with Latvia and is ready to deepen pragmatic cooperation between the two countries in all areas, as well as to promote common development, on the basis of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit and in accordance with the principles of enhanced consultation, joint investment and shared benefits.'[152] The reaction to the China-critical 2020 Latvian State Security Report was more pronounced, but still within the confines of diplomatic response.

How has Latvia avoided being targeted by 'wolf warriors' so far? Let us examine the political, strategic, and individual explanations.

On the political side, a comparative lack of triggering topics conditioned by Latvian official pragmatism vis-à-vis China could account for a moderate attitude. Namely, even if Latvia shares the common EU value-based approach, it is far from the most problematic counterpart in Beijing's eyes, therefore, it is not worth to put a strain on the relationship.

Strategically, one can argue that Latvia does not hold high importance or represent a priority for China, which is why it has not been the posting for high-profile and high-visibility diplomats. Xi Jinping's 'Thought on Diplomacy' focuses on 'thinking in big-picture terms'[153] and speaks of China's 'major country diplomacy', which posits that China must not shy to divide countries according to size and strength. Moreover, China's hopes for a boost in cooperation have subsided in comparison with the launch of the '16+1' framework in 2012-2013. Many publications have outlined the bitterness over unmet European expectations that followed the initial phase[154]. Yet a similar disillusionment transpired on the PRC side as well, when the initial Chinese plan to 'establish a 10 billion USD special credit line with a focus on cooperation projects in such areas as infrastructure, high and new technologies, and green economy'[155] proved to be impossible to implement.

As expectations diminished, so did the Latvia's position among the priorities' profile.

In the individual level, the low visibility of China's representatives in the Latvian public domain could be explained by the lack of assertive public personas among PRC diplomats in Latvia. The individual choice behind adherence to the 'wolf warrior' approach has been argued before: '[..] just as Chinese society has become more diverse, Chinese diplomats are not monolithic. There is no consensus within the Chinese foreign policy establishment on whether confrontational diplomacy is desirable, and not all Chinese diplomats are wolf warriors.'[156] It is not unfeasible that there simply are no proponents of the 'wolf warrior' school among the diplomats currently employed at the Embassy in Riga.

All three explanations are effectively mutually enhancing – unlike Sweden, Latvia is not a priority for the PRC's diplomatic efforts, nor is it, unlike Lithuania, a major challenger of China's role in Europe. Therefore, there is no reason to dispatch diplomats of high visibility and assertiveness, as they are needed elsewhere in countries where 'telling the China story' is increasingly contested.

What Latvia is hearing – reporting on China in the Latvian information environment

In this section, an examination of the most impactful Latvian media is conducted to determine if the previously established official PRC frames have acquired traction in local discourses, which could be a potential sign of Chinese influence.

The discourse analysis of nine media outlets was carried out to determine whether China's promoted frames are mirrored in the Latvian media landscape. In addition to Latvian and Russian language media outlets with the highest readership (Latvian language: ***Delfi.lv***, ***Tvnet.lv, Lsm.lv***; Russian language: ***Rus.delfi.lv, Rus.tvnet.lv, sputniknews.ru, press.lv***), the business news portal ***db.lv*** and the news portal ***nra.lv*** (mentioned in the previous sections as the media outlet that comparatively regularly publishes interviews with Chinese officials) were included.

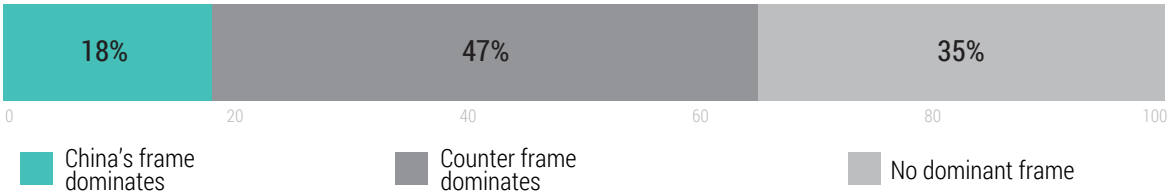
Based on the issues and frames promoted by official Chinese sources, four topics were chosen and analysed in depth:

- Combating COVID-19,
- China's business and economics,
- China-EU relations,
- China's activities in East Asia.

In total, the analysis generated a set of 174 articles – 127 of them in Latvian and 47 in Russian – published over a period of four months, from 1 January to 31 April, 2021.

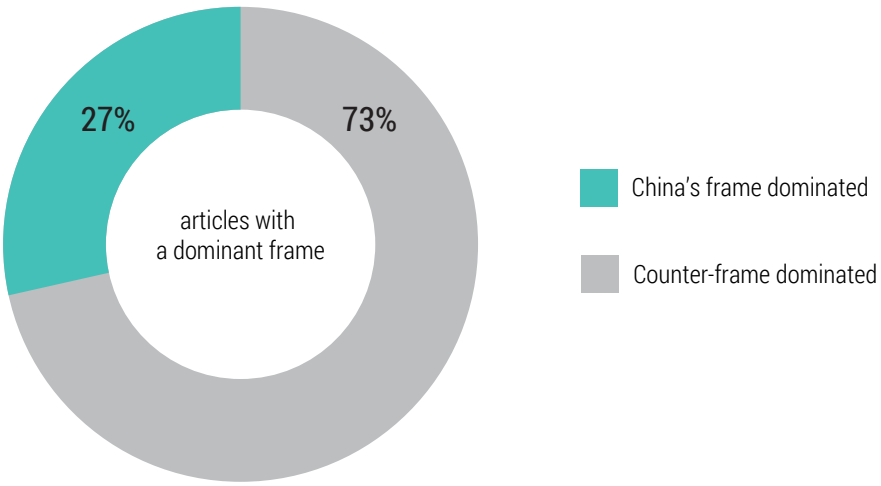
Each article was analysed in search of China's frames and/or counter-frames. China's frames, in this case, are frames deployed by Chinese official actors and information sources. We define counter-frames as the competing frames deployed by other actors, including Latvian politicians, experts or journalists, interpreting the same events and topics from an alternative, often opposing point of view.

Figure 1: Dominant frames identified from all articles



As news stories tend to be balanced, representing opinions of all involved sides, media and editorial guidelines often require that reporters cover opinions 'from across the political aisle in order to observe 'objectivity"[157]. The case study confirmed that '[..] the presence of a frame does not eliminate all inconsistent information, texts inevitably contain some incongruent data'[158], and news stories often contain more than one frame. So, all the frames represented in every article were identified. However, even though an article contains reflections from more than one frame, journalists and editorials intentionally or unintentionally often give preference to one or another interpretation or framing of the issue. The reasoning behind such editorial choices is widely discussed in the academic publications on news framing. In cases where possible, the dominant news frame was determined. To identify a news frame as dominant, it had to overshadow the competing perspective and was typically presented in a headline and/or the first few paragraphs, with none or little attention given to the competing perspective. At the same time, the space allocated to competing frames had to be significantly smaller (if present at all) and located after the dominant frame. When in doubt, an article was marked as lacking a dominant frame.

Figure 2: Dominant frames identified from articles with a dominant frame



From the 174 articles analysed, in 114 cases it was possible to determine a dominant frame. 27% of them were dominated by China's official frame described in the previous chapters. 73% were framed alternatively, namely, were dominated by counter-frames.

This proportion differs between Latvian and Russian language media. While Latvian and Russian language media contain a similar proportion of China's frames (LV-18%, RU-19%), the representation of counter-frames is significantly higher in Latvian language media (LV-53%, RU-32%). It leads to the conclusion that Russian language media take the counter-China's side less often. Even if China's frames are not reproduced exclusively, they are more present than they are in Latvian language media.

Table 1: Dominant frames identified

	Dominated by China's frames	Dominated by counter-frames	No dominant frame	Total
Latvian language media	23 (18%)	67 (53%)	37 (29%)	127
Russian language media	9 (19%)	15 (32%)	23 (49%)	47
Total	31 (18%)	82 (47%)	60 (35%)	174

Table 2: China's and counter-frames mentioning frequency*

China's frames	Frequency	Counter-frames	Frequency
Global leader	30	Questioning China's might	12
Covid-19 success story	12	Vaccine diplomacy	10
Sovereignty	12	Suppressor of democracy	37
Uighurs are treated well	4	Human rights violator	17
Lucrative partner	8	China as a security threat	12
Responsible major power	7	Unreliable regime	7
		Politics of pressure	8
		Attacks on the free market	7

* Frames identified at least three times

China's frames identified

Qualitative content analysis of the selected articles revealed a presence of the Chinese position and frames deployed by Chines official actors and information sources. Not only were such frames spotted, but 18% of the articles were also identified as dominated by frames mirroring China's official position.

It is important to emphasise that China's frames were rarely produced directly by local Chinese officials. They were primarily identified in the news articles written by international news agencies and translated by the local news agency *LETA* or editorial offices. These articles often contain the position of China-related information sources, such as representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBS), the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, the Chinese state-controlled broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), the official state-run press agency of the Xinhua News Agency, and others.

The following China's frames were identified in Latvian media:

Global leader. This represents the most prominent and effective frame used by official Chinese actors that has resonated in Latvian media. It frames China as an economically prosperous country that was the only major economy to register growth in 2020. Being technologically advanced, China is the world leader in developing innovative solutions and tackling such global challenges as the COVID-19 pandemic. The 'Global leader' frame has been identified in more than 15% of all the articles analysed during the study, with half of the articles covering China's economics and business. The 'Global leader' frame dominated nearly every 10th of 174 articles.

COVID-19 success story. The frame builds on the story of China as a global leader. China's actors have put much effort in presenting China's fight with COVID-19 as a series of victories – limiting the virus from spreading, developing four different vaccines, and offering them to less developed countries, becoming the first country to introduce a vaccination passport for travellers, etc. Even though the 'COVID-19 success story' frame has faced significant resistance in the form of several counter-frames, its success rate in Latvian media is relatively high. Research showed that on 12 occasions this frame had been deployed in the analysed news stories, and 7 out of 12 times it dominated the story.

Responsible major power. Another frame that China has deployed to portrait itself in the global arena. The frame emphasises that China is controlling and preventing the spread of COVID-19 in an 'open, transparent and responsible' manner. In line with the 'Responsible major power' frame, China describes its role in investigating COVID-19 origins, claiming it acted in a timely and transparent manner in terms of providing information to the international community about the coronavirus.

'It was important for the Chinese side to make sure that lies did not distort the objective narrative and collective memory of the fight against the pandemic.'[159] As a responsible actor, China is taking care not only of its own citizens but others as well. For instance, while Western countries have demonstrated vaccine nationalism, China provides other countries with its vaccines. Altogether in the selected articles, the frame of China as a 'responsible major power' was detected seven times, and only one article was dominated by it.

Sovereignty. What happens in Hong Kong or Xinjiang is a matter of China's domestic policy and 'impudent attempts to interfere in its internal politics harm China's sovereignty.[160] The 'Sovereignty' frame has been repeatedly instrumentalised, presenting China's viewpoint on issues related to EU-China relations, Chinese business, and economic development, including sanctions imposed by the EU and others. Even though this frame was identified 12 times, it was not able to win over others and was the dominant frame in only two of the analysed articles.

Uighurs are treated well. Any criticism is fake news, and the sanctions imposed against China demonstrate Western companies' hypocrisy. This set of poorly resonating frames in Latvian media demonstrates China's interpretation of the Western sanctions against China over human rights abuses. According to this frame, Xinjiang and its vocational training centres are aimed at reducing the appeal of Islamic extremism[161], and Uighur farmers are happy to work in the cotton fields.[162] The EU sanctions are 'based on nothing but lies and disinformation,' and Western companies that are willing to earn by operating in China while spreading rumours about the living conditions of the Uighurs are hypocrites.[163] The only media outlet that made these frames dominant in two separate articles was Russia's state-owned news agency Sputnik. Meanwhile, three other Russian language publications mentioned this as one of several other explanations of what is happening in Xinjiang. By contrast, the four news articles that note this Chinese rhetoric in the Latvian language media granted a far greater spotlight to competing interpretations.

Lucrative partner. Cooperation with China is a pragmatic and beneficial choice, whilst turning one's back to China will make the country the 'biggest loser.'[164] 'History will show that anyone who tries to strangle and oppress China will eventually hurt himself.'[165] Counter-frames have effectively challenged the rather aggressive 'lucrative partner' frame, and from all the eight articles that include references to the frame, only one was dominated by it.

Counter-frames[166] identified

In most cases, the news articles devoted to the selected topics were not in line with China's interpretation. The frames promoted by China's official actors and information sources were not consolidated as the dominant ones. As described in the previous section, China has deployed several relatively

effective frames, especially the 'Global leader' and the 'COVID-19 success story' frames, which have left their mark in the Latvian media landscape. However, only one topic – China's business and economics – was dominated by China's frame from all of the topics reviewed. In all the other three topics – COVID-19, China's domestic policy, and China's EU relations – alternative interpretations dominated the articles.

During the qualitative content analysis, the competing frames deployed by other actors like Latvian politicians, experts or journalists interpreting the same events and topics from alternative, often opposing point of view were identified. Cases where alternative positions were spotted at least three times were designated as counter-frames.

The following counter-frames were identified:

Suppressor of democracy. The frame that interprets China's activities and statements through the lens of an authoritarian regime. China acts undemocratically – restricts fundamental freedoms, censors information, and represses opponents. The 'Suppressor of democracy' frame has been identified in more than 20% of the analysed articles and it has been used to counter China's frames on all four key topics. This counter-frame has been deployed especially often with regard to opposing China's 'COVID-19 success story' frame. The counter-frame refers to how drastically China has treated its citizens to control the spread of the virus and the lack of transparency regarding the origins of COVID-19. In the context of the 'Suppressor of democracy' counter-frame, China's 'Responsible major power' frame has proved to be ineffective.

Human rights violator and **Attacks on the free market.** These two more specific frames further aggravate the perception of the 'Suppressor of democracy' frame. The 'Human rights violator' frame, which specifically focuses on human rights abuses and describes the attacks on particular individuals or groups of people, has also been deployed in all four topics analysed in this study. More often than not (9 out of 17 times), the 'Human rights violator' frame dominated the article and diminished the value of China's frames even if they were included. The 'Attacks on the free market' frame (mentioned seven times), on the other hand, focus on the business environment, where companies and business owners may be coerced by the authorities. For example, 'Beijing is not ashamed to punish or even imprison businessmen who criticise the government.'[167]

Unreliable regime. The media analysis revealed that China is also being framed as an unreliable actor (mentioned seven times), and its actions and information provided should be considered with caution. The agreement by Beijing to maintain broad autonomy for Hong Kong for 50 years has been 'violated'.[168] The whistle-blowers that reported the spread of a deadly lung infection on social networks in China back in December were 'silenced' by the authorities.[169]

The efficiency rates of China's vaccines are switching from more than 90% to only 50.4%, 'raising concerns about the transparency' of the Chinese producers' process.[170] Moreover, repeated delays in publishing the report on the origins of COVID-19, have raised questions in the West regarding China's potential motives in hampering or tampering with the investigation.[171]

China as a security threat. Another effective counter-frame that undermines China's communication efforts describes China as a threat to Latvia, its neighbouring countries, and the EU. The most significant risks are related to the integration of Chinese technologies in both the public and private sectors. The Chinese regulatory framework creates preconditions for the Chinese special services to obtain access to information using Chinese-related technologies and is 'not in [Latvian] national security interests.'[172] In 10 out of the 12 times when an article contained this frame, it was also the dominant one.

Vaccine diplomacy, politics of pressure and buying influence. These three specific frames refer to China's approach to amplifying its reach in pursuit of its diplomatic and strategic goals. While China is framing vaccine sharing as an activity of a 'Responsible major power,' the 'Vaccine diplomacy' counter-frame in the Latvian media proves to be more effective. Ten out of ten times, when identified in the news articles, it was also the dominant frame. The 'Buying influence' frame (that was identified only three times) builds on the idea of 'Vaccine diplomacy.' It explains China's so-called 'pragmatic' partnership and investment pledges as a manoeuvre aimed at strengthening China's position in the region, possibly at the expense of the recipient. Finally, the 'Politics of pressure' frame is another alternative conception of the 'lucrative partner' proposed by China. The 'Politics of pressure' frame (mentioned 8 times, dominated – 7) could be identified by wording such as China's 'commercial pressure to silence foreign governments,'[173] intimidation intended to force Western companies or governments to refrain from any criticism, or 'it is better to intimidate than to please.'[174]

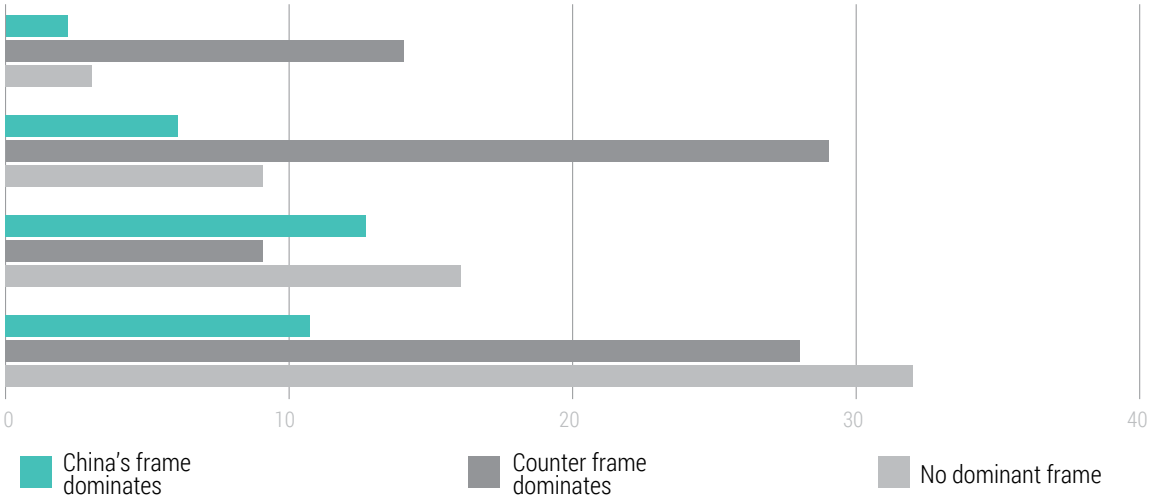
Questioning China's might. Another frame that has been deployed consistently across the Latvian media landscape questions China's 'Global leadership.' It focuses on aspects that portray China in less appealing ways. For example, China's GDP grew by 2.3%, and even though China was the only major economy to register growth in 2020, the media that choose to 'question China's might' interpret it as the weakest growth since 1976.[175] Stories like the one about the western companies that are considering shifting production from China to other countries[176] or six '16+1' format countries disobeying China's demand to send heads of government to the summit[177] are at the centre of this frame. Similarly, the confession of the head of China's Centre for Disease Control that China's COVID-19 vaccines are not very effective made news in most of the analysed media. This frame was identified in 11 out of 12 times, and it was also the dominant frame in the publication.

Europe's pushback. This frame – identified only three times – emphasises the changes in the EU position towards China. The economic relations with China have thus far been unbalanced - the EU market is more open to Chinese companies and investment than the Chinese market to EU companies. Therefore, Europe is correcting this imbalance.[178] Additionally, for the first time since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, Europe aims to punish China for human rights abuses.[179]

What impacts the framing of China in Latvian media?

China's frames are the most effective when discussing its economic success. The messaging about China as a global leader is present in most media articles devoted to business and economics in China, and this frame dominates one-third of them. 42% of these news articles offered a balanced treatment of different positions. 24% of the articles included at the outset of the story the counter-frames describing China as a suppressor of democracy, a human rights violator, and a country that violates free market principles.

Figure 3: News topics and dominant frames



Another subject that has at least partly allowed China to build its media presence in a positive light has been COVID-19. Among the analysed articles, the pandemic was the topic that mentioned China most. China's approach and experience in combating COVID-19 altogether generated 71 articles in the period and media scope studied. 15% of them framed China as a country that has successfully fought the COVID-19 pandemic. Articles about China successfully solving the challenges of COVID-19 were equally published in Russian and Latvian language media, including ***TVNET*** and ***LSM*** - media that are relatively critical towards China.

The coverage of China's EU policies and political activities in East Asia is much more polarised, with media outlets taking distinct sides. For example, the media outlet ***NRA*** (that quarterly publishes interviews with the Chinese ambassador) and Russia's state-owned news agency Sputnik, exclusively frame these issues in line with China's narrative. On the other hand, during the analysed period, none of the Latvian news portals ***Delfi, TVNET***, and ***LSM*** have ever followed China's narrative in relation to China's politics towards Taiwan, Hong Kong, and EU- related issues. From the 42 articles ***Delfi, TVNET***, and ***LSM*** devoted to these topics, 37 or 88% were clearly opposing China's position and dominated by counter-frames. A few were marked as neutral.

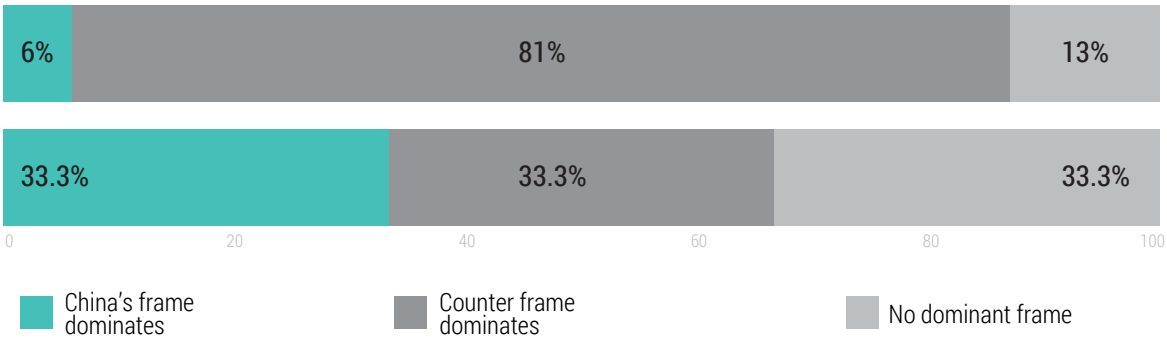
Table 3: News topics and dominant frames

	Covid-19 combating		China's business / economics		China-EU relations		China's activities in East Asia		Various topics		Articles in total	
Dominant frame: China's	11	15%	13	34%	6	14%	2	11%	0	0%	32	18%
Dominant frame: counter frame	28	39%	9	24%	29	66%	14	74%	2	100%	82	47%
No dominant frame	32	45%	16	42%	9	20%	3	16%	0	0%	60	34%
Articles total	71		38		44		19		2		174	

Noticeably different is the Russian language media outlets' attitude towards China's politics in East Asia. First, media analysis indicates that Russian language media is less interested in writing about this topic. 13% of all the Latvian language articles were devoted to China's politics in East Asia during the analysed period. During the same timeframe, only 6% of the analysed Russian language materials covered this topic.

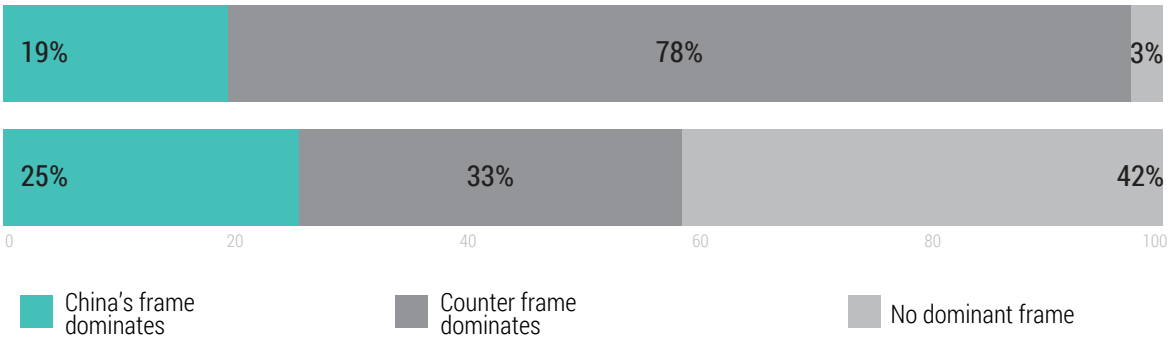
Second, the Russian language media have been more moderate than their Latvian counterparts. 81% of articles that Latvian language media published about the topic were dominated by counter-China frames. In comparison, counter-China frames dominated only 33%, of Russian language media.

Figure 4: The covering of China's political activities in East Asia



Similarly, the articles about China's relations with the EU were also clearly dominated by the counter-frames in Latvian language media, while Russian language media more often included China's frame or described the issue without the positioning of dominated frames.

Figure 5: The covering of China's EU relations



Even the media that have both Latvian and Russian language editorial boards like ***TVNET*** and ***Rus.tvnet***, or ***Delfi*** and ***Rus.delfi*** have demonstrated different approaches to covering these topics in different languages. From the 14 articles ***Delfi*** published about China-EU relations and China's activities in East Asia, 12 (86%) were dominated by counter-frames. In its Russian language counterpart, however, the proportion was 50%. The Latvian language version of ***TVNET*** published 10 articles on the same topics, all dominated by counter-frames. Its Russian language version seemingly avoided coverage of China-EU relations and its activities in the East Asia region earned only one ***Rus.tvnet*** article.

According to the agenda-setting theory, through choosing which topics to include in their agenda the media establish a hierarchy of news prevalence and, thus, might influence the importance placed on issues in the public agenda.[180] The reasons for such divergent perceptions on the importance of the analysed topics cannot be precisely determined and should be investigated separately, as well as the effect it has or may have exerted on the public and political agenda.

Another essential line of inquiry concerns the institutions and persons driving China's frames. The main conclusion – that China's frames are mirrored in Latvia's media landscape – results from the Chinese global strategy and international communication campaigns, not local efforts. Upon examination of the sources of information and authors of the respective news stories, it becomes visible that local Chinese spokespersons are not shaping Latvia's media landscape. China's local actors do not play an active role in setting their agenda in Latvian media and are not visibly affecting news content. Two quarterly interviews in the NRA and several times when China's representatives or experts shared their views marked the only exceptions. All the other articles were written by aggregating international news sources like international news agencies and international media, including the Chinese state-controlled broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV) and the official state-run press agency of the Xinhua News Agency.

> *That China's frames are mirrored in Latvia's media landscape – results from the Chinese global strategy and international communication campaigns, not local efforts.*

Conclusions

China's information influence strategy in Latvia feeds into China's global strategic interests: to keep a number of relatively friendly and non-antagonised countries within the EU; and to preclude a joint EU-US position against China.

In Latvia, the former objective is being pursued by spreading the message that cooperation with China yields great benefits for the nation involved, because China is a global economic leader, it has tackled and won in the struggle against COVID-19, it knows what local assets are and wants to create opportunities for them via the Chinese market. In Latvia, this message is being spread through several mutually enforcing frames, i.e. 'China as a global leader', 'Economic potential', 'COVID-19 success story', 'Latvia's appreciator', and 'Lucrative partner'. The latter message is less visible, however, there are attempts at promoting it through the 'Multilateral Europe' frame. In general, China's efforts in Latvia have focused on amplifying and spreading the positive message of China's achievement in general, as well as of opportunities for Latvian engagement with China.

China's approach to Latvia's information environment is two-fold – amplification of the cooperation narrative, abstinence from public confrontation, and covert push-back against non-flattering content. Perhaps in connection to this, no traits of 'wolf warrior diplomacy' are currently present in Latvia.

China's official messages in Latvia are being spread through traditional information channels and methods, including paid op-eds, as well as social media. However, the local official PRC representatives do not maintain active Twitter accounts to push back on Western narratives – the tactics used in other countries. The Embassy of the PRC in Latvia has stepped up its efforts on social media and on Facebook in particular, however, original content remains very limited and no Latvia-specific narratives have been created. This confirms the previously expressed assumption that Latvia is of secondary importance in China's foreign policy strategy.

Local Chinese spokespersons and officials have not been effective at influencing Latvia's media landscape. Instead, China's frames enter the Latvian media as translations of international news agencies' articles and as the result of China's global strategic and international communication efforts. Nevertheless, an increasing intensity of polemic content in Latvian on the embassy's Facebook page leads to presume that the situation could change in the future.

China's 'Global leader' and 'COVID-19 success story' frames have been relatively effective and have left their mark on the Latvian media landscape, whereas Latvian media reporting on China's business and economics is practically aligned with China's messaging. It is unlikely that these frames have gained traction in the Latvian information environment because of China's success in influencing public opinion, but rather due to home-grown hopes of tapping into China's economic opportunities.

These hopes were the most pronounced and even amounted to national priority in the early 2010s. Therefore, China's frames only succeed in dominating news stories if they tap into the fertile ground of pre-existing conceptions.

Russian language media are less likely to pick up counter-frames to China's official frames. Even if China's frames are not reproduced exclusively, they are more present than they are in Latvian language media. This asymmetry is starkly visible in popular online media outlets that have both Latvian and Russian language editorial boards, like *TVNET* and *Delfi*, as their approaches to covering China's politics in East Asia and its relations with the EU for Latvian and Russian readers differ.

Overall, China is avoiding 'sticks' in its communication efforts in Latvia for the time being, focusing on 'carrots' – the 'lucrative partner' and 'the 'Latvia appreciator' frames – instead. However, China's official frames have been met with counter-frames in the Latvian media space, suggesting that the aspiration to maintain a positive image of the PRC will continue to present a challenge.

4. CHINA'S INFLUENCE IN THE SWEDISH INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Viking Bohman

Introduction

Sweden provides one of the most striking examples of the Chinese government's 'wolf warrior diplomacy'. Between 2018 and 2021, the Chinese Embassy in Stockholm was engaged in an intense campaign of public criticism and threats against media outlets, journalists, human rights activists, scholars, politicians and authorities. The campaign targeted media reporting and policy decisions described as biased against China.

Meanwhile, Sino-Swedish relations deteriorated, Swedish media reporting became more critical, and Swedish public opinion on China plummeted. Points of contention include China's treatment of Gui Minhai, a Swedish citizen imprisoned in China, and more recently, the decision to exclude the Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE from some parts of Swedish 5G telecommunications networks.

The Chinese Embassy's public communications campaign and the extensive negative reactions it has elicited raise questions regarding China's influence in Sweden. Can media criticism and unfavourable public opinion be seen as evidence that China's power in Sweden is in decline, or are there more subtle ways through which the party-state may be impacting the Swedish information environment? Beyond public diplomacy, what other methods are being used to shape Swedish opinions, behaviours and decisions? And what exactly does China's 'wolf warrior diplomacy' look like in Sweden?

> *Sweden provides one of the most striking examples of the Chinese government's 'wolf warrior diplomacy'.*

This study explores these questions in three parts.

First, it provides a general overview of **China's activities that could influence the Swedish information environment**, including United Front work, espionage and strategic investments.

Second, it describes **the communication of China's 'wolf warrior diplomacy' in Sweden.** Based on a reading of Chinese official sources as well as state- and party-owned media, it distinguishes five 'frames' used in this effort. While predominantly focused on confrontation, China's public diplomacy also has a 'softer' side which leaves the door open to cooperation for those willing to refrain from criticising China.

The third section presents an analysis of the Swedish debate on the 'Huawei question' – the recent discussion on whether to allow Huawei to participate in the auctions of frequencies for 5G networks. This analysis suggests that **China's influence in the Swedish information environment is limited**. **However, some views in Swedish media *converge* with China's official communication** around several ideas regarding Sino-Swedish relations. In short, these ideas revolve around an understanding that China is an important global power with whom cooperation is required, and that opposing China would bring costly consequences. **Such ideas could provide fertile ground for future attempts by China to shape Swedish perceptions,** as persuasion attempts are more likely to be successful if both sides share a basic level of common understanding.

This study suggests that it is unlikely that these 'converging views' circulating in Swedish society are the direct result of Chinese influence. However, **ideas and arguments about Sweden's dependence and the costs of opposing China may, if exaggerated, induce unwarranted fears and hesitancy among policymakers.** This, in turn, may encourage pre-emptive alignment behaviours in the form of self-censorship or avoidance when it comes to decisions that could lead to retaliation from China. Future studies could explore the prevalence of such behaviours and the mechanisms underpinning them.

> *It is unlikely that these 'converging views' circulating in Swedish society are the direct result of Chinese influence.*

China's strategic interests in Sweden

China's political priorities in the Nordic countries can be divided into four components: (1) acquire technology and know-how, (2) use the Nordic countries to gain influence and access in fora, such as the EU, (3) promote and defend Chinese 'core interests', especially in relation to political values, such as human rights and (4) cultivate a positive public opinion of China.[181] All of these priorities are applicable in the case of Sweden and can be summarised as follows.

First, access to the Swedish market is of interest to China for both civilian and military purposes. Sweden has significant technology and innovation capabilities and is home to several leading companies that produce dual-use technology, including semiconductors. Green technology is another area of interest for China. At the same time, Sweden's market is relatively small and thus of limited importance to Chinese export ambitions. A study from 2017 noted that Chinese actors in Sweden 'seek products for their market rather than a market for their products'.[182]

Second, Sweden is part of a broader European context of interest to China. Sweden wields significant influence in Europe through its membership in the EU and as a strong partner to the Nordics, which necessarily makes Sweden an important puzzle piece for policymakers in Beijing seeking to promote Chinese interests and influence European policy. Sweden also holds knowledge and influence in the Arctic, a region of great interest to China.

Third, Sweden like most countries represents an arena where China can promote its political 'core values'. The most visible dimension of these efforts features China's attempts to safeguard its territorial integrity and national sovereignty by attempting to silence criticism of its human rights record, foreign policy and policies toward Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

Fourth, positive public perceptions of China may be seen as a prerequisite for long-term success across these dimensions with respect to Sweden.[183] Acquiring know-how, for instance, would be more challenging in the context of negative views of China, as this could diminish support for cooperative business projects or raise scepticism regarding Chinese investments. Similarly, unfavourable public opinion would make it harder to convince people and their elected officials of the merits of China's policies in, for example, Xinjiang or Hong Kong.

China's activities in Sweden

United Front networks

The United Front is a network of groups and actors working to promote the interests of the Chinese Communist Party. It is hard to determine the exact level of the United Front's activity and reach in Sweden. However, a study from 2020 demonstrated that there is an active network in Sweden consisting of hometown associations, local branches of the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) and professional organisations and media outlets that are either officially part of the United Front or maintain close ties with the CCP.[184] These organisations focus on mobilising the Chinese diaspora but also target a wider audience. While the study suggests that there is a significant United Front presence in Sweden, it concludes that such activity does not appear to be as extensive as in countries such as Australia and New Zealand, where broad networks have been uncovered.[185]

There are at least three active organisations connected to the United Front in Sweden. First, the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (CCPPNR) is dedicated to mobilising the Chinese diaspora. It has on several occasions organised and gathered support for CCP policies, including by protesting the Hague Tribunal's ruling against China's claims in the South China Sea and more recently, condemning the protests in Hong Kong.[186]

Second, the Nordic Zhigong Association (NZA) is made up primarily of members of the science and business communities. The Zhigong party is one of China's so-called 'democratic' parties, but in practice is part of the CCP's network. To illustrate the NZA's objective, the 2020 study quotes the organisation's Director-General: 'numerous science and technology talents are members of the [NZA]. They come from universities and research institutes across the Nordic region and are in charge of various scientific research programs. The [NZA] wants to build a bridge for science and technology between the Nordics and China, to introduce the results and research programs to the Fatherland'.[187]

Third, the Belt and Road Institute in Sweden (BRIX) actively seeks to promote Sweden's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. It offers purportedly 'objective, well-researched information free from prejudice and geopolitical agendas that, unfortunately, tainted many reports in Western media'.[188] This organisation is allied with the Chinese Embassy and associated with the LaRouche movement through its cooperation with the Swedish branch of the Schiller Institute.

There are at least three Chinese-language newspapers published in Sweden that reflect China's official positions: Nordic Chinese Times, Nordic Chinese Newspaper, and Green Post.[189] The Nordic Chinese Times cooperates with Xinhua and People's Daily; Nordic Chinese Newspaper is run by a PLA veteran; and the Green Post is run by a former employee of People's Daily.[190]

Relationships with political parties

The Chinese ambassador has on several occasions met or in other ways been in contact with Swedish politicians. While it is not uncommon for foreign diplomatic missions to communicate with political parties, the Embassy has also contacted individual politicians to voice its concerns on specific issues. In May 2020, it sent a letter to the leader of the Christian Democratic Party, criticising her for making a reference to the 'Wuhan virus' in the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament). 'This reinforces the image that China is more interested in its own reputation than to contributing to an effective handling of the spread of the virus', she responded in an interview.[191]

In connection with a 2017 visit to Sweden by Lobsang Sangay, the President of the Tibetan government-in-exile, the Chinese Embassy asked parliamentarians to not attend a meeting organised by the Riksdag's friendship group on Tibet. One politician said that there was a 'threatening undertone' to these approaches from the Embassy. She later told a Swedish newspaper that meeting Sangay became particularly important to her: 'We will listen to everyone. And human rights is a universal question, not an internal Chinese issue'.[192]

In 2019, it was uncovered that a member of the Christian Democratic Party and the city council in the Swedish municipality Nacka had on several occasions received United Front representatives. The politician heads an organisation called 'Sweden China Business Council' and has actively participated in BRIX and in the promotion of the BRI in Sweden. Shortly after the revelations, she was expelled from the Christian Democratic Party.[193] Prior to this event, a Swedish journalist seeking to visit China was called to the Chinese Embassy for an interview, where she was asked extensive questions about the Christian Democrats, including her assessment of why the party was growing so much and whether it could form a government with other conservative and right-wing parties.[194]

As there have been no studies of China's connections with political parties in Sweden, the full extent and impact of such relations remains unknown.

Academic relations

In 2005, Stockholm University became the first university in Europe to open a Confucius Institute – a Chinese government-funded institution dedicated to educational and cultural promotion activities in foreign countries. In the following years, several institutes were set up at other universities. However, at present Sweden no longer hosts any Confucius Institutes, as the Swedish partner universities have terminated the cooperation agreements. The last of Sweden's Confucius Classrooms, a programme focusing on primary and secondary education, closed in June 2020.[195]

Quantifying the volume of co-publications is one way to measure the level of collaboration between universities. A report from 2018 concluded that Swedish co-publications with China had increased substantially since 2012. However, China still made up a smaller portion of Swedish co-publications than Japan, South Korea, Singapore and English-speaking countries, such as the US, Canada and Australia.[196] In 2018, an Australian study analysing co-publications between the People's Liberation Army and western universities ranked Sweden as the sixth most common collaborating country, after the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and Germany, suggesting that China could be instrumentalising such collaboration and academic exchanges to acquire military expertise and technology.[197]

Several Swedish universities cooperate with Chinese institutions. To name a few examples, KTH cooperates with Fudan and Tsinghua University, Linköping University shares a research centre for sustainable city planning with Guangzhou University, and Uppsala University cooperates with Southeast University Nanjing on medical research and development. Following a donation by a Hong Kong-based businessman in 2015, Karolinska Institutet, a leading research institution in the field of medicine, established the Ming Wai Lau Centre to conduct 'cutting edge research in reparative medicine and related subjects' and promote 'synergies between academia and innovation in Sweden and Hong Kong as well as China'.[198] Sweden and China have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in research and education, which includes scholarship programmes to promote student and teacher exchanges.[199]

Espionage

According to the Swedish Security Police (Säpo), China's and Russia's espionage against Sweden has intensified in recent years. One of the agency's senior analysts reported that 'especially China's way of working with these questions against Sweden have changed in a decisive way'. Säpo describes the extensive nature of this espionage, covering everything from spying on refugees and dissidents, to industrial espionage in technology, to attempts to influence decision-makers. Industrial espionage is reported to be particularly focused on areas where Sweden is considered to be a front runner, such as telecommunications, the automotive industry, and green technology.[200]

There are several cases of Chinese espionage in Sweden that have prompted legal action. According to a Swedish court verdict published in March 2010, a representative from the Chinese Embassy in Stockholm had been involved in spying on Uighur exiles.[201] In 2018, a man was convicted of intelligence gathering after having spied on Tibetan refugees.[202]

Intelligence gathering aimed at Swedish universities has intensified according to Säpo. Again, China is listed as one of the main perpetrators alongside Russia and Iran.

The agency notes that Chinese citizens at Swedish universities have been employed to gather technology and knowledge aimed at strengthening China's military capability. This, in turn, has prompted counter-efforts to raise the level of knowledge and awareness of such activities at Swedish institutions.[203]

Overall, statements from Säpo suggest that there are significant levels of Chinese espionage activity in Sweden. Such activity may primarily serve as an intelligence gathering tool, whilst also encouraging self-censorship among targeted individuals, including Chinese dissidents and ethnic minority groups, such as Tibetans and Uighurs.

Investment and market exposure

Sweden is an important destination for Chinese investment in Europe. Between 2000 and 2019, Chinese direct investment in Sweden amounted to 7.3 billion EUR, which made up 4.5% of Chinese total investment in the EU28 during that period. This amount accounts for 1.54% of Sweden's GDP in 2019, a large number compared to the EU average. In only six other EU countries did Chinese investment between 2000 and 2019 make up a bigger portion of their 2019 GDP: Malta (6.06 %), Finland (5 %), Luxemburg (3.78 %), Portugal (2.83 %), United Kingdom (1.99 %) and Hungary (1.67 %).[204]

Investment in Sweden has been mainly driven by large deals. In 2018, Zhejiang Geely acquired a stake in Volvo AB for 3500 million USD while GSR Capital invested 500 million USD in National Electric Vehicle Sweden AB and a battery plant. In 2017, Shanying International bought Nordic Paper Holding AB for 353 million USD while Wanda acquired Nordic Cinema Group for 930 million USD. Another well-known investment is Zhejiang Geely's acquisition of Volvo Cars in 2010.

Between 2000 and 2019, most of the investment was made in the automotive industry (74%). Other important sectors were entertainment (8%), basic materials (6%), and transport and infrastructure (6%). Out of all Chinese investments, 27% came from state-owned companies while 74% came from private companies.[205] In recent years, China has also become an increasingly important trading partner for Sweden. While China accounted for around 2% of Sweden's external trade in good in 2000, by 2019 this number had grown to nearly 5%.[206]

The Chinese Embassy in Stockholm has used these investments to showcase the benefits of economic cooperation. In a 2018 interview, the ambassador noted that China had created 20 000 jobs in Sweden and that the Geely investment in Volvo had opened the Chinese market to the company.[207] The Embassy also promotes the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – China's grand vision for infrastructure development.

The ambassador has noted how new sea routes opened through the Arctic grant Sweden and China 'ever brighter prospects' for cooperation and conveyed that China was capable of constructing and providing technology and financing when it comes to high-speed trains and railway.[208]

There are several examples of Chinese investments that have raised concern in Sweden. In 2017, it was uncovered that Chinese companies had plans to invest in a deep-sea port on the Swedish west coast, and that the front figure of one of the investing companies had ties to the People's Liberation Army. The project was halted in 2018 when the investors withdrew for unknown reasons. Another example was when, in 2018, it was revealed that three Swedish advanced semiconductor manufacturers had been sold to Chinese buyers despite the dual-use nature of their products.[209]

Overall, while Chinese investment has typically been met with enthusiasm from Swedish counterparts, the public debate has become significantly more critical in recent years. According to a study from 2020: 'throughout 2018 and 2019, a number of actors in government authorities, political parties, the media and civil society have described China's investments as a potential security threat.'[210] The debate has featured concerns regarding how China's authoritarian state can influence companies and investors and gain control over critical infrastructure and sensitive technology.

Public communication and diplomatic measures

Between 2018 and 2021, the Chinese Embassy in Stockholm conducted an unprecedented public communications campaign against its critics at all levels of Swedish society. Through a stream of sharply worded written statements, letters, op-eds and interviews with the ambassador, the embassy has proactively defended China's policy positions on human rights, its treatment of Swedish citizen Gui Minhai, Chinese territorial integrity (e.g. Taiwan and Hong Kong) and its foreign policy initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

The campaign was spearheaded by the ambassador himself who during his posting between 2017 and 2021 managed to position the embassy as a front runner in what some have referred to as the Chinese government's 'wolf warrior diplomacy', a particularly confrontational style of communication espoused by Chinese diplomats in recent years. This propaganda push, aimed at what the embassy sees as biased reporting and misguided policy decisions, has targeted media outlets, journalists, human rights activists, scholars, politicians and authorities. These targeted actors have been accused of being uninformed, misled or of serving an anti-China agenda. The embassy's criticism has occasionally featured implicit threats.[211]

This proactive approach is reflected in the embassy's attempts to shift attention to Sweden's perceived shortcomings and

wrongdoings. In 2018, the embassy reacted forcefully to what local authorities deemed an orderly police intervention by claiming that Swedish police had 'brutally abused' a Chinese tourist family. In connection to the incident, both the embassy and the foreign ministry issued travel alerts to Chinese citizens about the dangers of visiting Sweden.[212]

Chinese state-owned media have also played a role in this campaign. In March 2020, Global Times published an article on Sweden's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, demanding that '[t]he international community, especially the European Union, should severely condemn Sweden's surrender to the virus'. Sweden's defence minister later published an op-ed describing the article as part of an 'information war'.[213]

The embassy has sent several letters and emails directly to individuals and media outlets to protest the content of their opinions and reporting.[214] The ambassador has also invited reporters to meetings where concerns about their reporting have been raised. In April 2021, for example, a journalist received an email from the embassy which was quoted as saying, 'We urge you to immediately stop your wrongdoing, otherwise you will eventually face the consequences of your actions'.[215] Sweden's foreign minister Ann Linde called the embassy's behaviour 'unacceptable'.[216]

Another threat from the Chinese Embassy came in late 2019, after the international writers' association PEN stated its intention to award Gui Minhai with the Tucholsky Award and Swedish culture minister Amanda Lind announced her plans to attend the ceremony. In response, ambassador Gui Congyou said, 'We will surely take countermeasures'.[217] After the ceremony, where Minister Lind was a speaker, the screenings of Swedish films were cancelled in China as well as the China-Sweden Joint Committee on Economic, Industrial and Technical Cooperation.[218]

Moreover, China's recent sanctions package aimed at the EU, which came in response to EU sanctions in view of the situation in Xinjiang, included Björn Jerdén, Director of the newly-founded Swedish National China Centre. Again, Linde called this move 'totally unacceptable'.[219]

Swedish reactions and public opinion

The embassy's communication campaign clearly has not improved China's public image. It has drawn the attention of the media, sparked strong counter reactions and appears to have reinforced views of China as a threat to Swedish interests.[220]

Swedish public opinion is overwhelmingly negative towards China. In a comprehensive survey study of 13 European countries from 2021, Sweden emerged as the most negatively disposed towards China.[221] Almost 80% of Swedish respondents distrusted China, while two-thirds held negative views of the country. The authors of the study conclude that this is partly a new development, as more than half of the surveyed Swedes stated that their general views had worsened over the past three years.

Another conclusion from the study is that Swedes, despite their critical view of China, do not necessarily prefer a tougher China policy. While Swedes see the human rights situation in China as an important issue, they recognise China's importance to the Swedish economy and support cooperation on global challenges. There is only limited support for tougher policies of diplomatic signalling and political disengagement, such as expelling the Chinese ambassador or terminating sister-city agreements.[222]

Views on China also appear to be critical at the local level. Several cities and subnational authorities have since 2015 terminated their cooperation agreements with their Chinese counterparts, citing human rights concerns. The same appears to be true for political parties, as debates on China in the Riksdag have become more critical.[223]

The communication of China's 'wolf warrior diplomacy' in Sweden

The Chinese Embassy in Stockholm has employed a dual approach in its communications efforts towards Sweden. With one hand, it confronts and denounces those that criticise China. With the other, it offers lucrative cooperation to those willing to refrain from such criticism and emphasises the importance of maintaining good relations. Between 2018 and 2021, this dual approach was tilted heavily in favour of the first dimension, during the campaign of frequent and forceful criticism of media outlets, journalists, human rights activists, scholars, politicians and authorities.

China has communicated its views primarily through statements by the embassy and the foreign ministry. It has also relied on Swedish mainstream print media, to which the ambassador between 2017 and 2021 has given interviews and sent op-ed contributions which have been occasionally published. In this period, the embassy had no official presence on social media platforms that are widely used in Sweden, such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. However, the Embassy opened a Twitter account in February 2022.

From June 2020 to April 2021, it is possible to distinguish at least five 'frames' that China has featured in its communication effort. Each of these frames are made up of 5 key messages, as listed in the tables below.[224] In the third part of this study, this mapping is used as an analytical tool to assess whether there are views expressed in Swedish media that converge with China's official communication.

The first basic set of messages (A) is focused on portraying China as peaceful, benevolent and successful as well as a high achiever in technology, culture, economy, development and politics. A second frame (B) is focused on promoting an understanding that there is much to gain – especially economically – from Swedish cooperation with their Chinese counterparts.

A third theme in Chinese rhetoric (C) is aimed at convincing Swedish audiences that there is a cost – again, primarily an economic one – of not cooperating with China. A fourth frame (D) is focused on responding to criticism of Chinese actions and policies.

The fifth set (E) is focused on questioning the credibility of Swedish decision-making and criticism of China. Many of these arguments are built around the idea that Sweden should solve its own problems before criticising China. According to the ambassador, 'Chinese people have been following one principle throughout our history – we must do it first, if we ask others to do something. I hope the Swedish side will do the same.'[225]

Paramount relations

The way that the embassy emphasises the paramount importance of the relationship (see message B1 in the overview below) illustrates a central component of China's communication. The gist of this message is that, while there are differences between the two countries, it is essential not to jeopardise the longstanding relationship and friendship between the peoples by criticising each other.

While Sino-Swedish relations have deteriorated sharply in the last three years, the embassy has refused to acknowledge that the overall relationship has been damaged. In an interview in December 2020, the ambassador was asked why he had been called up to the Swedish foreign ministry as many as 40 or 50 times. He responded that he had not been 'summoned' and that it was 'actually a good thing' that he had been able to meet with his colleagues at the MFA. He insisted that the dialogues focused on 'how to focus on our commonalities and expand friendly exchanges and cooperation, and on how to manage differences so that they do not affect our friendly cooperation'.[226]

The ambassador also refuted claims based on a Pew Research Centre survey that Swedish public opinion on China had worsened by saying that he 'learned by talking extensively with Swedish people that they all advocate for friendship with China and that they all have a good impression of China'. He added: 'We hope that the Swedish Government's China policy can represent and reflect the mainstream public opinion in Sweden, rather than be based on a poll conducted by certain US media or organisation'.[227]

In sum, all the contention surrounding Gui Minhai, the Huawei question, direct threats by the embassy as well as the growing criticism from Swedes, did not seem to add up to anything that the ambassador viewed as particularly damaging to the generally positive trajectory of Sino-Swedish relations.

How is this possible? According to the ambassador, these events were the result of the actions of a small China-critical minority that has managed to cause trouble and influence other actors to act in opposition to Chinese interests.

'In the so-called Xinjiang question, there are a few China critics who have made up [stories], to prevent China's development', he said in an interview.[228] Similarly, Global Times reported that Sweden's decision on Huawei was heavily influenced by the US.[229] Through this prism, Swedish actors are victims who have been misled rather than rational agents with genuine concerns about China.

In essence, these statements can be interpreted as conveying one central message to Sweden: the door to cooperate with China remains open, on the condition that you stop criticising China. Moreover, if you align your actions with Chinese interests, disturbances in our relationship will cease and we could both reap the benefits of collaboration.

The European Union?

According to the Swedish government's latest white paper on China, the EU is Sweden's 'most important foreign policy arena and a strong and united EU is crucial in relations with China'.[230] This assertion is built at least in part on the idea that Sweden is more likely to achieve its policy objectives if it deals with China as part of a block of states rather than by itself.

The EU is rarely mentioned in Chinese communication towards Sweden. This is understandable, as it should be in the interest of China to avoid discussions that portray the EU as a legitimate and important part of Swedish foreign policy. Instead, it would be natural for China to seek to frame Sweden's relations with China as a bilateral exchange. Through this lens, Sweden alone is accountable for its actions, which ideally from a Chinese perspective, raises the stakes for Sweden when it comes to voicing criticism or adopting policies that run counter to Chinese interests.

Frames of China's communication effort in Sweden

A. China is peaceful, benevolent and successful

No.	Message	Summary/quote
A1	China is a strong democracy with an excellent human rights record.	China has the best human rights situation it has ever had due to achievements in poverty eradication, women's rights, and ethnic minority rights. China is 'a democratic country where the people decide'. 1,4 billion Chinese citizens support the CCP.
A2	China is a high achiever in sustainability and climate action.	China has made great achievements in terms of combating climate change and working towards an 'ecological civilisation'.
A3	China has successfully dealt with COVID-19.	China has effectively handled the COVID-19 pandemic and contributed actively by leading international cooperation donating equipment. This illustrates the merits of the Chinese model, including the leadership of the CCP.
A4	China is an important contributor to the world economy.	China contributes greatly to the world economy through exchanges of trade and investment. China employs fair trade practices and is firmly committed to the multilateral trading system.
A5	China is a peaceful country and a supporter of the established international order.	China is an active supporter of the international order with the UN and international law at its centre, including by participation in peacekeeping missions. China does not pose a threat to any other country, opposes aggression and war, and defends all countries' sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity.

B. There are great opportunities if you cooperate with China

No.	Message	Quote/summary
B1	**The most important thing is our relationship.**	While there are differences between our countries, it is essential not to jeopardise our longstanding relationship and friendship between our peoples by criticising each other and escalating tension. Let us focus on the cooperative dimension of our relationship.
B2	**Previous cooperation between us has been successful.**	Sino-Swedish cooperation has a long and successful history, with many examples of joint achievements, for example, in the field of green/ sustainable development. 'Friendly exchanges and win-win cooperation have always been the mainstream and direction of China-Sweden relations' (sic).
B3	**There is great potential for future cooperation.**	There is significant potential for economic cooperation, as the Chinese and Swedish economies are complementary. In sustainability, the potential for cooperation is 'enormous'. China is willing to cooperate in the global fight against COVID-19.
B4	**Further market opening is to be expected in China.**	'… the pace of opening up to the world will not slow down. China will open more and more'.
B5	**We have common challenges.**	It is necessary to work together to tackle terrorism, protectionism, cybercrime, COVID-19, and climate change.

C. It is costly to not cooperate with China.

No.	Message	Quote/summary
C1	**Sweden needs China's economy.**	'The Swedish government believes that China is very important to Sweden, the Chinese market has huge potential'. Swedish companies profit tremendously in China and Chinese companies make great contributions to the Swedish economy.
C2	**There will be losses if we do not cooperate.**	If you do not embrace economic cooperation with China, development will suffer. If you exclude Chinese companies from your market, products will be more expensive, and you will fall behind.
C3	**Opposing China will have consequences.**	If you counteract China's interests, there will be (unspecified) consequences. Such actions 'will not be accepted by the Chinese people'. We need to practice mutual respect and not meddle in each other's internal affairs. This is a prerequisite for our continued good relationship.
C4	**China is obliged to respond to criticism.**	It is an obligation, not a choice, for China to react or take countermeasures against biased information and meddling in China's internal affairs. It is the ambassador's responsibility 'to communicate with Swedish society and eliminate prejudice, arrogance and suspicion towards China from some Swedish individuals'.
C5	**Small Sweden.**	A small country like Sweden should not act so confidently towards China. 'China does not want to threaten Sweden, actually Sweden is not important enough for China to threaten'.

D. Chinese policies are justified and good

No.	Message	Quote/summary
D1	**Chinese policies, which are subject to criticism, promote security and development.**	While certain people claim that Chinese policies violate human rights and undermine market rules, in reality they foster security, stability, development and a more conducive business environment.
D2	**China is different, and you may not understand how.**	China's system is different from western societies. 'The world is by its nature varied'. As such, we should practice tolerance, mutual respect and equal treatment for different systems to achieve harmony and avoid conflict. 'We hope that everyone drawing attention to China takes their time to study China properly before drawing conclusions'.
D3	**It is necessary to spend time in China to understand China.**	Opinions voiced by people who have not visited China are not credible. 'We hope the journalists that are interested in China will visit China more to see the realities.'
D4	**China adheres to the principle of non-interference.**	China's core interests, such as Hong Kong, are non-negotiable, and China will never tolerate criticism or interference in its internal affairs. 'We do not try to impose our system upon other countries, and we do not accept that other countries can impose their system on us'.
D5	**China's policies are like those of western countries.**	'What local authorities have done [in Xinjiang] is effectively the same thing as what is being done in Sweden, France …' 'The people who handled the case of Gui Minhai in China are not security police but regular police, essentially like the police on the street [in Sweden]'.

E. Swedish criticism of China is unjustified

No.	Message	Quote/summary
E1	**Sweden has human rights problems of its own.**	Sweden has problems related to racism, serious crime and inequalities. Swedish society is insecure due to high levels of crime.
E2	**Sweden's decision to exclude Huawei from its 5G telecommunications networks was unjustified.**	The decision 'goes against principles of market economy and free competition'. It is unfair, partial and discriminatory. It has no factual basis, signifies an abuse of the national security concept, and obstructs cooperation. 'Sweden takes national security as a pretext to slander Chinese companies, openly oppress Chinese telecom companies, and politicize normal economic cooperation.'
E3	**Some media coverage of China is biased and untruthful.**	Some media outlets practice 'media tyranny'. Their reporting is untruthful and totally groundless. 'We fully respect freedom of press, but any press publication must be based on facts.' 'China is broad-minded to take the suggestions and criticisms, but we categorically reject fact-distorting reports, malicious criticisms and smears'.
E4	**Critics represent only a small minority of society.**	Only a small number of people criticise China, while most Swedes like China. 'The mainstream public opinion in Sweden is completely consistent with China's hope to develop friendly cooperative relations with Sweden'.
E5	**Sweden is influenced by the US.**	Sweden is influenced by the US to make decisions that go against China's interests. The US is a third-party antagonist to Sino-Swedish relations. 'The US is the biggest saboteur of global free trade and multilateral trading system. China and the EU including Sweden are all its victims, and all oppose the above practices of the US'.

Swedish views on the Huawei question and their relation to China's framing efforts

Sweden's Huawei decision

In late 2019, the Swedish government proposed amendments to the law on the protection of national security in the use of radio equipment.[231] These amendments entered into force on 1 January 2020. In practice, they meant that the authority responsible for the auctioning of Sweden's 5G spectrums, the Post and Telecom Authority (PTS), should consult the Swedish Security Police and Armed Forces on such decisions. These authorities found that the Chinese party-state and intelligence agencies could influence and exert pressure on Huawei and ZTE, which could potentially be harmful to Swedish security. Based on this assessment, PTS announced its decision to exclude these Chinese vendors from central functions of Sweden's 5G telecommunications networks in October 2020.[232]

The decision sparked strong reactions from the Chinese side and has received global attention. The Chinese MFA said that Sweden should 'correct its mistake and avoid negative impact on China-Sweden economic cooperation and the Swedish businesses operating in China'.[233] When asked about the potential consequences of the Swedish decision, the Chinese ambassador said that it would 'negatively affect China-Sweden practical cooperation and the operation of Swedish companies in China'.[234] This was widely interpreted as a threat against Ericsson's operations in China. In the run-up to the decision, it was uncovered that Ericsson's CEO Börje Ekholm had pressed Swedish trade minister Anna Hallberg to intervene in the decision to prevent negative fallout.[235] In October 2021, Ericsson reported a significant loss of market share in China.[236] Huawei recently sued the Swedish state for the decision.[237]

Methodology

This section presents the results of an analysis of Swedish media in relation to the debate on whether to allow Huawei to participate in the auctions of frequencies for 5G networks. The Huawei debate is a suitable case study for mapping Swedish views on China for two reasons. First, it has drawn the attention of and sparked reactions from the most influential voices in Swedish China policy. Second, it has accentuated the key elements of the China debate by concentrating public attention on a single decision that requires consideration of economic interests, national security and political values all at once. Nevertheless, the Huawei discussion does not perfectly encapsulate the entirety of the China debate. The results of the analysis should therefore be approached with some caution.

Drawing on the five 'frames' of China's official communication identified in the previous section, this study initially set out to quantify the presence of such frames in the Swedish media landscape. This approach facilitates a greater understanding of China's influence

in Swedish media, as identifying a 'Chinese frame' would imply that the view in question has to a degree been influenced or informed by a Chinese perspective. For example, media content that mirrors China's rhetoric, relays or in other ways presents a distinctly Chinese view, could suggest that an article has, indeed, taken it cues from China's official messaging. In the Swedish case, however, the value of such a mapping exercise quickly proved limited as the presence of such frames was very rare in the selected mainstream media.

Instead, therefore, this study opted to explore how views expressed in Swedish media may ***converge*** with the framings put forth in China's official communication. A 'converging view' does not necessarily mirror Chinese ideas and arguments as a 'Chinese frame' would. What defines a converging view, instead, is that it shares a basic idea or assumption with the Chinese perspective, such as an interpretation of a phenomenon, problem or chain of events. For example, the idea that Sweden's China policy has been influenced by the US is considered to converge with Chinese messaging, even if it does not include content that mirrors or in other ways suggest that it has been informed by a Chinese perspective.

Consequently, studying 'converging views' does not generate the same clear indications of Chinese influence as a direct identification of Chinese frames could have. Rather, the value of this approach lies in its ability to highlight ideas and arguments around which there is a comparatively high level of agreement between views expressed in Swedish media and Chinese official communication. As persuasion attempts are more likely to be successful if both sides share a basic level of common understanding, these results signify discursive spaces where China's communication efforts are more likely to be effective, as they could provide fertile ground for future attempts to shape Swedish perceptions.

Moreover, it is likely that these ideas expressed in Swedish media serve as an important conduit for Chinese influence. As they implicitly support or reinforce understandings presented by China, it is conceivable that they could shape opinions and encourage action aligned with Chinese interests. In this sense, they could represent a valuable starting point for studies seeking to better understand the cognitive factors underpinning Chinese influence.

Two caveats are necessary before reading the results of this media analysis. First, it is worth repeating that 'convergence' should not be seen as evidence that Chinese actors have influenced the Swedish views in question. It is not surprising that Swedish and Chinese converge around some general ideas about the nature of Sino-Swedish relations, even when these ideas have developed independently of each other. For example, this study suggests that many of the Swedish views that converge with China's official statements in the Huawei debate are most likely a natural expression of a strong Swedish commitment to free trade principles.

Converging Swedish views ***may*** of course have been influenced by China, even if they do not mirror Chinese arguments. This limited study, however, has not taken the necessary steps to explore the inspiration or origin of the ideas presented to draw such conclusions.

Second, convergence does not signify that the Swedish views in question are in any way misguided or in opposition to Swedish values or interests. For example, one recurring Chinese message is that 'there will be consequences' if Sweden criticises China. Accepting such a narrative may serve Chinese interests by discouraging Sweden from opposing China. However, acceptance could also reflect basic strategic calculus on the Swedish side in that decision-makers need to consider the consequences of their policies.

Mapping convergence

This analysis is limited in scope and captures only a snapshot of the Swedish media coverage related to the Huawei question in early 2021. It covers a period of four months (January–April) and is based on a reading of a total of 119 media items from some of the largest mainstream, business and alternative media platforms, including editorials, op-eds and news features.[238]

Three newspapers were chosen to represent mainstream media: ***Dagens Nyheter***, one of the most widely distributed and influential morning newspapers, and ***Aftonbladet*** and ***Expressen***, two of the largest evening newspapers. ***Dagens industri*** was chosen to represent business media, as it is the most widely read business newspaper. Alternative media was represented by a selection of right-wing and fringe platforms (***Fria tider***, ***Nya Dagbladet***, ***Samnytt***, ***Nyheter idag***, ***Nya tider*** and ***Newsvoice***), although only three of them included media items relevant to this study (***Newsvoice***, ***Nya Dagbladet*** and ***Samnytt***).[239]

Items were categorised by assessing if their content converged primarily with (1) Chinese messages, (2) competing views challenging these Chinese understandings, or if (3) there was no dominant convergence with either side. In items where 'dominant convergence' was identified, views in line with either China's messages or opposing views were presented in a way that overshadowed the competing perspective, including by presenting the dominant view in the headline or first paragraph, while giving none or little attention to the competing perspective.

Items sorted into the 'No dominant convergence' category either did not include any views amounting to convergence or included ideas from both sides which balanced each other out. Percentages are expressed as a share of the total number of items.

Table 1: Dominant convergence of media items

	Convergence with China's frames	Convergence with competing views	No dominant convergence	Total
Mainstream media	6 (10%)	40 (65%)	16	62
Business media	13 (27%)	7 (14%)	29	49
Alternative media	0 (0%)	3 (38%)	5	8
Total	19 (16%)	50 (42%)	50	119

In total, convergence with China's frames was dominant in 16% of all items, while convergence with competing views was dominant in 42% of cases. While this indicates that there is ***some*** convergence, it is difficult to say whether it indicates a high level of agreement as no comparable studies have been carried out on other topics or in other counties.

For business media, the ratio of converging views was higher than in mainstream media while the share of competing views was lower. This can be explained by the editorial position of the analysed business newspaper, which is supportive of free trade and sympathetic to business interests. In the Huawei debate, it is unsurprising for a media outlet with this perspective to gravitate towards arguments about the potential economic costs of excluding Huawei from Sweden's 5G networks or the importance of seeking cooperation with China (arguments which were also expressed by Chinese representatives).

Table 2 lists the six Chinese messages with which convergence was most common. The count indicates the number of items including a message or framing in line with that specific Chinese view. This does not signify that the items in question had a 'dominant convergence' with China's views, only that at least one message in the piece converged with the Chinese view mentioned. For example, 21 items included messages that converged with the Chinese assertion that 'there will be losses if we do not cooperate'.

Table 2: Chinese messages with which convergence was most common

Chinese message	Items	As % of all items	No.
There will be losses if we do not cooperate	21	18%	C2
Sweden's Huawei decision was unjustified	14	12%	E2
Sweden is influenced by the United States	13	11%	E6
Opposing China will have consequences	9	8%	C3
There is great potential for future cooperation	7	6%	B2
Sweden needs China's economy	7	6%	C1

'Converging views' and their significance

In the following summary of converging Swedish and Chinese views, quotes are taken out of context and do not necessarily give a fair reflection of the authors' opinions.

The most common convergence with Chinese views was with the message that **'there will be losses' (C2)** if Sweden and China do not cooperate. One view expressed in Swedish media was that the government's handling of the 5G question and PTS' decision unnecessarily delayed the development and roll-out of 5G in Sweden: 'To stand last in line regarding 5G technology can become one of Sweden's most expensive affairs ever. The damages can be lasting'.[240]

There were also those who argued that the decision created uncertainty, as it came close before the scheduled start of the 5G spectrum auctions: 'We are now entering an auction under legal uncertainty, which is both unfortunate and unnecessary. Had the Armed Forces and the Security Police been direct with their approach from the beginning and especially had a dialogue with us operators the situation would have been more stable', said a representative from Telenor, a Norwegian telecommunications company with significant presence in Sweden.[241]

Others discussed the long-term consequences, notably by suggesting that halting of cooperation between Ericsson and Huawei on technical standards could lead to the fracturing of the Internet, there by incentivising China to develop its own systems and technologies. If cooperation changes into rivalry and mutual isolation, 'the world can lose its common communications network'.[242]

This idea of lost opportunities is related to the assertion that **'opposing China will have consequences' (C3)**. This view assumes that China will take action to impose costs on Sweden if it acts against Chinese interests.

In the Huawei debate, this was reflected primarily through the claim that China would punish Ericsson for the PTS decision. 'In one way or another, China is likely to punish Ericsson', one analyst said.[243] A report from Ericsson said that there was a risk that China takes action against Sweden's and Ericsson's business interests.[244] One commentary said that 'China has more than implied that it will in some way hit back at its home market, which is important to many Swedish companies'.[245]

Ideas of lost opportunities and 'consequences' are reinforced by the understanding that **'Sweden needs China's economy' (C1).** This argument is built largely on an understanding that Sweden is a small and export-dependent country: 'For a small, open economy like Sweden, it is important to realise how intertwined our economies and value chains are and what the consequences would be if we stopped trading with China, especially now given the state of the market'.[246]

A recurring statement is that China represents an increasingly important trading partner for Sweden. 'China is becoming more important to Swedish growth and thereby our welfare. If you take both investments and trade there are about 100 000 jobs in Sweden which are dependent on our economic relation to China', said trade minister Anna Hallberg.[247] Asked about the tensions between Sweden and China in recent times, a consultant said, 'I do not think people really understand how important China is to the Swedish business sector, not least if you want to continue to be part of technology development'.[248]

The view that there is **'great potential for future cooperation' (B3)** also strengthens arguments of 'losses' and 'consequences'. This media analysis captured some of these views in the debate concerning the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). 'The agreement will benefit European companies and is a success for the EU that has long complained that Chinese terms and conditions makes the market uneven … Now the playing field becomes more even and the hope is that the agreement will be the start of a process towards a proper free trade agreement'.[249]

In this context, ideas about the benefits of economic interdependence were voiced. Commenting on CAI, one columnist wrote that 'isolation would only make the situation worse. It would create a more insecure and divided world because Beijing would have greater incentives to go its own way, arm its defence forces, establish its own standards and continue violating the west's conventions'.[250]

Another columnist wrote that 'global trade promotes peace', arguing that '[t]here are good reasons for Swedish companies to trade with basically all countries. The fact that container ships have not transformed China into a liberal ideal regime is no reason to block them'.[251] Another editorial wrote: 'Global capitalism, international trade and mutual dependencies create peace … Countries that are dependent on each other's technological development and stock market development for its tech companies do not start wars'.[252]

Taken together, these four mutually reinforcing messages emerge as a coherent argument for why cooperation is preferable to confrontation: **Sweden needs China's economy and there is great potential for cooperation. If we do not cooperate, both parties will miss out on opportunities and suffer losses. Moreover, if Sweden overtly opposes China, broader consequences will follow, and even greater losses will be imposed on Sweden.**

Swedish audiences may very well find such arguments convincing. A survey from 2021 showed that over 68 % of Swedes saw China as important to the Swedish economy. 81 % of respondents regarded China as economically strong or very strong, while only 74 % held the same view about the US. In addition, 24 % of respondents believed that China was a technologically very advanced country, while 22 % said the same about the US and only 16 % agreed with that description of the EU.[253]

Another common 'converging view' is the idea that **'Sweden's Huawei decision was unjustified' (E2).** The decision to exclude Huawei and ZTE from Sweden's 5G auctions drew criticism not only for its substance, with some viewing it as an excessive and ineffective security measure that goes beyond the EU's 'toolbox' on 5G, but also for its timing (near the start date of Sweden's 5G auctions) and the lack of transparency by authorities prior to the decision. The decision was also criticised for too overtly singling out China, when compared to decisions of other European countries who were more careful to not mention Chinese companies by name.

Another message with which convergence was found was the claim that **'Sweden is influenced by the United States' (E6)**. This assertion gained traction in the Huawei debate after *Dagens Nyheter* published a story on how American representatives had contacted Swedish politicians to call for the exclusion of Huawei. The US ambassador was reported as saying 'If a close partner nation has an unsafe network this can jeopardize secret information'.[254] One columnist noted that '[m]ore countries, including Sweden, are following the US advice to block Huawei from the development of 5G'.[255] The story about US influence was picked up directly by the Chinese MFA who noted that it 'shows once again that it is exactly the United States that has been practicing carrot and stick approach and 'coercive diplomacy' all across the world.'[256]

'Competing views'

While some Chinese and Swedish views converged around the six messages listed in Table 2, these ideas were also challenged by a presence of competing views in Swedish media. The narratives that Sweden's Huawei decision was unjustified and influenced by the US, for instance, were countered by a significant presence of arguments in favour of the decision, portraying it as the result of a legitimate security assessment by the Swedish Armed Forces and Security Police.[257]

The idea that Sweden needs China's economy, and that it will suffer losses if cooperation is not pursued, also faced counterarguments. One of these arguments suggested **that it was in fact primarily specific Swedish companies – in this case, Ericsson – who were dependent on China. These companies were seen as lobbying in favour of Chinese interests in a way that does not benefit Sweden's overall interests.** This idea gained traction after *Dagens Nyheter* published a story on how Ericsson's CEO, wary of a potential Chinese counter-reaction against its business in China, tried to pressure the Swedish trade minister to intervene and prevent the impending decision on Huawei.[258]

Similarly, the assertion that Sweden would face consequences from opposing China was also countered by several arguments. First, China was met with many negative comments about its bullying tactics and overt threats about unspecified consequences against Swedish interests. Second, some observers argued that China is unlikely to follow through on its threats, pointing out that China has not always done so in the past, and that China is dependent on stable economic relations with Sweden and the EU. Third, some observers recognised that there would be a cost to opposing China but that it would be worth it to safeguard national security.[259]

Views which expressed that there was 'great potential for future cooperation' should also be seen in relation to the high number of competing views. These competing messages pointed out that cooperating with China could lead to a range of potential security risks, and that being economically dependent could increase Chinese influence over Sweden.[260]

In sum, the presence of competing views does not make the finding of 'converging views' less significant. Even when countered by competing views, convergence still indicates that such ideas resonate with segments of Swedish society. A strong presence of competing views should be seen only as an indication that there are also groups in Swedish society that disagree with the 'converging views' identified here.

Conclusion

As in many other countries, the Chinese party-state's efforts to influence the information environment in Sweden consist of a combination of overt and covert activities, including United Front work, espionage and diplomatic initiatives. In the public sphere, the embassy's intense public communications campaign stands out as particularly important. By vigorously denouncing its critics at all levels of Swedish society, the embassy has positioned itself as a front runner in the Chinese government's 'wolf warrior' approach to diplomacy.

While this confrontational logic has dominated China's public diplomacy in Sweden between 2018 and 2021, there has also been a softer, more forgiving side to Chinese messaging.

In this mode, the embassy attributes negative developments in Sino-Swedish relations to 'a few China critics', suggesting that this minority misleads the public and disproportionally influences Swedish policies. To the majority, therefore, the door to cooperate with China is still open, on the condition that they refrain from criticising China. While the overall communications campaign has been met almost exclusively with negative Swedish reactions, it is conceivable that such positive messaging may appeal to audiences that are eager to avoid disruptions in the relationship and have significant vested interest in sustaining collaboration, such as businesses.

This study has found that some views expressed in the Swedish debate regarding the Huawei question converge with the following ideas voiced by Chinese representatives:

- Sweden needs China's economy
- There is great potential for future cooperation
- There will be losses if we do not cooperate
- Opposing China will have consequences
- Sweden's Huawei decision was unjustified
- Sweden is influenced by the United States

This should not be seen as evidence that the people voicing such opinions in the Swedish debate have been influenced by Chinese actors. Nor does it signify that such views are misguided, untruthful or in opposition to Swedish values or interests. While it is possible that some of these views have been subject to external influence, this study presents no evidence to support such conclusions.

The results do indicate, however, that there is a comparatively high level of agreement between these views expressed in Swedish media and Chinese official communication. As persuasion attempts are more likely to be successful if both sides share a basic level of common understanding, this signifies the presence of discursive spaces where China's communication efforts are more likely to be effective. In other words, they could provide fertile ground for future attempts to shape Swedish perceptions.

The first four of the ideas listed above are mutually reinforcing: they revolve around an understanding that China is an important economy and global power with whom cooperation is required, and that opposing China would result in costly consequences. Many of these views would be regarded as uncontroversial in Sweden. This is backed up by survey results from 2021, which showed that Swedes typically see China as a strong and technologically advanced economy that is important to Sweden, and with whom they welcome cooperation on global challenges.[261]

In concrete terms, China has long been a priority market for Swedish businesses and the government.[262] Government

representatives regularly refer to China as an important trading partner and state their ambition to intensify economic exchange.[263] On the political side, meanwhile, China has a strong presence in most parts of the world and wields significant influence in multilateral fora prioritised by Sweden, such as the UN and the WTO. Deteriorating relations with China could result in Sweden being side-lined on important issues or make it harder to find support for political initiatives, such as the global effort to fight climate change.

It is understandable, therefore, that ideas about Sweden's dependence on China and the imperative to avoid confrontation could resonate among businesses, decision-makers and other Swedish actors. Such ideas could also shape their decisions. Consider, for example, a policymaker pondering whether to approve a policy that could spark an extensive negative Chinese reaction. If he or she is convinced that cooperating with China is necessary to realise foreign policy objectives of high priority – and that such initiatives could be compromised if Sweden adopts the policy in question – then the likelihood of approving the decision in question would decrease considerably.

Again, this study does not suggest that such reasoning is in any way flawed or in opposition to Swedish interests or values. It is possible, however, that an understanding that exaggerates Sweden's dependence or the costs of opposing China could induce unwarranted fears and hesitancy among policymakers, which could in turn lead to pre-emptive alignment in the form of self-censorship or an inclination to avoid sensitive decisions. On the other side of the spectrum, underestimating China's reactions and the potential costs for Sweden could lead to high-risk decision-making. To avoid scenarios of both types, **it should be in Sweden's best interest to develop a thorough (and as accurate as possible) understanding of its dependence on China** as well as map the costs and benefits of different policy options.

China's influence?

Did Chinese actors influence the Swedish public discourse discussed prior? This study presents no such indications, and it appears to be unlikely in most cases.

Sweden has a long tradition of defending and promoting free trade. There is a strong belief that open markets are a prerequisite for continued economic growth for a small and export-dependent country like Sweden. In this context, any arguments in favour of limiting economic exchange between countries are bound to face a degree of criticism. It is understandable, therefore, that this happened in the Huawei debate, where several voices warned of the economic losses deriving from the exclusion of the company and the potentially harmful long-term impact, including the risk of creating a divided internet and turning interdependence into confrontation.

In other words, these views appear to be a natural expression of Swedish support for free trade principles, rather than a result of Chinese actors' efforts to shape Swedish opinions.

Similarly, the view that Sweden is influenced by the US is not a novel idea in itself. Within the parameters of the Huawei debate, the notion of American influence appears to have developed independently from Chinese communications efforts. It seems to have gained traction after a Swedish newspaper uncovered that American representatives had contacted Swedish counterparts to voice their concerns about Huawei.[264]

The area where it is most likely that Chinese actors played a direct role in shaping Swedish public discourse concerns the view that 'there will be consequences' if Sweden opposes China. It is hard to see how this idea could have gained traction if the Chinese Embassy and MFA had not issued such threats on the Huawei question. This could be seen as an indication that **China has been able to convey a credible threat to Sweden. This threat does not appear to have been effective, however, as the government has not intervened to change the decision, despite repeated appeals from China to do so.**

Future research

The Chinese embassy's confrontational approach to diplomacy has generated great interest in the daily developments in Sino-Swedish relations. By focusing on public and easily observable activity, however, it is easy to overlook more subtle ways in which Chinese actors might be influencing the Swedish information environment. For instance, **there is little knowledge of the extent of self-censorship in society which could have resulted from the embassy's public accusations and threats against individual journalists, activists and scholars.** Another under-studied area is Chinese investments, considering that while there is public knowledge of the levels of investment as well as specific deals, there remains little in-depth analysis on their political impact and geostrategic significance.

This study provides an example of how to analyse China's influence in the Nordic-Baltic information environment. The results are far from exhaustive as the analysis only covers a snapshot of the Swedish Huawei debate in early 2021. Beyond using a more comprehensive data set, future studies could compare levels of 'converging views' over time. If ideas expressed in Swedish media were found to be gradually converging with China's official views, this could be a sign of growing Chinese influence that could merit further investigation.

5. CONCLUSION

The case studies of Latvia and Sweden offer a test case for analysing China's influence in the Nordic-Baltic information environment. Although limited in scope, the findings can provide valuable insight into China's potential to influence public discourse in the specific countries of the region.

Both case studies illustrate the main channels of the CCP's communication efforts and demonstrate how tactics differ depending on the nature of relationship and reaction to China's perceived 'red' lines by the country of analysis. China's communication efforts towards Latvia thus far can be characterised as non-confrontational, focusing on prospective cooperation between the two countries. In instances of criticism levelled against China, it is not confronted publicly. By contrast, Sweden has experienced a more confrontational side of China's public communication, with Chinese diplomats publicly reacting to Swedish criticism regarding human rights abuses and aggressive foreign policy.

China's frames identified in both countries can be seen as part of China's global communication efforts. However, in contrast to the Swedish situation, China's frames in Latvian media are not derived from locally adapted content (for example, by China's proxies, diplomatic mission, etc.), but rather appear in local media through translations of China's global communication channels, such as China Central Television (CCTV) or Xinhua News Agency.

The media discourses of both countries have not been supportive of Chinese official frames, rather confronting them with opposing views. Furthermore, Swedish public opinion regarding China has become increasingly negative over the past years. Despite these developments, research showed that in both cases there are numerous areas/topics where China exerts a potential for influence, especially when China's frames converge with already existing attitudes and perceptions of local populations. For example, media in both countries have been more supportive of Chinese frames when reporting on the economic benefits and opportunities from cooperation with China, as well warning about the costly repercussions from opposing China (in the Swedish case in particular).

The fact that some views in Latvian and Swedish media converge with China's official communication is not necessarily a direct result of China's influence activities in the countries of analysis.

> *However, the potential of China's influence may not lie in China's active communication efforts, but rather in exaggerations of ideas regarding China's importance in bilateral relations and the consequences of opposing the country. This can foster self-censorship and abstention by decision-makers when considering policy decisions regarding relations with China.*

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In order to gain a comprehensive picture of Chinese influence in the region and identify commonalities and differences between China's efforts, it would be useful to undertake similar analysis in the remaining six Nordic-Baltic countries. Future studies could also compare 'converging views' in the media space over time, in order to investigate whether the Chinese influence is growing.

This research can be supported by analysis of how China's views are reflected in the statements of political and economic elites, as well as in public perceptions of China and its activities.

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