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Introduction

The world we live in is constantly changing. As Heraclitus once famously stated: 'The only thing constant is change itself'. History has shown us that certain geographical regions can suddenly become the centre of attention. A territory that has caught international attention recently is the Arctic. A frozen, fairly untamed area that is mostly known for glaciers, polar bears, and endless wilderness is starting to emerge as a centrepiece of the global agenda. Minerals, vast waters for fishing and shipping, as well as strategic importance are some of the Arctic's key points of attraction. Many states have expressed interest in extending their reach and developments in the Arctic. Yet, one of the states that is actively participating in Arctic endeavours is attracting more scholarly attention than the others – China.¹ Not only is it located nearly 1500 kilometres away from the Arctic Circle,² it also has one of the fastest growing economies in the world.³ This has led some experts⁴ to wonder whether it is possible for Arctic states to remain in complete control of the contested region. China's interest in the region has resulted in it becoming one of thirteen observer states of the Arctic Council. The organisation can be considered the *de facto* most important intergovernmental forum for Arctic affairs.⁵

Some scholars state that the Chinese interest in the Arctic is constrained and limited by not having any territory there,6 yet the appeal is certainly there. Rare-earth elements used in the production of various electric and electronic components are only one of the many reasons why China has its eyes on the Arctic. Both strategically and economically the region offers many benefits for states who have access to it. With the Arctic 'White Paper' published in 2018, China expressed a vision for its role in the region, and how it wished other states to see it as well, namely as a 'Near-Arctic state'.7 With China currently in the international spotlight, it wishes to show the world that it is involved in Arctic matters and that it cares about what is happening there. To further establish its position in the region, it needs to work together with states that have already done so. This has led to increased cooperation between China and states that are part of the Arctic.⁸ According to Ryzhova: 'In order to put into practice the concept of "geographical proximity of China to the Arctic", China is actively seeking support from the Nordic countries'.⁹ It is believed that China is trying to increase its cooperation with these states, since they would be the receiving end of the 'Ice Silk Road' – connecting China and Europe.¹⁰

This paper analyses the narratives that appear in Chinese media regarding Arctic states. Given that this research is being executed under the auspices of the Nordic-Baltic project of the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, it



focuses on the Nordic states. This research seeks to better understand the phenomenon of China's 'Near Arctic' identity. It examines how Chinese media frame China, the Nordic countries, and the relationship between them, particularly concerning the Arctic. Throughout this article we attempt to identify the narratives that China is trying to construct when engaging with Arctic states - in this case the Nordic ones (Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland). From the outset, this research presumes that there are differences in China's approach to the five Nordic countries and to their territories pertaining to the Arctic. Some of the territories located in the Arctic are autonomous parts of their respective states, for example, Greenland or the Faroe Islands of the Kingdom of Denmark. Other territories carry a special international status, such as Norway's Svalbard. This research also assumes that the framing of the Nordic countries in Chinese media is influenced by domestic and international events that have the potential to strengthen or weaken China's position in the Arctic. The key questions this study will attempt to answer are: What kind of discourses are Chinese media outlets constructing when they write about Nordic states? Are narratives different when these articles have an Arctic dimension? And are Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and Denmark written about in the same way? To answer these questions, the paper relies on qualitative data. A dataset was created for the particular purpose of this research. The dataset includes articles that have been published by Chinese media

in the past five years, between 2017 and 2021. We have chosen some of the biggest Chinese media outlets that are publishing in English and frequently write about foreign affairs: Xinhua, South China Morning Post, Global Times, and CGTN. It is important to note that Global Times operates under the auspices of People's Daily, yet, as it covers foreign relations more, we have chosen to include it, not People's Daily. This allows us to identify narratives constructed primarily for international audiences rather than for Chinese internal audiences. Articles from the first three media outlets will only be examined when they mention the Arctic, while articles from CGTN will be evaluated both when mentioning the Arctic, and when talking about China and the Nordics outside of an Arctic context. This is done to assess how important the Arctic aspect is for Chinese media outlets. Since CGTN is arguably one of the two biggest Chinese media platforms communicating in English, alongside Xinhua, it was chosen as the data source for comparing articles that mention Nordic countries and articles that mention Nordic countries and the Arctic. While it would be of value to assess Xinhua as well, due to the limitations of this paper, we have chosen to use just one of the two biggest Chinese media platforms. By doing a keyword search for the Nordic states individually as well as collectively, we identify patterns in narrative frames presented by the media. The data collected is carefully sifted to highlight common narratives present in the Chinese media, as well as those that diverge.



Strategic narratives through the lens of constructivism

The narrative frames we identify in this paper are elucidated in the section 'The 'Near Arctic' identity: what's in it for China?', yet throughout this part of the research we intend to highlight what we understand by strategic narratives, and why they matter. Whenever an event occurs, political or otherwise, there can be several interpretations of it. A good illustration of this is how different states perceive the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While BRI is generally seen as Beijing's attempt to establish itself as a global leader, there is nuance to how different states view and respond to the project. For instance, Kazakhstan welcomes the BRI and sees it as a positive narrative that it will benefit from. India holds a more negative view and thinks the project is undermining its ontological security.¹¹ This example explains what a strategic narrative is: a specific interpretation of reality based on an agenda. Even though both states see BRI as benefiting China, they have completely different perceptions of it, informed by different regional and international goals.

Strategic narrative of identity

According to Miskimmon et al.:

There are three types of strategic narratives - narratives about the international system, which articulate how a political actor conceives their understanding of international order; narratives employed by political actors seeking to influence the development of policies; and strategic narratives of identity, which are central to how political actors seek to project their identity in international affairs.¹²

Even though this research focuses mainly on detecting and analysing strategic

narratives of identity constructed by China, the other types of strategic narratives serve as a supporting foundation for the analysis.

Identity narratives have been used by actors to project and demonstrate how they want to be perceived and thought of by the international community. According to some scholars: 'China sees itself as positioned on the defensive in an international system widely perceived as dominated by the West'. ¹³ In other words, China perceives the international system as being unfair and dominated by the West. China's narratives also often highlight its history: that China was once powerful, and that they will be powerful again. ¹⁴ This also aligns with the 'defensive' posture China seeks to project:



merely reclaiming an international position that it believes it has always been entitled to.

By shaping an 'identity' narrative, an entity can influence how other actors perceive it. On the world stage, it is vital for a state to not only shape how it is seen, but also define the roles and rules of international relations. This can create an illusion that some actors are the protagonists while others are the antagonists of a story. From an international relations point of view, it would make sense to appear friendly towards allies, and look fearsome towards enemies. This demonstrates the incentive to use strategic narratives to send a certain message.

Constructivism and identity

There have been three widely accepted theories of international relations in the 21st century - realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Constructivists believe that knowledge is socially constructed. There are no undisputable realities; everything we know is based on previous interpretations concepts.16 Constructivism and closely related to the idea of symbolic interactionism, whereby meaning is formed based on interactions between people.17 Combining the theories of constructivism and symbolic interactionism, one might say that the perceived 'reality' of international affairs is shaped by interactions between states while also being strongly informed by pre-existing ideas, concepts, and frameworks of understanding. The material gives way to the ideational.

Constructivists argue that socially accepted ideas are constructs. For example, a \$10 bill is worth a certain amount of money, despite it simply being a piece of paper. 18 It is the perception of value that makes it worth more than the cost of paper and ink. The idea of money has been around for centuries and is well established across the world, yet there are other ideas that are only socially accepted in parts of the world. This suggests that someone from Hawaii might have a different perception of the world than someone from Algeria, because they have been exposed to different social constructs.

Viewed from a constructivist perspective, identity is a key concept in international relations. According to Miskimmon et al.: 'In international relations theory, early constructivist literature on the role of state identity argued that state identity affects foreign policy and international relations'.19 Identities drive interests and actions: states that comply with a certain identity will be expected to act within the norms that are associated with this identity. That is why it is of immense importance for states like China to project a certain identity to the world in order to shape international relations. It also explains why some states invest heavily in constructing public perceptions of other states and their relationships with them.



Methodology

This research is a continuation of the previous two projects conducted by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence on Arctic narratives. The first, 'Arctic Narratives and Political Values: Russia, China, and Canada in the High North', published in 2018, focuses on the strategic narratives of China, Russia, and Canada. The second is called 'Arctic Narratives and Political Values: Arctic States, China, and NATO'. It was published in 2020, and expanded on the first one by analysing the strategic narratives of all eight Arctic states, as well as China and NATO. To ensure consistency, this research uses an adapted version of the same methodology as the previous two projects. The project continues to be 'narrative driven'. We have used the term 'narrative' as defined in the Cambridge dictionary – 'a particular way of explaining or understanding events'. This corresponds with the definition proposed by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: 'Morals drawn from stories'.20 The project will identify narratives communicated by China and use framing theory to identify how China is shaping perceptions about the Nordic countries and its relationship with them, particularly in the context of the Arctic. Framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience influences the choices people make about how to process information.²¹ The media creates frames by introducing information with predefined and narrow contextualisation, thus enhancing understanding, or using them as cognitive shortcuts to link stories to metanarratives.

By choosing a qualitative approach, this research is more readily able to draw links between articles, identify common themes, reoccurring distinguish narrative frames.²² According to Moen: 'there are inevitable gaps between reality, experience, and expression'.23 This affirms that different perceptions might exist at the same time, depending on the perspective. We compiled a dataset of articles published by Chinese media that mention any or several of the Nordic states between 2016 and 2021. We only chose those articles that focus on the Nordics, disregarding the ones that only superficially mention them. This was done to create a concrete dataset of articles that could be analysed to find common and differing narratives. Within this dataset, we also distinguished the articles that have an Arctic dimension to investigate how important the 'Arcticness' of the Nordics is to the Chinese media. We intend to find out if different narratives are being constructed when Chinese media are writing about the Nordics while mentioning the Arctic. To identify the frame, we will search for certain keywords and try to interpret the context of the article. The research will also try to identify whether the media is outlining common history as a reason for cooperation.

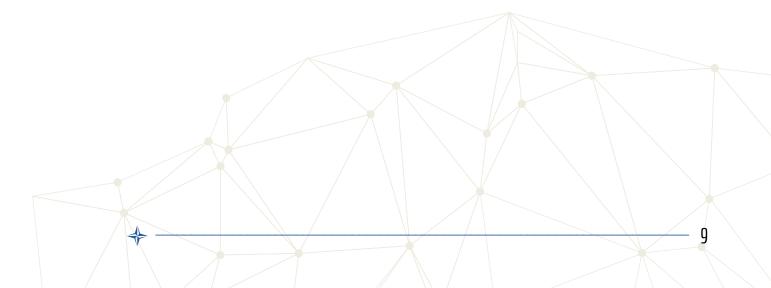


We have chosen to focus on these outlets as they publish in English and are either connected to the Chinese government or follow editorial policies that amplify governmental strategic messages.

Although the research is based on articles published by the biggest Chinese media outlets which publish in English (Xinhua, South China Morning Post, Global Times, CGTN), this paper does not analyse the official Chinese policy towards the Nordic states. We have chosen to focus on these outlets as they publish in English and are either connected to the Chinese government or follow editorial policies that amplify governmental strategic messages. Taken together, these two criteria imply two things: one, given these articles are in English they are intended for international consumption; two, the articles will have undergone an editorial process within pro-Chinese media organisations and therefore not diverge too much from official state policy. It is important to note, that even though SCMP is located in Hong Kong, and can raise

eyebrows when 'put in the same bag' as the other outlets, Hong Kong is recognised as a special administrative region in China. Even more so, they have been asked to remove articles that Beijing does not agree with.²⁴ Thus, even though traditionally SCMP was considered to be more independent, the past few years have proven otherwise.

We will attempt to answer the questions that this research poses with the help of constructivist theory. As we are focusing on state-sponsored media and media which follows editorial policies that amplify governmental strategic messages, we will also use the theory of strategic narratives to justify the creation of frames. Combined, these theories can draw out richer conclusions in analysing how China's 'Near-Arctic' identity is framed through narratives.



Chinese relations with the Nordics

In recent years, China has increasingly cooperated with several states around the world.²⁵ Some collaborations appear natural, even inevitable, given a common history, geographical proximity, or shared values. China's relationship with Russia falls into this category.²⁶ Yet, there are other instances where a greater appreciation of the wider context and a teasing out of underlying ambitions and interests is necessary to explain collaboration.

So, why has China suddenly increased its liaison with the Nordics?27 The answer to this question might lie in the Belt and Road Initiative, which is China's attempt to establish its position as a global leader.28 Organisations such as NATO and the EU have noticed China's attempts, and have referred to China as a competitor and on some occasions even a threat.²⁹ Despite this antagonistic description, China keeps trying to develop its relations with the Nordics, which are all part of either the EU, NATO, or both. It could be because China views NATO and EU member states as individual states, and not through the lens of the organisations they belong to. Throughout this chapter we will briefly scrutinise China's bilateral relations with each Nordic state and assess the nature and development of each of these relationships.



Despite Iceland being the smallest of the Nordic states in terms of population, it does not necessarily get any less attention from China. In 2013, China and Iceland signed

a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), signalling China's interested in further developing its relationship with Iceland. This was China's first FTA with a Western European state.30 The relationship between these two states is also reflected in tourism statistics: over 100.000 Chinese citizens visited Iceland in 2019, roughly 10 times more than in 2010. The number decreased significantly in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19.31 In 2018, the Chinese Government invited Iceland to join the Belt and Road Initiative, suggests that China envisions a role for the remote Nordic. The United States, an important ally to Iceland,32 shortly thereafter responded to China's overtures. US Vice President at the time, Mike Pence, thanked Iceland for rejecting the proposition to join the Belt and Road Initiative.³³ Icelandic representatives later corrected Pence, stating that they had not yet given a definite answer to China.34 It seems that China cares about the US presence in the region, thus it is important to emphasize this aspect. This works well together with the 'China is a friend; US is not' frame, discussed in the analysis.



Market China-Norway

The Chinese-Norwegian relationship has improved drastically over the years, but it has not always been good. Perhaps the most impactful event in recent Chinese-Norwegian relations took place in 2010, when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Chinese dissident and human rights activist Liu Xiaobo, who was imprisoned by the Chinese state at the time.35 The Chinese government did not approve the Norwegian Nobel Committee decision to honour Liu. Perceived as meddling with their internal affairs, they even warned the Norwegian government not to do so.36 For approximately the next six years the relationship stagnated, until it normalised in 2016, when Norway reiterated its support for the 'one China policy'. 37 The relationship has strengthened since then, with state officials holding several high importance meetings throughout the years. It appears that the current diplomatic relationship is not only stable, but fruitful as well: Norway is in the final stages of FTA negotiations with China.38



Nowadays, the relationship between China and Denmark can be described as complex. In recent years, several notable events have taken place that had an impact, mainly relating to human rights issues in China³⁹ and security concerns that Denmark shares with its NATO Allies⁴⁰. During recent

years, Denmark like some other Nordic countries has also experienced China's very active - and at times assertive or even confrontational public diplomacy. 41 For example, China considered it offensive and demanded a public apology from a Danish newspaper in 2020, when it posted a caricature depicting China's flag with virus symbols instead of stars.42 The Kingdom of Denmark, which includes the large selfgoverning island of Greenland, is an active and engaged player in the Arctic. Over the past decade, China has made attempts to increase its presence in Greenland through commercial investments or scientific establishments.43 China research currently engaged in two separate economic projects on the island, yet the number has been fluctuating.44



Of the Nordic countries, Sweden was the first to establish diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China, in 1950. 45 China-Sweden relations have been mostly steady since then, but in recent years, negative developments have overshadowed the positive. For example, in 2016 China's first overseas ground satellite receiving station was built in Kiruna, a town in the Swedish Arctic. 46 This was viewed as a great collaborative success until 2019, when the Swedish Defence Research Agency expressed concern, stating that the satellite station might be used by the Chinese military. 47 Also in 2019, Chinese



Ambassador Gui Congyu threatened Sweden by saying, 'We treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we use shotguns'.

ambassador Gui Congyu threatened Sweden by saying, 'We treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we use shotguns'. This came in response to Sweden awarding the Tucholsky Prize for achievements in literature to Chinese-born dissident and Swedish citizen Gui Minhai, who is still imprisoned in China.⁴⁸ Relations continued to deteriorate in 2020, when several Swedish cities ceased to be twin cities of their Chinese counterparts. 49 At the end of 2020 Sweden blocked two Chinese companies, Huawei and ZTE, from supplying core 5G infrastructure. As Politico puts it: 'Sweden's travails are of wider interest to the EU because they touch on important questions which many countries in the bloc face, namely where to draw the line between often lucrative commercial deals with China and concerns over China's human rights record and its history of spying on Western nations'.50

and economic issues are at the forefront. Chinese market offers many business opportunities for Finnish companies and significant share of the turnover of large Finnish global companies comes from China. Finland does not participate nor commit itself politically to China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁵²

Relations between Beijing and Helsinki cooled briefly in 2020 when Finland suspended its extradition agreement with Hong Kong in connection with the 'Hong Kong national security law'. China warned Finland about interfering with its internal affairs, 53 yet the tensions did not cause any major break in the relations. In 2021, the foreign ministers of China and Finland met and expressed their intention to deepen their cooperation. 54 This suggests that China has a long-term view regarding its relations with Finland and has a keen interest in advancing the relationship in the coming years.



China seems to view its relations with Finland among its most important bilateral relations with Nordic countries.⁵¹ Trade



The 'Near Arctic' identity: what's in it for China?

As globalisation continues to intensify, states often pursue interests far away from their borders. One such development is that states not located in the Arctic have been creating policies specifically for the region.⁵⁵ This implies that states have agendas that they wish to implement in the Arctic. In 2018, as part of their Arctic policy, China declared itself a 'Near Arctic state'.⁵⁶ By doing so, the government of China made clear that the region is important for them and that they want to play an active part in developments in the region.

To identify key themes and directions of China's strategic narratives in the Arctic, this research has consulted scholarship that analyses general narratives put forward by Beijing. We have considered these narratives in light of China's Arctic ambitions by synthesising existing academic studies with analysis emerging from our own research.⁵⁷

'Polar great power'

Our analysis shows that when framing the relationship with the Nordic countries and presence in the Arctic, China resorts to the frames of 'leadership' and 'power', whilst at the same time emphasising 'partnership' and 'mutual benefit'.

China's initial presence in the Arctic started in 2001 when it opened its first research station in Longyearbyen, Svalbard. According to Dams et al., the international media hardly covered the event.⁵⁸ Back in 2001, China was not known to be particularly

interested in the region; it is possible that the establishment of the station was disregarded as insignificant, but today it can be interpreted as China's first attempt to establish an Arctic presence.

From today's perspective, 2001 marks the beginning of an expanding Chinese physical and political presence in the Arctic. In 2004, China opened the 'Arctic Yellow River Station', a permanent research station in Svalbard. Three years later, China was accepted as a temporary observer state of the Arctic Council. In 2013 China became a permanent observer on the Council. A year later, the President of China, Xi Jinping, announced that China's ambition to be a 'polar great power'. ⁵⁹ With all these events taking place in less than 15 years, China's Arctic presence has grown swiftly.

'Near Arctic state'

Beijing justifies its increasing presence in the



Natural resources, as well as new, trans-oceanic trade routes motivate Beijing to seek larger space for itself. As the region is effectively a closed one, China has to partner with regional states.

Arctic by using an environmentalist frame. More than any other region of the world, the Arctic plays a fundamental role in regulating the Earth's climate.⁶⁰ This allows any country, including China, to claim influence over developments in the region.⁶¹ However, in the case of China, its climate concerns are suspicious, since it is the world's largest CO2 emitter, responsible for 27% of the total greenhouse gas emissions in the world.⁶²

'Beneficial to the Arctic'

China uses the framing of 'the Arctic will benefit from China' to promote different economic opportunities in the region and how these can benefit not only China, but other countries. This thinking goes hand-in-hand with China's Belt and Road Initiative plans. According to Avdaliani: 'Natural resources, as well as new, transoceanic trade routes motivate Beijing to seek larger space for itself. As the region is effectively a closed one, China has to partner with regional states'. As a part of its Belt and Road Initiative, China seeks to develop infrastructure in the region. These investments and attempts to develop

the region have shown glimpses of being fruitful, as some Arctic states have become more open to having more Chinese presence in the region. 65, 66

'Knowledge leader'

To point to its relevance for the Arctic, China uses the frames of 'partnership' and '[knowledge] leadership' in the context of scientific research.

Even before China's political ambitions became apparent to the international community, its early presence in the Arctic was framed as a scientific endeavour. Today, China has several research stations in the Arctic. The oldest is located in Svalbard, Norway, another one is in North Iceland, while China continues to eye Finland--so far without success.67 When talking about investing in science, China's former ambassador to Iceland Jin Zhijian has stated that China 'has spared no efforts to contribute its wisdom and fulfil its duties'.68 This implies that the Chinese government is portraying itself as a 'knowledge leader'.



'Reliable partner'

To demonstrate its readiness to cooperate, China uses the frames of 'partnership' and 'innocence'. China has placed great importance on maintaining the image of a country who is willing to 'play by the rules' in the region. According to Allan: 'projecting the values of respect and integrity and cementing its reputation as a trustworthy. rule-abiding actor is a consistent feature of China's Arctic communications'. 69 Albeit the Arctic shipping routes are undoubtedly one of the biggest interest points for China, it has stated in its Arctic policy that it supports the existing rules of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), suggesting that it is eager to collaborate with Arctic states in the creation of the 'Polar Silk Road' 70

these projects are no longer on the bilateral agenda. All these examples highlight that partnering with China can be economically advantageous, with benefits ranging from FTAs to large infrastructure investments.

'Desirable partner'

Apart from emphasising its ability to contribute to Arctic scientific research as a 'knowledge leader', China also frames its Arctic relationship through using the frame that it is 'welcome' and of value in the region. While China may have a complicated relationship with most Arctic states, when it comes to working with these countries in the Arctic, China tries to portray itself as a valuable partner. To lceland already has concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China. Some years ago Norway and Finland were perceived by China as important links in the plans for its Belt and Road Initiative but most recently



Analysing the narratives

It is important to highlight that the narrative frames revealed in Chinese media have been similar to China's general strategic narratives identified by existing scholarship.⁷² The methodology section explains how we formulated these narratives based on the data at hand.

The Chinese media have mostly framed China's relationship with the Nordic states in positive terms. Several narrative frames reappear frequently. This might indicate that the Chinese media look favourably upon the Nordics yet there are many aspects to consider before reaching such a conclusion. As displayed in Figure 1, throughout the study we have identified 13 different narrative frames, most of which present China in a positive light. To gain an

understanding of how Chinese media are trying to portray China to the Nordic states, this research will first attempt to analyse them separately.⁷³

To determine whether a frame is positive, neutral, or negative, the research considered the context of the article. The study also identified reoccurring keywords, to better group the narrative frames and assessed their attitude towards China's relationship

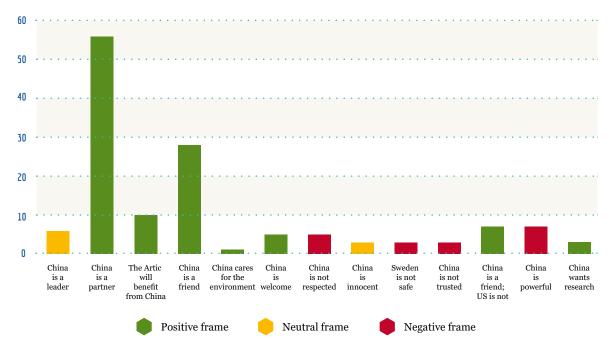


Figure 1: Framing of Nordic states in Chinese media

with the Nordic countries. As seen in Table 1, the categorisation of frames relies on several keywords, all of which have particular connotations tied to them. Based on common-sense understanding of these connotations, we have chosen which category each frame fits into. For example, we have classified the 'China is a partner' frame as positive, since it tends to express need for cooperation, emphasise common achievements, and portray the situation in a beneficial light. Whereas frames like 'China is innocent', and 'China is a leader' have been classified as neutral. This has been

done to emphasise that the media creates a variety of different, sometimes seemingly disconnected, frames. For instance, that China is presented as a leader does not directly define China's relationship with the Nordics in either a positive or a negative way. Albeit few, there were also negative frames. These were most often followed by keywords that emphasise some sort of disagreement or difference. The 'China is not trusted' frame is a good example here, since the articles where this frame occurs largely highlighted some sort of action that criticised China or showed how there

Narrative frame	Keywords	Attitude
China is a leader	leading • leader • impressive • taking off	Neutral
China is a partner	partner • trade • bilateral • cooperation • collaboration	Positive
The Arctic will benefit from China	investment • development • growth	Positive
China is a friend	friend • friendship • close • ties • history	Positive
China cares for the environment	environment • global warming	Positive
China is welcome	waiting • welcome • invite	Positive
China is not respected	politicize • disrespect • inequality	Negative
China is innocent	innocent • fair	Neutral
Sweden is not safe	danger • robberies • crime • hate	Negative
China is not trusted	threat • concern	Negative
China is a friend • US is not	only context	Positive
China is powerful	demand • power • memory • consequences	Negative
China wants research	research • science • study • observation	Positive

Table 1: Attitude of the frames

was concern about China's intentions. Keyword counts need to be approached with nuance; each instance of a keyword needs to be assessed in its context, sentence by sentence. For example 'friend' might appear in a sentence that describes how a Nordic state is a friend to China, but it could also be used to describe a state as a friend to China's rivals. By conducting a close reading of the text, we have been able to make an informed and qualitative assessment of the emotional valence of each article to ascertain whether a narrative frame was positive, negative, or neutral.

Handal Norway

When writing about Norway, Chinese media frames the China-Norway relationship in a very positive light. The research identified four different narrative frames appearing in the articles: 'China is a friend'. 'China is

a partner', 'China is a leader', and 'China is welcome'. As seen in Figure 2, the study has classified three of the narratives as positive and one as neutral. Between 2016 and 2021, the media outlets under consideration in this research published ten articles about China and Norway with an Arctic dimension. Four were published in CGTN and six in the other leading news agency, Xinhua Network. To better understand the importance given to the Arctic in describing the China-Norway relationship, we gathered all articles about Norway and China in the news outlet CGTN to compare that total against the number of articles published on the Arctic. We found 13 articles which focused on China and Norway without reference to the Arctic. Thus, we can establish that almost one quarter of the articles about China and Norway have an Arctic dimension, which is a very significant margin.

We can identify that there is one dominant

General narrative frames

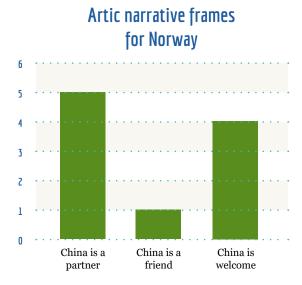


Figure 2: Narrative frames for Norway

for Norway

China is a

friend

partner

China is

leader

narrative here: 'China is a partner'. This frame appears in five Arctic articles, and ten general articles. While 50% of the articles with an Arctic dimension include this frame, it is not the only one used in this context. Another 40% of the articles incorporate a 'China is welcome' frame. This is peculiar, as the narrative does not appear even once in articles without an Arctic dimension. This may indicate that there is a strategic effort by the Chinese media to create the impression that the Nordic states are inviting China into the Arctic. This could benefit China by further justifying its presence in the Arctic.

As a final point of inquiry, we looked specifically at Svalbard, located between mainland Norway and the North Pole. We wanted to see whether Chinese media attention toward the archipelago, where China's first Arctic research station is located, revealed any different results. Yet,

according to our analysis, there appeared to be little interest in Svalbard from the Chinese media. Between 2016 and 2021, our dataset only included three articles with a Svalbard focus. They were all framed positively, with the frames 'China wants research', 'China is a partner', and 'The Arctic will benefit from China' appearing equally often. This suggests that even though China has a research station on Svalbard, their focus is on the national rather than local level, and to gain support from respective Nordic governments for their plans in the Arctic.

Denmark

Similar to Norway, Chinese media portray the Chinese-Danish relationship in positive terms. As we see in Figure 3, there is once again a dominant frame: 'China is a partner'. Although we observe no neutral frames for Denmark, we cannot conclude that

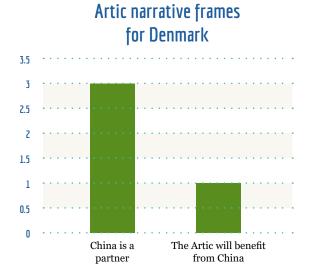
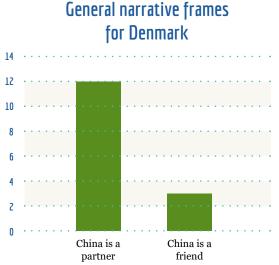


Figure 3: Narrative frames for Denmark





the Chinese media portray Denmark more favourably than Norway. In fact, the number of times the 'China is a partner' frame was observed was the same for both countries. In the context of Denmark, it is important to distinguish between mainland Denmark and Greenland. For example, CGTN has not written any articles about China and mainland Denmark which include an Arctic dimension. But when it comes to Greenland, which is a part of the Kingdom of Denmark, all 11 articles written by CGTN about Greenland had an Arctic dimension.

Regarding the 'China is a partner' frame, it is worth pointing out that a large number of articles about Chinese-Danish cooperation highlight one significant event: Copenhagen Zoo receiving pandas from China. This is notable, as China's 'panda diplomacy' is a well-known tool that works like a favour. It is a friendly gesture, but the pandas are not gifted, they are loaned. If relations remain amicable, they get to stay, but if China becomes displeased with a state's

behaviour, they reserve the right to revoke the animals. Since the pandas arrived in Copenhagen relatively recently, it is fair to assume that Beijing is trying to improve the bilateral relations of the two states.

When it comes to the Arctic dimension, Xinhua network published 50% of the articles on the topic, more than any other outlet. We found the 'China is a partner' frame to dominate in these articles as well, with three quarters of the articles highlighting economic cooperation between the states. 'The Arctic will benefit from China' frame was presented in another 25% of the articles. This frame never appears to be the dominant one, but it still plays a prominent role in the portrayal of most Nordic states by the Chinese media.

🕰 Greenland and the Faroe Islands Њ

Although a part of the Kingdom of Denmark, for the sake of this study Greenland and

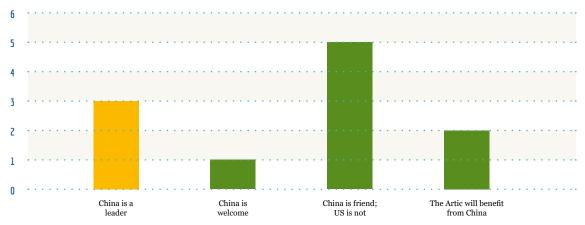


Figure 4: Narrative frames for Greenland

the Faroe Islands have been researched individually, just like Norway's Svalbard. This has been done to identify whether the Chinese media have a different approach to these territories than to mainland Denmark.

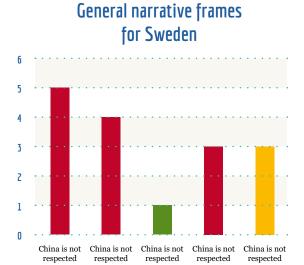
While some articles did mention the Faroe Islands, these few occurrences did not offer enough evidence to claim whether the small archipelago is talked about with a recurring narrative frame. In the case of Greenland, however, our research found that all articles writing about it included an Arctic dimension. This indicates that Greenland is almost exclusively of interest to Chinese media given the island's significance in the Arctic. The narratives are positive, but in a different way than those of mainland Denmark and Norway. In Figure 4, we see that the neutral 'China is a leader' frame is significant, yet the most prominent frame is 'China is a friend; The US is not'. Even though the research could have grouped this one together with the 'China is a friend' narrative frame identified earlier, it is different, as the articles about Greenland and China emphasising friendship always included language that was critical of the US. In the face of Chinese-American rivalry in the Arctic, Chinese media have an incentive to frame the US as being less dependable as an ally for Greenland, and to further justify China's ambitions to establish a presence on the island.

Sweden

The Chinese media's perception of Sweden is perhaps the most intriguing finding of this study. Unlike the portrayal of every other Nordic state (Norway, Denmark, and Finland), Sweden is depicted by Chinese media in overwhelmingly negative terms. This is an important finding, as it suggests that Chinese media do not have a unified

Artic narrative frames for Sweden 4.5 4 3.5 3 2.5 2 1.5 1 0.5 China is not trusted powerful trusted powerful

Figure 5: Narrative frames for Sweden





strategy of communicating about the Nordics, as previous parts of our analysis may suggest. This is consistent with China's approach of preferring to work bilaterally (with individual countries) rather than multilaterally (with blocs).

As seen in Figure 5, there is also a wider range of frames for Sweden. In previous cases we identified three or four frames per state; here we see seven different frames, four of which are negative. This most likely does not demonstrate the general attitude that China has towards Sweden and may instead suggest that a few events have generated a lot of negative attention in these media portrayals across the five years under consideration. Specifically, these events are the 'Huawei' 5G technology ban and the 'Kiruna satellite incident', when the Swedish Defence Research Agency warned that the Chinese-built satellite could be accessed by the Chinese military. As most articles focus on just these two events, this creates the impression of an overwhelmingly negative picture.

Despite the negative portrayal, it is important to emphasise that barely 1 in 10 articles published by CGTN about Sweden and China included an Arctic dimension. The media platform that most covered the Swedish Arctic was SCMP, which, although it has ties with the Chinese government, operates from Hong Kong, suggesting that it would be able to express more nuanced views. Although, in the recent years, SCMP has muddled its reputation as an independent outlet.⁷⁴ It

is worth noting that even though negative frames are used in 75% of articles describing Chinese-Swedish relations in general, only half of the articles which discuss the Arctic use such framing. This may suggest that Chinese media exercise more restraint when it comes to the Arctic. More research and an expanded dataset are needed to further support this hypothesis.

Finland

Analysing Finland's portrayal in Chinese media, we return to familiar territory – overwhelmingly positive. The only instance of a negative frame is the 'China is powerful' narrative, which could also be read as a warning, i.e. 'China is a threat'. It implies that, in China's view, even though the relationship between the two states is stable for the time being, China has the upper hand and demands respect.

Moving on to Figure 6, we can see how the 'China is a partner' frame is quite prevalent for Finland, as it was for Norway and Denmark. The 'China is a friend' narrative appeared more often in relation to Finland than any other Nordic country. Why Finland has received a friendlier approach from the Chinese media is beyond the scope of this research. But we can conclude that the attitude towards Finland is immensely positive.

If we separate the Arctic dimension from the general one, we can make an interesting



Artic narrative frames for Finland

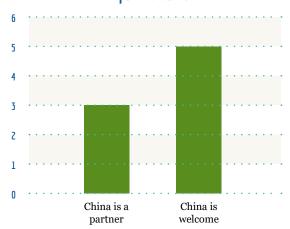


Figure 6: Narrative frames for Finland

for Finland 18 16 14 12 10 8 6 4 2 0 China is a friend powerful

General narrative frames

observation. In the general dimension, China emphasises friendship; in the Arctic dimension, it highlights partnership. In the latter, 'the Arctic will benefit from China' frame, which revolves around investments and development, occurs more often than any other. This should not come as a surprise in the case of Finland given its potential role as the European end of the Polar Silk Road.

CGTN has published more articles on China and Finland's relationship in the context of the Arctic than other outlets under consideration in this research. CGTN has written 5 out of 8 total articles with an Arctic focus. When comparing the number of Arctic articles to those written about the general relationship between the countries, we found that more than 15% of all of CGTN's articles written about China and Finland have an Arctic dimension.

Iceland

While Iceland has received less attention than other Nordic states in Chinese media, which may be due to it being the smallest of the states in terms of population, our findings nonetheless reflect the general pattern identified throughout this paper: mainly positive frames.

In Figure 7 we see that the 'China is a partner' frame is dominant. We also see, similar to articles covering Chinese-Finnish relations, the 'China is powerful' frame. As we did in the Finnish context, we can interpret this as a warning that China demands respect from Iceland. It is noteworthy that even though 100% of Iceland's territory is in the Arctic, not all articles have an Arctic dimension. In the two articles published by CGTN on Iceland, they



for Iceland 3.5 2.5 2 1.5

China wants

research

China is

welcome

Artic narrative frames

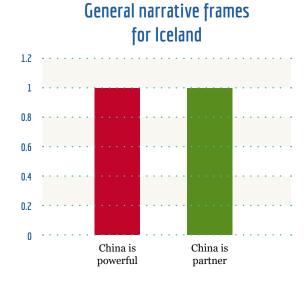
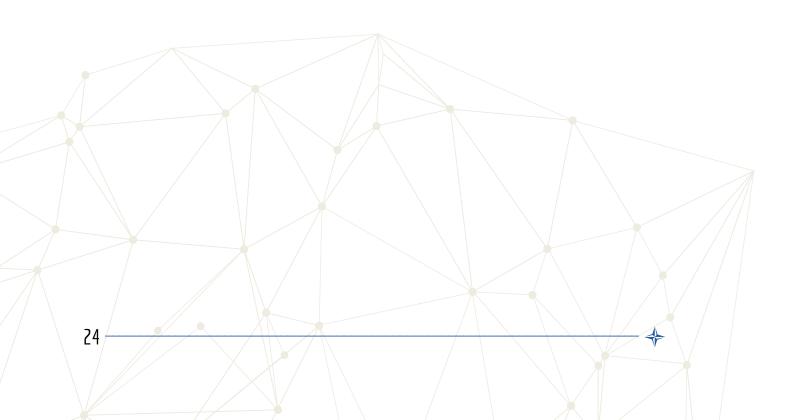


Figure 7: Narrative frames for Iceland

partner

did not mention the term 'Arctic'. The most prominent frame when talking about Iceland in the context of the Arctic was 'China is a partner'. This is an important point, since economic investment from a country as well-resourced as China will be felt more strongly in a small economy, like Iceland's, than a larger one. Moreover, by highlighting the economic collaboration between the

two states, Beijing creates an illusion that there is little to lose from cooperation. Emphasising economic advantages could be an attempt at influencing Iceland's decision whether to take part in China's Belt and Road Initiative. After all, Iceland is the only Nordic state with a Free Trade Agreement with China, meaning it has already shown some readiness to partner with China.



Overall, we have observed that narratives discussing the Arctic have been more positive, suggesting that Chinese media are investing in apositive discourse to justify China's presence and ambitions in the Arctic.

Conclusion

This research has analysed the strategic narratives used by Chinese media in their coverage of the Nordics, China, and the Arctic. To gain insight into how much weight is given to the Arctic in describing Chinese relations with individual countries, this paper has also compared articles that are about the Nordic countries in general to those that discuss them in the context of the Arctic. Moreover, it has investigated how the Arctic dimension changes the way these media outlets talk about China's relationship with the Nordics. Based on the information gathered in the dataset, we can state that the 'Arcticness' is important for the Chinese media. When writing about the Nordics, more than 18% of all CGTN articles included an Arctic dimension. It was most prominent when writing about Greenland and Norway.

Importantly, in our close analysis of the dataset, we also discovered that the Chinese media do not have a unified narrative agenda designed for the Nordic region as a whole. It is more likely that Chinese media have different communication strategies for each individual state. This can be seen especially in the narratives constructed for Sweden, which were drastically different from those of the other states. Even amongst the narratives used for other Nordic countries, there were noticeable differences in dominant frames. The frame 'China is a partner' occurred more frequently

than others, implying that China might be prioritising economic development, which could be supported by the country's pursuit of its Belt and Road Initiative. Finally, there do not seem to be distinct differences in how different media outlets report on the same event, suggesting that they might coordinate how to frame news stories.

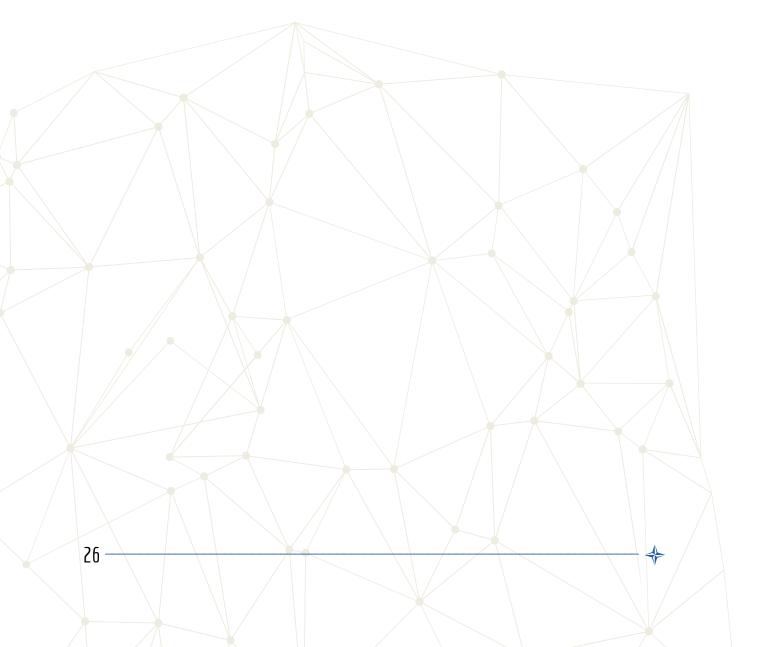
The study also asked whether narratives about Chinese-Nordic relations are different in an Arctic context. Overall, we have observed that narratives discussing the Arctic have been more positive, suggesting



that Chinese media are investing in a positive discourse to justify China's presence and ambitions in the Arctic. The exclusive occurrence of the 'China is welcome' and 'the Arctic will benefit from China' frames in articles with an Arctic dimension further supports this interpretation.

As for the hypothesis that the Chinese media have different attitudes towards the Nordic states and their territories in the Arctic, we can affirm that this is the case for Greenland, yet other Arctic islands like Svalbard and the Faroe Islands did not have enough coverage to either prove or disprove the hypothesis.

To complement this study, future research could expand the period of the dataset, as specific events might have given undue weight to certain narratives, and thus skewed conclusions about Chinese-Nordic relationship in general, as might have been the case with Sweden. While this research focused on the most prominent Chinese media sources, future research could analyse lesser-known outlets to widen its scope.



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